



## ***WOMEN AND ABJECTION: MARGINS OF DIFFERENCE, BODIES OF ART***

LEISHA JONES

### **Abstract**

The production and performance of the contemporary subject depends upon constituting and regulating processes of the social. Gender as a constructed category may be contrasted to that of “sex,” with its contested links to a pre-symbolic, inaccessible “naturalness.” To define the parameters of “human” and “subject” is to redline difference, norms constituted on the back of deviance. The abject challenges the power of the social to shape and regulate human bodies. Women artists in the 1990s deployed the abject through choice of form and content to deterritorialize everyday relations to food, bodies, sex, and death. They may have been attempting to destabilize such 1970s art world notions as “women’s work” and a biologically determined sisterhood by propagating the threat of the “hyper-feminine.” These “shouts-outs” from the art market margins may serve to challenge existing norms of visual culture, or they may serve to further marginalize or constrict boundaries between inside and outside, selves and others.

## **The Body Speaks**

(R)efuse and corpses *show* me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live . . . Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver.

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (1982, p. 3)

*The body speaks.* Not just through its coded and territorialized outsides, but through its gleaming gut, chimera of bump and ooze. The collision between art and abjection is a scream. Biological ab/objects include by-products and excesses of the body: excrement, blood, mucus, menses, vomit, pus, sometimes semen, and ultimately the corpse. Cultural abjections include sexual taboos, prisons, disease wards, freak shows, anything that threatens to confront the leakiness of order and *other*, the liminal, the borderline that defines what is fully human from what is not. *Vagrant viscera.* The postmodern subject as gendered by-product may confront this terrain, like the loss of God, with actions intended to find and penetrate borders of the self to produce a definitive outline, silhouette on the wall. *Thin veins.* The future is *in here*. Me/not me, inside/outside become existential dichotomies for abjection to propagate. Cultural deployment of philosophies of the abject may challenge the limits of language through the attraction/repulsion of *others*. The threat of the hyper-feminine becomes real.<sup>1</sup>

### **Productions of the Unthinkable**

We are supposedly neither man nor woman because we are not yet men and women; we are still in the abyss of the undifferentiated human being . . .

Luce Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference* (1994, p. 92)

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<sup>1</sup> My notion of the hyper-feminine refers to the co-option, exploitation, and (obnoxious) reiteration of medium, style, and content that has been traditionally (negatively) associated with women artists, for the purpose of exposing restrictions and challenging assumptions about the disempowered status of the feminine. To spit back the feminine in its adulterated state suggests that soft, wet, empathetic, small, gentle, loving, tentative, pliable, frivolous, flaky, and sweet smelling could kill you.

The processes of acculturation begin at or around the time of a human's birth. The fetus may be given a name based on reproductive technologies' ability to render gender visible now in luscious four-dimensions (4-D) for the expectant parent. Once a "gender" is assumed by virtue of a genetically coded or genitally determined "sex," a process that may be interrupted but not completed has begun. Becoming a human being in Western culture portends many things. One learns through participation in various socially constructed groups (family, daycare, school, neighborhood), and in the use of mass products (television, color-coded toys, books) to practice assigned gender responses. For example, if I am a "boy" I may be rewarded for assertive physical phenomenological responses to stimuli, and may be discouraged from hour-long contemplations on a petal of a daisy.

The way that culture may shape the bodies of children into recognizably sexed junior adults seems important for the reproduction and perpetuation of status quo norms. Girls and boys are taught through a circuit of rewards and punishments what may be expected of them according to unwritten codes of behavior and channels of appropriate desire, how best to navigate the ebb and flow of becoming human. Body parts are compartmentalized into public and private zones. Primary and secondary sexual characteristics are roped off for the private, i.e., places that are not to be touched by oneself or by others in public spaces, while other parts such as hands, cheeks, faces, arms, are deemed acceptable areas for public encounters. What it signifies to have an adolescent girl body becomes questionable for her, as the cultural site of body preference wraps itself around the boy body, calling out action, strength, and projectile urination as valuable vehicles through which to participate in a community of adolescents/humans.

