



SAYING THE F(EMINISM)-WORD AT A CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The word “feminism” is burdened with historical baggage, and that burden may take on an extra dimension for those in Christian higher education. Here, I investigate the connection between feminist and Christian paradigms and explore, through a case study of three students, their struggles with the label of feminism even as they create feminist artworks and describe their beliefs and experiences in relation to those works using feminist-based terminologies, such as “woman as Other” and “male gaze.” I then draw conclusions for consideration for those working in Christian higher (art) education and the responsibility that we share in educating our students within an environment that is understanding of both their feminist and Christian perspectives, and in which students are free to engage in dialogue and critical inquiry in relation to these paradigms.

Feminism in Christian Universities

In designing a curriculum for Women’s Studies at King’s College in Briarcliff Manor, New York, June Steffenson Hagen (1990) confronted the dilemma of the use of the word “feminism,” a term with which many of her colleagues at that Christian university admitted discomfort and uneasiness, even while still in agreement with the movement’s tenets. She concedes that the feminist movement is not one “universally valued by the church” (p. 18) but also concludes:

Those of us in Christian higher education, especially those struggling for a holistic vision of learning and faith, find the subtle academic limitations placed upon women doubly difficult to counter because women also carry a burden that the Christian community, unable or unwilling to perceive the full meaning of freedom in Christ, imposes on them. While preaching that Christ has set us free, Christians seem too often to practice societally generated patterns of bondage. Yet the Christian community has even more reason than others to examine itself and to break out of unfair patterns. The Gospel demands that we work to free the oppressed, that we be on the side of the poor, that we strive for justice and peace. The example of Jesus himself shows us the possibility of respecting the dignity of every human being. All of Scripture bears a theme of equality. (Hagen, 1990, p. 16)

Likewise, Schuurman (1993) and others (Diehl, 1990; Fiorenza, 1984; McClelland, 1990; Ruether, 1984) point out that feminist interpretations of the Bible support the liberation of all people, including women, through the many descriptions of female leadership and friendship within scripture.

A Case for Critical Inquiry in (Christian) Art Education

In my background within the church of Christ—and in my personal study of the Bible as God’s inspired Word—I may read and reread the same passage of scripture thirty times from my specific point of view and understanding, and may never read anything new into it. I may never

have a new epiphany, or revelation, of the meaning of that scripture. If, however, I am able to add to my own study someone else's commentary or interpretation on that scripture, written from a point of view different than my own, I may—for the first time—notice a significance in meaning or interpretation that had heretofore been lost to me. How many times have we had an unarticulated idea tickling the back of our brains, only to have another person bring it to light fully and beautifully? The ability to engage with a variety of interpretations and readings of a text, any text, provides us a richer, fuller understanding. The more resources from which we have to draw in interpreting a text or visual image, the greater the pedagogy of possibilities; this multiplicity of resources yields deeper meaning than any single-minded reading of a text or image can ever afford.

Critical inquiry, including feminist inquiry, offers a pedagogy of possibilities. Feminist concerns, coupled with Biblical interpretation, may reveal previously overlooked points of view. Simply put, a female or male feminist acts to restore political, social, and economic justice between men and women; Christian feminism adds to this the dimension that all people are made in the image of God and are therefore deserving of respect and dignity (Koch & van Leeuwen, 1993). In further differentiating (secular) feminism from Christian feminism, I would add that in the latter, the ideas of social justice are rooted in Christ and His teachings, His example, and His relationships with people. The Christian feminist's actions, therefore, may be tempered by the gospel teaching to "consider others better than oneself" and to "love one's neighbor as oneself" as well as St. Paul of Tarsus' call for peace and unity. In short, the differences between feminism and Christian feminism may lie less in the "what" of feminism than in the "why."

In meeting its ends of restoring social justice, feminist and other critical pedagogies are inclusive of the goals of empowerment and social equity through the abolishment of hierarchies, and this is often accomplished by means of self-representation (Keifer-Boyd, 2003). Self-representation, which is important to many feminist artworks, involves deconstructing prevalent social narratives. Such artwork is crucial in working toward justice and liberty for all people; otherwise, "dominant-hegemonic stories end up seeming natural and normal—the way things

'really' are and ought to be" (Amburgy, Knight, & Keifer-Boyd, 2004, p. 82). Too frequently, however, established traditional hierarchies within the church—even those in conflict with Biblical teaching¹—add an extra burden to women's freedom of self-representation.

Purpose of Study

The concept of "feminism" has undergone an evolution, from addressing such basic rights as women's suffrage, emerging into the radical feminism of the 20th century, and proliferating into the multi-layered feminisms we see today. It may be argued that the radical feminism associated with the 1960s and '70s paved the way for the feminisms that now exist. In most situations in the United States, women are now afforded the same considerations in employment, salary, and voting rights as men. On a philosophical level, women are also afforded more avenues and opportunities for self-realization than in the past, inclusive of, but not exclusive to, the roles of mother and wife.

Given the varied philosophical approaches now inclusive of the term "feminism," is this designation adequate anymore? Is it necessary? Should we come up with another term, perhaps one burdened with less baggage than "feminism"? I would retain the term inasmuch as it continues to point to pervasive inequalities in societies—just by the very nature of its "baggage," it evokes debate, dialogue, and continued effort toward equity and justice. Part of this dialogue invariably reveals the levels and gradations in which feminism now exists. This study focuses upon a feminism informed by Christianity.

Keifer-Boyd (2003) describes feminist pedagogy as representative of a particular feminist's "values and theoretical orientation adjusted according to and within a specific context" (p. 317). I write this from the perspective of a Christian feminist who teaches within Christian higher education. Christian perspectives of feminism are relevant inasmuch as 76.5% of those living in the U.S. self-identify as Christian (Graduate

¹ Galations 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NASV).

School, CUNY, 2001).² In addition, there are 900 independent, religiously-affiliated four-year colleges in the U.S. (MacQuarrie, 2005).³ With this large number of colleges educating a vast population of students, the role of Christian art educators in preparing a citizenry sensitive to social justice concerns—including feminism—within the context of these college settings cannot be minimized. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to illuminate some of the particular challenges of feminism from within this specific Christian context. In doing so, I will explore self-representation through a case study of three of my students' artworks as they express feminist themes and concerns, even while they may hesitate to apply the term "feminism" to themselves or their work.

Case Study Methodology

The case study in this paper represents the work of three art students in three separate classes. These classes—while all very different in nature—are all shaped and informed by my own beliefs in critical inquiry, social justice, and feminist pedagogies. The three students include one Art Education major and two Visual Communication⁴ majors. All three women come from conservative church backgrounds.⁵ All of them were upper division students at the time of their courses and projects and all had courses in art history with me as instructor. While issues related to feminist theory arise naturally in my *Art History Survey*

2 The ARIS study is so comprehensive that the U.S. census bureau cites it in its U.S. population demographics at www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/07s0073.xls. A 2002 study by the Pew Research Council entitled "Americans Struggle with Religion's Role at Home and Abroad" stated that 82% of U.S. citizens identified themselves as Christians (Kohut & Rogers, 2002).

3 MacQuarrie (2005) says that 102 of these are members of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, and at many of these universities coursework is shaped around biblical teachings.

4 A graphic design degree program.

5 I define conservative here as regarding the Bible as God's inspired, and perhaps even infallible, Word, to be read and interpreted as Divine Truth. It's in that area of how each interprets the text, of course, where differences may lie.

and *Art Theory and Criticism* classes, I include them just as easily in my studio courses.⁶ For instance, in all of my classes—studio and theory—we discuss feminist pedagogical issues, such as gaze theory, the role of (and restrictions upon) women in art history, critical readings of imagery in visual culture, and how our understanding of these issues inform art practice. These three students demonstrate their own background with this pedagogy through their use of such language as "marginalized," "gaze," and "woman as Other" in the discussion of their own artworks. The fact that these students *chose* to explore these ideas, with open-ended assignments in such a wide variety of classes (and felt free and comfortable in doing so), is indicative of the pervasiveness with which the concepts come through in my pedagogy.

My case study of these women's art spans two years, from 2005-2007. Each of these examples include three components of analysis: (a) the artifact, or artwork; (b) a reflection (oral, or written, or both) by the student of the artwork at its time of completion; and (c) a later interview that included examination into the student's views on feminism as it relates to her own artwork, her own paradigm of Christianity, and herself. The projects in this case study represents courses in: (a) *Art Theory and Criticism* (a senior level course required by Art Education majors), (b) *Explorations in Media* (a studio course required of Art Education majors in which we work with a variety of art media from clay to papier-mâché, to creating *WebQuests*®), and (c) *Painting* (required for both Visual Communication and Art Education majors). Analysis of these students' responses to feminist concerns in their own practice of Christianity and art offers insights that may prove valuable to those presenting feminist pedagogies in Christian university art settings.