As the girl body may be shaped as something other than boy, so may the girl experience her body as *other*. This also may apply for boys whose experience of their own bodies cannot be sutured to the inscribed norms he may recognize as signs of masculinity. A culture that perceives females as weak and in need of protection re-inscribes regulatory practices on her body that are intended to protect her from the threat of the "masculine" (outside), as well as those qualities she herself may exhibit that are perceived as a threat to her own well-being (inside). *Keep your*

*legs shut and your dress down.* For boys who do not appear to exhibit the codifiable signs of a masculine adolescent, such as participation in ball sports, fast cars, and girls who will "put out," there may be rejection by his dominant peer group. *Freak. Geek. Queer.*

These subjects become constituted by the constraints on their bodies. The regulatory apparatuses that maintain acts of man and woman, masculine and feminine, limit the conceptual and thus performative boundaries of gender signification. The intelligible performance of woman or man is readable only through the pre-established accepted bounds of the cultural norm. It is the constitutive force of the norm that produces an outside to gender. If not "woman" or "man" then what? If not "human," then "inhuman?" Judith Butler (1993) describes the production of these abjections:

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (Butler, 1993, p. 3)

Abject beings are pushed beyond the margins of subjecthood, but they may also push back, challenging the stability of readable and enforceable norms. This threat may produce critical gaps that challenge the reproduction of exclusionary intelligibilities. Further, the materialization of a given sex will centrally concern *the regulation of identificatory practices* such that the identification with the abjection of sex will be persistently disavowed. And yet this disavowed abjection will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions of the sexed subject, grounded as that subject is in a repudiation whose consequences it cannot fully control (Butler, p. 3).

Norms materialize gender through the force of reiteration against what is relegated "pathological." However, the production of an abjected

“outside” and subsequent self-disavowal “inside” may not always be a closed circuit. Beings, whose lives are defined by their societies as deviant, may move in and out of certain social spaces as sometimes-subjects. This could involve some sort of mimesis, where one performs a norm adequately enough to “pass” for or move through regulative and context-specific criteria: heterosexual, White, young, able-bodied, middle-classed, etc. This could involve forming and inhabiting certain counter-, sub-, or fringe cultures that are still permitted occasional access to the privileges afforded the norm. This is not to suggest that all subjects may become sometimes-subjects, or that sometimes-subjects act without restrictions. Nonetheless, sometimes-subjects may open up a space to act as agents through/of difference, to locate cultural machinations of oppression, to critique the physical imprinting of culture by rematerializations of their own bodies.

**Public Privates:  
(Re)Materializing Difference  
through Kristeva and Psychoanalysis**

Where one body (in the West, the white, youthful, able, male body) takes on the function of model or ideal, the human body, for all other types of body, its domination may be undermined through a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities.

Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies,  
Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994, p. 19)

Another way to rematerialize abjection and subjectivity is through the psychoanalytic renderings of the child before and after the acculturative processes of language. Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, published in 1980, is an exploration of the connections between language, the maternal body, and abjection. For Kristeva, both object and abject are opposed to “I.” Her work is grounded in a psychoanalytic theory whence “(t)o each ego its object, to each superego its abject” (Kristeva, 1980/1981, p. 2).

During the pre-Oedipal move from Imaginary to Symbolic Order,

in Jacques Lacan’s Mirror Stage (Lacan, 1977, pp. 1-7), a child learns to differentiate between me and not me. Abjection exists as “an oral disgust, a refusal of the mother who is experienced as abject so that the child might expel itself from the mother-child dyad and become a subject” (Ross, 1997, p. 149). It remains a shadow threatening the integrity of the subject as whole. The father as giver of law and language inducts the child into a circuit of power in which the child becomes phallus for the mother while viewing the mother as something other. The “normal” child (boy) then enters the Oedipal rejection of the mother through castration fears, perceiving her as having lack (of phallus). The “lacking” child (girl) is also supposed to perceive the mother and thus herself as missing something. Quest for the ever-present but strangely allusive phallus for the female places her in an economy of disavowal and disaggregation. Access to mitigations of culture and language may come at a high exchange rate.

Abjection preserves and signifies what may have existed in the pre-symbolic period. The search for an origin of completeness and a way to exhume this never ends, as the inside of the maternal body has always already been lost. However, it is in seeking the abject that *jouissance* may arise. For Kristeva, *jouissance* is a state of joy and ecstasy that is the pay-off of the search for the pseudo-(ab)object of desire and the transgression onto ground excluded by paternally imposed prohibitions.