Christian Confrontations with the "F-Word"

Confessions of a Christian Feminist

My own confrontation with feminism began in my doctoral work,

6 Because we are a small university—our enrollment is around 2,000 students—I teach both studio- and theory-based courses.

specifically in a course entitled *Women and Their Art*.⁷ In this course, we examined women artists often excluded from the canon of art historical study. This course was of particular interest to me in that I was already teaching courses in art history survey. I wanted to introduce my students to women artists who had been omitted from the canon of the course textbook. It was early in the semester when the professor asked how many of us would identify ourselves as feminists. I distinctly recall that I did *not* raise my hand.⁸ It was in that instant, though, that my introspection on the matter of feminism and my relationship to it began. It continued through that class, through these past 10+ years, and continues today. The *Women and Their Art* course was probably one of the most influential courses of my graduate school experience, and even today it shapes the way I teach and approach art and scholarship about art history.

Because of my own reticence to use the word “feminism” in application to myself in graduate school, I understand my students’ discomfort with the term. Even in writing this manuscript, I hesitated to delve deeply into my own journey of reconciling feminist paradigms with Christianity. The church of Christ background from which I come is deeply traditional and views the Bible as authoritative in spiritual guidance; as a Christian, I hold a profound respect and love for the Bible and the church (as God envisioned it, which stands in contrast at times to how we fallible human beings practice it). So not only do I present feminist views and art education in a Christian university setting; I am also, in a sense, presenting Christianity, which is a much more weighty and humbling task. Perhaps the Christian perspective of the gravity of such an undertaking—the risk of being inarticulate or misunderstood to the extent that one might bring disdain upon the church that one so dearly loves—is what gives some Christians pause in even attempting to express a reconciliation between their Christian and feminist philosophies. Many intrepid feminist theorists, however, have explored issues related to theology and feminism, with varying outcomes. What follows is a survey of this

7 Taught by Karen Keifer-Boyd at Texas Tech University as a special topics course through the Women’s Study program in 1998.

8 I was in much the same place that my students—in the case study that follows—seem to be.

literature that reveals gradations of (dis)agreement between feminism and Christianity.

Upsetting the Imbalance: Feminism Topples Biblical Interpretations of Male Superiority

Parvey (1984) and Ruether (1984) maintain that the women’s movement in churches has paralleled women’s education in general. As women began entering colleges and universities over 100 years ago, she explains, they enrolled in courses in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, studies to which only men had been privy in years before. Through their study of biblical languages, they discovered interpreter and translator biases imposed by male scholars (Parvey, 1984) and uncovered lost traditions and unwrapped “layers of androcentric scholarship . . . rediscovering new dimensions of biblical symbols and theological meanings” (Fiorenza, 1984, p. 54). One such example is Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1898) whose book, *The Woman’s Bible* provided commentary on depictions of women in scripture. Many educated women knew the power of the Bible and fully understood that equality for women could not be achieved until it could no longer be argued, on a biblical foundation, that women were inferior and subordinate to men—the same types of arguments that had been used to sanction slavery (Parvey, 1984). Abraham (1998) says that such developments were unanticipated and proved truly surprising to theology in (a) their departure from Modernist biblical scholarship as they challenged “the legitimacy of conventional forms of historical criticism” (p. 431), and (b) the degree of seriousness with which these feminist biblical scholars approached the canon of Scripture. While some of these scholars—unable to reconcile biblical teachings to feminist beliefs—have departed the church altogether, those who have remained⁹ have developed a rich body of work of theological study, primarily drawing “attention to the patriarchal culture in which the books of the Bible were written, to the marginal status of women in the various narratives,

9 Hagen (1990) points out that those feminists within the church—whom she refers to as Christian, or biblical feminists—remain within the church because they feel they can fulfill God’s intentions only through Christ rather than outside Christ.

to the negative passages about women, and to the use of these passages to prevent women from playing a full part in the life of the Church and of society” (Abraham, 1998, p. 432).

Feminist Personhood in Christian Teachings

Ruether (1984) says that “Feminist theology starts with the affirmation that God, the ground of being and new being, underlies, includes, supports, and promotes female personhood as much as male personhood” (p. 11). From feminist theology have emerged three feminist stances to Christianity: (a) post-Christian/revolutionary feminism, (b) mainline feminism, and (c) biblical/evangelical feminism (Diehl, 1990; Schuurman, 1993). Below I briefly describe each of these approaches along with two additional Christian approaches to feminism that are not feminist (Diehl, 1990). I have arranged Diehl’s (1990) descriptions from the most radical Christian feminist approach to somewhat feminist, to the last two, which are non-feminist in nature. The fifth view is the most conservative within Christian belief concerning women and equity.