One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion. And, as in *jouissance* where the object of desire . . . bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives us its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that “I” does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9)

The shape of the culturally abject body always takes the form of “the other,” either visible through its marked differences in shape, color, or stability or invisible in its undifferentiated banality—all in comparison

to culturally driven norms. Perhaps the constraints of the psychoanalytic model as taken up by Kristeva limit the possibility for conceptualizing abject bodies and identity constructions to culturally-coded transgressive rituals still connected to the primacy of the phallus. For Kristeva, women as a constituency of the margins are in the best position to transgress boundaries. Can a feminist model for the conceptualization and deployment of the abject be constructed that relies less on mother as symbolic lack and more on women's embodied multiplicities (deficiency vs. plenitude)? Can the production of excess and assignification keep the abject from becoming another fixed impenetrable boundary? What are the implications for a culture that increasingly views the body as vehicle, waste, and by-product of consciousness? I explore these questions in the following sections of this essay by mapping configurations of abjection in women artists' work from the 1990s. I close with a sample of works from artists whose careers have been successful, despite their work on/from the margins. They provide emblematic examples of the fruits of feminist interrogations of women's bodies that preoccupied writers and artists throughout the 1990s.

### Haunting the Borders: Art and Abjection

When failing, mortality, catastrophe, noise, unpredictability, loss of control, nonorganicity, and contingency become the predominant components of the body, this means that a major redefinition of subjectivity is at play, one that seeks to displace the conception of the subject as presence to the detriment of the abjected female body, which represents lack and absence, to a conception of the subject as both presence and absence, pattern and randomness.

Christine Ross, "Redefinitions of abjection in contemporary performances of the female body," *Res 31: Anthropology and Aesthetics* (1997, p. 154)

### The Monstrous-Feminine

In feminist film theorist Barbara Creed's (1986) influential essay "Horror and the Monstrous-feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," she

claims that Kristeva does not make clear her position on the oppression of women, that she "moves uneasily between explanation of, and justification for, the formation of human societies based on the subordination of women" (Creed, p. 45). Creed chooses to use Kristeva's notions of boundary and the mother-child relationship as it relates to the abject to apply to an analysis of women in horror films.

Certain kinds of contact with the mother become prohibitive. The maternal figure may be configured as the monstrous-feminine, one who prevents her child from taking its proper place in the realm of the symbolic through a refusal to relinquish control. Creed links Kristeva's "practices of rituals of defilement" to the monstrous-feminine through fears of contamination by the "polluting objects:" excremental (threatening identity from the outside), and menstrual (threatening identity from the inside). The horror film as a modern defilement rite parses out representations of paternal symbolic law and that (other) which threatens stability, maternal semiotic authority. "Fear of losing oneself and one's boundaries is made more acute in a society which values boundaries over continuity and separateness over sameness" (Creed, p. 65). For example, Norman Bates's mother in Hitchcock's (1960) *Psycho* becomes the monstrous-feminine *par excellence*.

In order for Creed to remove the mother from the dyadic/triadic relationship a la Freud/Lacan/Kristeva, she posits the addition of an archaic mother. Mother as originating womb might allow us to conceptualize her outside the confines of the patriarchal family constellation (Creed, p. 60). But I am immediately suspect of the process of going back to find an originary moment when mothers' relationships with their children were untainted and there were no conceptions of phallus and lack. Perhaps instead of looking back we might look ahead to changes in the parenting models that involve non-nuclear, non-biological, or non-phallocentric households. The social construction of family is currently being foregrounded and challenged by those very people abjected for being other. The presence of the monstrous-feminine continues to function as cultural scapegoat for everything from natural disasters to diseases such as AIDS.

## Fly-bys of the Abject Hero

Martin Jay critiques the presence of abjection that has “recently burst into prominence as a cultural category of uncommon power” (1994, p. 235). He is concerned with the disappearance of a confident collective subject, and wonders who will replace him/her. Jay suggests that with the subject in crisis, the stage has been set for a competing cultural figure, that of the abject hero. This new hero is valorized as subject *par excellence* for his/her constant fox trot with the other. Hosts of bat-head-biting, gender-neuterizing, body-piercing, self-proclaiming necrophiliacs are in the arenas, and the crowds are going wild. Performance artists are rubbing yams on their butts.

Jay argues that with the assimilation of artists whose work incorporates some form of abjection into the objectland of the museum, its power as cultural critique from the margins may be diminished. What once had the charge of an electric-eled Medusa may now be consumed as style; as exotic fetish. He questions the ethics involved in the exhibition of repulsive and genuinely harmful substances. His most compelling critical question: “(H)ow can the artist avoid the sublimating elevation of abjection into precisely the idealized state it is supposed to undermine?” (Jay, 1994, p. 246).

While I do find Jay’s concerns to have weight, I wonder how many patrons of 1990s art would even consider abject art to be art at all? MoMA’s Mondrian performance was not well received when “art student Juban Brown defaced, with a trajectory gout of blue vomitus, Mondrian’s *Composition in Red, White and Blue*” (Kramer, 1997, p. 38). Karen Finley was demonized by Jesse Helms as indecent and abject. President George H. W. Bush declared “The taxpayer will not subsidize filth and patently blasphemous material,” and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) found the works of the “NEA Four” unworthy of funding because they were beyond offensive (Finley, 2000, p. 2). Jay’s abject hero emerges from the galleries and museums that exhibit his/her works as a necessary bulwark against the “norming” of vanguard artistic production. Is the abject for art patrons and artists different than the abject for other folks? Can one be an “abject hero” if one is not permitted access to government subsidized museums?

## Women Artists Ab/Object

Woman is thus imaginatively fixed on a point which conflates her art with man’s perception of her sexuality. Because man wishes to repress her power to accuse him and to remake the world, he has also repressed all her powers of celebration . . .

Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (1988, pp. 217-218)

In many introductory courses on the history of women and art, men as the “producers of culture” function as gatekeepers coveting the genius key that gets you into the sanctified book of records and halls of the elite. Because great works and the great men who make them drive the scholarship of art, their methodologies, and moments of rupture and brilliance, models for participation in visual culture already exist. Contemporary artists have no choice but to confront, assimilate, reject, and/or perpetuate the models if they wish to stay in the game. For women, negotiating their way through the political quagmire may provide a limited set of options. Either they learn the rules and play like everyone else, or they take up residence on the margins and hope that their works may become a site for intervention.

Participation becomes further problematic for women as embodied subjects confronting the objectified bodies of other women that have comprised art’s meat and potatoes. Should the artist participate in further objectifications if only to survive? If women artists call attention to the presence of their bodies through the processes and products of their work, can they jump on, gnaw at, and/or blow holes through the boundaries erected to jettison and ghettoize themselves as other (thus, lack)? Notions of a feminine aesthetic perpetuated by philosophers, theorists, curators, critics, and other artists whose desires are harnessed through motions of solidarity and first wave essentialisms, among others, may serve to enable institutional and creative restrictions. The feminine aesthetic may reduce “women’s work” to shared commonalities of form, color worlds, textures, and realms of content. Are there kinds of work that women artists simply can’t make if they are to be taken seriously?

There are a handful of (women) artists whose abject works during the late 1980s throughout 1990s have become critically acclaimed.

Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, and Karen Finley among others have had their works both condemned as filth and lauded as groundbreaking. These artists have been loosely categorized according to both subject matter and material choice, as it relates to physical and cultural abjections.<sup>2</sup> Some critics have clunked through terms like “Body Art,” but this grouping neither meets the criteria for an art movement, nor adequately reveals the coalition of disparate renderings of a wide variety of critical interventions for the fragmenting of the postmodern. The emergence of these works follows closely on the heels of 1970s feminist art, which challenges the silence and absence of women in the art world with clear, loud voices. Susan Tallman writes of Kiki Smith’s work:

Determinations of sameness and difference, of internal and external, of just exactly where one thing leaves off and another begins, are not only philosophical issues, they are political ones. In art, when such issues have been raised it has generally been from a position of emotional and esthetic distance. By picturing these issues at a carnal level, Smith addresses the most primal of human concerns: the difference between self and other, between the social and the personal, between that which can be controlled and that which can’t. In all these instances, it is the body that unites us—and separates us, ultimately and irretrievably. (1992, p. 175)