Post-Christian and Revolutionary Feminisms. These feminist stances hold that patriarchalism is so pervasive in scripture that the Bible cannot hold divine revelation. Those who fall under the category of “post-Christian” feminist believe that women should seek out a religious experience devoid of the male experience, abandoning a “male” God in favor of a “Mother Goddess.” Revolutionary—or radical—Christian feminists, similarly, believe that an experience of “women-church”¹⁰ was prevalent during the earliest Christian churches but has been destroyed through traditionally patriarchal approaches (both in writing and interpretation) to Biblical text. The revolutionary Christian feminist believes that “a community of women-affirming Christians seeking liberation from patriarchal oppression” (Diehl, 1990, p. 40) should characterize the women-church of today. Both the Christian and post-Christian stances to radical feminism demonstrate revolutionary views in their approaches to Christianity. While accounts of the early church throughout the Bible

point to an active and vital role of women in church building, these accounts also emphasize unity (over separation) of Christians. The early church becomes a haven for all disenfranchised throughout society, including women, giving them a voice and condemning any favoritism of one person over another based upon wealth or status.¹¹

Mainline/Reformist Feminism. This viewpoint includes the idea that the Bible represents the will of God but is not the infallible word of God. Inasmuch as the Bible advocates redemptive themes and opposes oppression, it represents God’s will, for instance; but those aspects that demonstrate patriarchy do not represent God’s will. The role of the Christian here is to reform from within, to “work for the full liberation of women in all spheres of life,” (Diehl, 1990, p. 38), including in ministry. Language that refers to God should include both male and female characterizations.¹² This last point may well be supported through the argument that God is not a man, but man and woman are God’s inventions. The Bible clearly points to the existence of God as Spiritual throughout, including in I Corinthians 3:17: “Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (NASV).

Biblical, or Evangelical, Feminism. This philosophy maintains that the Bible is the infallible word of God but that it does not teach patriarchal hierarchy as a part of God’s divine plan. While God revealed Himself¹³ through means of a patriarchal culture, He progressively worked toward the abolishment of any hierarchy among males and females. Likewise, Paul taught equality and mutual support/submission of the sexes

11 Notably in Ephesians 4 and James 2.

12 Schuurman (1993) says that it is this group, along with what Diehl (1990) calls the revolutionary Christian feminist, which has generated the largest body of feminist theological scholarship.

13 Since, under the Biblical/Evangelical Feminist paradigm, the Bible is the infallible word of God, and God manifests Himself as a male persona in scripture—even if for the purposes of operating within a patriarchal culture—the Biblical/Evangelical Feminist would traditionally refer to God as “He,” unlike the Mainline/Reformist Feminist above. The Biblical/Evangelical Feminist would reject the notion, however, that this male manifestation of God is an indication that women are somehow inferior to men and that they should be treated thus.

10 A term that Diehl (1990) says was adopted by Fiorenza (1985).

to one another; however, he was moderate in his approach as his priority was the teaching of the Gospel within the cultural context of the day. Any admonitions he gave regarding women's roles in the church (or that appear in other biblical texts outside Pauline¹⁴ writings) were meant to address specific situations and problems (i.e., at specific congregations) and were not meant to be prescriptive of how things should be (Diehl, 1990).

Liberated Traditionalist. Diehl (1990) also refers to this viewpoint as “moderate hierarchalist” and says that it includes the notion that the Bible is the infallible word of God and does demonstrate a moderate hierarchy of man over woman. This group is, however, sympathetic to feminist concerns in that it understands that Christ's attitude toward women demonstrated a radical and ground-breaking departure from the rabbinical hierarchy taught at the time. Under this paradigm, Paul does teach men's authority over women but also some degree of mutual submission. Examples of mutual submission occur in Ephesians 4, when Paul compares the love and regard of a husband for his wife with Christ's relationship to the church¹⁵ and also when Christians are admonished to serve one another out of deference and reverence (to one another and to God).¹⁶ Women under this Liberated Traditionalist paradigm are allowed to hold leadership positions in the church, but—because this group holds to an interpretation of hierarchy, however moderate—these positions must subordinate to male ministers and other church leadership.

Traditionalist/Strict Hierarchalist. This approach also holds that the Bible is the infallible word of God and that the hierarchy of man as head of woman, which is described within, is ordained by God. Those of Paul's writings that describe the man as the “head” over woman refer to authority, superiority, and rank. While women may hold service roles

14 Pauline refers to New Testament books of the Bible attributed to Paul; these are in the form of letters, or epistles, to early churches and individual Christians.

15 “So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are all members of His body” (Ephesians 4: 28-30, NASV).