These are women who risked professional repercussions and art market ghettoizing by virtue of their work on bodies and abjection. In the case of Kiki Smith, the gamble paid off quite well. Kiki Smith and photographer Lorna Simpson (whose work deals quite specifically with the abjection of Black women’s bodies) each have more works currently on exhibition at the new MOMA than any other woman artists. Perhaps their presence evidences a nod to the power of feminist art while at the same time gesturing towards its biologically-determinism corporeality. Or they might simply be representative examples of 1990s body art. In any case, other women artists who produced abject works—in the late 1980s, and throughout the 90s, related in kind, time, and substance—may

<sup>2</sup> For a history of abject art, see Joseph L. Koerner’s “The abject of art history,” *RES 31*: Spring 1997.

not be so represented in major museums (with the exception perhaps of Alison Saar). Most of the artists and artworks explored in the following pages deploy abject substances in the works themselves. All the artworks offer viewers encounters with the feminine abject: oozings of moist flesh, contagions of disease, effigies of violence, and superheroeed anatomies in the works of Judie Bamber, Jeanne Dunning, Millie Wilson, Alison Saar, and Moira Dryer.

### Judie Bamber

Critiqued for being programmatically feminist (Duncan, p. 137), Judie Bamber’s early paintings depict small objects on bland monochromatic fields with pithy titles that provoke close interactions between the elements of her signifiatory circuit. In *What’s the Magic Word?* the smooth pleasing object depicted is revealed to be a butt plug sex toy whose function is to permeate the boundaries between inside and outside. Critic Dana Friis-Hansen (1990) purports that the form in *I Don’t Want to Talk About It (mussel)* is not only suggestive of female genitalia, but that shellfish have long been associated with sexual power. Bamber crosses the oral pleasures of eating the mussel with human sexual pleasures, for punning effects. But a stronger point is made by the fact that this pleasure object is dissected from its shell, as the female vulva is often photographically or psychologically distanced from the body itself. The unspecific denial within the title leaves us to guess the subject, context, speaker, and listener—and conclude that sexual objectification is likely at issue (Friis-Hansen, 1990).

Her series of untitled intimate vulva paintings are controversial both for their graphic, painstakingly rendered rectangles of flesh, but also for the political punch in the face they seemed to elicit in those whose abjection of female sex organs is most pronounced.<sup>3</sup> These lush renderings of folds and pubic hair seem to demystify while aestheticizing the territory condemned most often for synecdoche of lack. One of the contradictions they betray/point to through their curiously phallic bor-

<sup>3</sup> For example, see [http://arts.ucsc.edu/sesnon/exhibitions/outinside/bambe\\_untitled.gif](http://arts.ucsc.edu/sesnon/exhibitions/outinside/bambe_untitled.gif)

ders, small exclamation points of force, is a connection to the economy of power on which visual culture feeds. The ubiquitous “money shot” of heterosexual pornography is the erect and ejaculating penis, never an intimate portrait of the quiver of female organs. Hetero sex is dependant upon what the money shot represents.<sup>4</sup> Bamber’s phallic vulvae not only interrupt the iconic residue of patriarchal prowess, they challenge that signifier with the dominance of the multiple.<sup>5</sup> One critique of the series is that the sensuous vulvae may be so easily co-opted by the scopophilic act of misogynist viewers trained to consume women’s bodies like so many M&Ms®, that the challenge to its abjected realm will be lost in the fray. However, the exhibition of vulva as art object in the pristine space of the gallery returns to this oft-derided organ the sense of wonder and majesty it deserves. The force of these vulvae may at the same time prove a powerful contaminant to spaces organized by and for the execution of the phallus as proper object.

### Jeanne Dunning

The work of Jeanne Dunning is sublimely slimy, deterritorializing body parts and re-situating gazes that permeate borders of inside and outside. Her focus on the female body reveals the power and discomfort in primordial ooze, at once abject and erotic. Her 1989-1990 series of paintings depicting the backs of women’s heads offer a bracketed landscape of shine and hue that invite contemplative nibbles in place of full frontal consumptions.<sup>6</sup> Critic Kathryn Hixson suggests that Dunning

4 In Linda Williams’s ground-breaking feminist interrogation of pornography, *Hard core, power, pleasure, and the “frenzy of the visible,”* she explores the paradox of the money shot as it extends visibility of the climax but “only to a knowledge of the hydraulics of male ejaculation, which, though certainly of interest, is a poor substitute for the knowledge of female wonders that the genre as a whole still seeks” (Williams, 1989, p. 94).

5 I am referencing Luce Irigaray’s reconfiguration of women’s sex organs as multiple instead of invisible and lacking, when compared to the uber-unit of the male. “This sex which is not one” (Irigaray, 1985, pp. 23-33).

6 Click on Head 2 for a close-up at [http://www.art.northwestern.edu/faculty/dunning\\_portfolio.html#](http://www.art.northwestern.edu/faculty/dunning_portfolio.html#). Scroll to the bottom of the page at this link.

offers us here the possibility for resisting objectifying codifications of female subjectivity:

But this symbolic resistance contains its own contradiction, and the black bobs and golden locks become a condensation of personality (shaping identity through appearance) or an emblem of the mythical power of hair (Samson and Delilah). More subversively, through Dunning’s particular choices of hair-shapes, her ambiguity added in through their “monstrous” double-life-sized scale, the compositional emphasis on the neck as a vulnerable shaft, and the vacuous, dreamlike backgrounds of undifferentiated hues, they become the phallus. (1991, p. 44)

Once again, as in Bamber’s vulva paintings, there is a phallic presence in the feminine. The ambiguities of her early 90s fragmented body parts and unrecognizable body products destabilize traditional assumptions about shape, texture, and approachability of uncivilized content. Melting flesh and edible secretions (as well as the presence of food) trouble traditional renderings of the nude female form. A. D. Coleman (1991) pans her *Sundae 1* and *Sundae 2* video image stills by asking how acceptable would these images be if a man had made them: “a disembodied female head is slowly and completely covered with whipped cream by a disembodied hand wielding an icing spatula . . . Is this a critique of male fantasies or a commentary on our sugar-addicted culture” (p. 165)? Vince Aletti (1997) posits that through “coating unidentifiable flesh in fat, tunnel-like mounds, the stuff suggests the body turned inside out—eviscerated, violated—but Dunning tends to treat it as sensuous topography, otherworldly terrain” (p. 97). Whatever may be the intensity of attraction the viewer experiences toward the image of the nude, so also is the repulsion of the stickiness that threatens to coat the surface of the eye and invade. (This, for me, is *jouissance*.)

### Moira Dryer

Dazzling yet somehow flat, Dryer’s paintings are suspended fluid,

interruption and ache, virulent and haunting traces of hole and whole.<sup>7</sup> Holland Cotter (1994) critiques her work through the context of her *contamination* with breast cancer, using metaphors of illness to describe formal elements: “damaged,” “reds ... a peculiar darkness of venomous blood,” “blues appeared jaundiced,” “greens had a subliminal red blush” (p. 110). The diseased body produces work that dis-eases. Her abstract forms suggest states of inner movement, such as *Vanishing Self-Portrait*, in which there is a suturing of subject and nature (the sea, sky, becoming-world) that wave through the language of culture toward something beyond, unnamable.

*Random Fire*, *Damage and Desire*, and *Revenge* are some of the last works she completed. They convey an inner landscape where the ailing subject deterritorializes and reterritorializes its boundaries. The inside is becoming world, while the outside transfixes and seems to hold. The agency of a sick body may be exercised in a blink, shot through with light and darkness. The transience of this sometimes-subject left its mark through the gaps between gender and sex, between speed and slowness.<sup>8</sup>

### Millie Wilson

Miriam Basilio (1996) characterizes Millie Wilson’s working strategy as interrogating the relations between texts and objects instead of explicit renderings of human forms: “Wilson’s work has consistently explored the possibilities of lesbian representation within the hegemonic discourses of the mass media, anthropology, psychoanalysis, museology, and modernist and postmodernist artistic production” (pp. 56-57). Her use of human hair resonates with the tragedy of Dauchau, while inviting the comfort of a beauty shop floor.<sup>9</sup>

In the *Autopsy* series, Wilson takes on the well-publicized case of Aileen Wournos, the first U.S. female serial killer, who was also a

7 For a brief survey, see the installation link at the Art Gallery of York University at <http://www.yorku.ca/agy/exhibitions/dryer.html>

8 Some of the concepts and language used here, such as deterritorialization, becoming, and speed and slowness, I take from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1987) corpus, specifically their opus *A Thousand Plateaus*.

9 See [http://www.askart.com/askart/w/millie\\_wilson/millie\\_wilson.aspx](http://www.askart.com/askart/w/millie_wilson/millie_wilson.aspx).

lesbian. “(S)even bucket seats upholstered with seven different kinds of garish faux-fur—alludes to the seven dead men” killed by Wournos, who claimed she acted in self-defense while working as a roadside prostitute in Florida (Smith, 1994, p. 119).

*Daytona Death Angel*, a five-foot tall coil of synthetic blonde hair braided and splayed on a pedestal, suggests pubic contours. Wilson foregrounds discursive formations of criminality, pathology, and deviance associated with medical and psychiatric codification practices. She “inscribes vaginal imagery into the wigs to reference the threat of castration and its dismissal through fetishism: in this way, she demonstrates the extent to which homophobic constructions of lesbianism have deeply affected the Wournos case” (Basilio, 1996, p. 58). Through abjection Wilson challenges the construct and constraint of female lack, perhaps alluding to states of the sometimes-subject that serve as limitation or perhaps impetus for an embodied becoming-subject.

### Alison Saar

Alison Saar works with abjected, abandoned, discarded objects to explore African and Haitian diasporic themes that are traced through contemporary instantiations, with a focus on the Black female experience (Eccles, 1996, p. 98). Her emphasis on the cultural borders of race and humanity question predigested assumptions about history and subjectivity. For instance, Judith Wilson writes of Saar’s 1988 sculpture *Lazarus* that:

The Christian Lazarus evolved from a fictive character—the sore-covered beggar of the New Testament parable in which the eternal damnation of an uncharitable rich man is contrasted with a pauper’s heavenly reward—into the patron saint of medieval mendicants and lepers. Saar’s *Lazarus*, however, doubles as the Western saint and San Lazaro, a syncretic Afro-Latin American deity—Cuba’s Babaluaiye and Brazil’s Obaluwaiye or Omolu—associated with smallpox and other skin-deforming diseases. With the current AIDS epidemic, images of the Catholic saint/African god

are in great demand at New York City's *botanicas*. "He's really a needed saint these days!" the artist observes. (1991, p. 117)<sup>10</sup>

*Dig*, a sculpture of a woman in the shape of a shovel handle, places her as tool and connective tissue to dirt, earth, and decay. Perhaps this may implicate the emergence of the symbolic for a subject, in which becoming-human is intrinsically connected to the monstrous-feminine. *Conked*, a severed female head choking on her own hair of wire, points to the silencing of Black women by culture that violates bodies through projection, stereotypical representation, and degradation—norms decapitating difference.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

According to Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Barbara Creed, and Martin Jay, the acculturation of bodies and all things corporeal are actively codified in order to entrench the controlling power of norms (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, health, etc.). The performing of difference pushes back against those forces as critique—a call to arms. I argue that while the shaping and regulating of what is human excludes those abjected, the lines are not sufficiently fortified to prevent gaps, tears, and leaks where the sometimes-subject may act.

The (women) artists mentioned above challenge not only the practices of cultural and physical abjection, but also the practices of abjection internal to the politics of the phallic economy that reigned ever-present in the 1990s art world and continues to thrive. These women emerge as the sometimes-subjects of art in a doubling of absence and presence: their bodies are absent from the regulatory schemas that dominate the presence of the bodies of women in artworks, while remaining present through abject eruptions of deterritorialized flesh that absent the intelligibility of bodies chained to codes. This work remains controversial for the trampling of boundaries between critique and derivation/ap-

propriation. What can be produced by toeing a line? For feminists, artists, and subjects sometimes, it is a striving to reverberate in the shape of difference—the *jouissance* of becoming-human.

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10 See <http://www.janbaum.com/artistShowDetail.asp?itemID=19&pagetitle=Painting&firstname=Alison&lastname=Saar&artistID=asaar>

11 See <http://www.artnet.com/artwork/46118/alison-saar-conked.html>.

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### **About the Author**

Leisha Jones is a dual degree Ph.D. candidate in Women's Studies and Visual Culture at The Pennsylvania State University. She co-curates the virtual art gallery *Doll Revolt* (<http://www.dollrevolt.org/>). Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to the author at [ljj4@psu.edu](mailto:ljj4@psu.edu).