16 In passages such as Galatians 5:13 and Philippians 2:3-8.

within the church, only men may hold positions of authority. This position may point to the patriarchal society under which the early church was compelled to operate but clearly does not demonstrate the vision of unity articulated for the church throughout scripture.

Student Works and Responses to Feminism

These diverse points of view represent a wide range of responses to feminist approaches to theology and biblical interpretation. While these categories appear discrete, a person may not fit cleanly into one paradigm to the exclusion of the others but may instead find him- or herself overlapping two or more of Diehl's stances. Below, I examine three of my students' artworks, as well as their own discussion of these artworks, in order to explore: (a) how they view feminist themes within their work and their own beliefs of feminism and Christianity and, in doing so, (b) how they might place themselves within the theoretical framework of Diehl's approaches to feminism and Christianity. Understanding these student/artists' responses to feminism as Christians will bring to light challenges and considerations for teaching feminist pedagogies within the particular Christian college setting, or even perhaps to the Christian student in the general college or university setting.

*Camille's*¹⁷ Shrine to Femininity as The Other Half

Camille, a Visual Communication major, enrolled in *Explorations in Media* in 2006 as an art elective. The course was originally designed to allow Art Education majors to experience a variety of art media in an educational program too small to include individual courses in, for instance, printmaking and ceramics. Camille created her piece, *The Other Half: A Shrine to Femininity*, for a papier-mâché project in which students created an altarpiece or shrine connected to an idea, an issue, a person, or a product/object. Within the context of this assignment, we examined the *Día de los Muertos* holiday, a variety of *ofrendas* and shrines as examples. This study of *ofrendas* and the *Day of the Dead* is of particular cultural interest given our locale in West Texas, which was for-

17 I have replaced students' names with pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

merly Mexico and therefore many local people are of Mexican heritage. In preparing for this project, we discussed three-dimensionality, mixed media, and the symbolism of *ofrendas*. Subjects worthy of an *ofrenda* were left wide open to student interpretation, and we discussed the range of possibilities from poignant remembrances of loved ones or those we admired, to tongue-in-cheek shrines to things we feel we couldn't live without. Consequently, some students chose subjects such as *Starbuck's* coffee, the *iPod*, women struggling with breast cancer, and a recent trip to Italy. Camille constructed her *ofrenda* (see Figure 1) as a box, the right side of which is half of a woman's head. The color pink predominates, and the objects encapsulated within the shrine are those commonly associated with femininity: cosmetics, a compact with mirror, a high-heeled shoe, and silk flower.



Figure 1. Camille's *The Other Half: A Shrine to Femininity*, 2006, Mixed media (36"x22"x20").

She also included a bottle of *Midol* and a "to-do" list that demonstrates the range of activities and work with which women are engaged, including caring for children, career, and work in the home (such as meal planning and preparation). On the back of her *ofrenda*, Camille includes the title of the piece, her name, the date, and a scriptural reference to Proverbs 31:10-31 in which the writer describes the "worthy woman" as one involved in a variety of enterprises from overseeing the household to caring for the needy to buying real estate.

Of the three students that I present in this case study, Camille is the only one who stated that she is not a feminist. When she presented her piece in class, however—and even during the course of our interview—she shared views that evidenced feminist leanings. For instance, during our class critique of the shrines, she explained her use of the term "Other" in her title, noting "woman as Other" in her discussion (Personal communication, September 27, 2006). I asked her to elaborate on the use of the term and what it meant to her; she explained that, throughout history, women have been categorized or marginalized, along with other groups: "Native American, African American, Woman American" (Personal communication, September 10, 2007). She further described females as being perceived, historically, as a detriment to society—they couldn't properly farm or fight in war, for example. I asked her if she recognized her use of the term "Other" in this context as indicative of Post-modern, even feminist, influences. She admitted that she did, but only moderately so, characterizing her stance as "not totally for, and not totally against" feminism (Personal communication, September 10, 2007).

Throughout our interview, Camille resisted the application of the term feminism and feminist in reference to her work or her self,¹⁸ and she strongly differentiated between the terms "feminism"—which she associated with radical feminism and women as "project[ing] themselves to have . . . power over man"—and "femininity," which she defined as an "awareness of womanhood." She emphasized "separate but equal" roles for men and women, noting that women are more "fragile" than men, an "emotional entity" (Personal communication, September 10, 2007).

18 The concession above, near the end of our interview, was the closest she came to openly identifying with the concept.

Camille continued, “I don’t want to sound like I’m stereotyping . . . it’s just how we’re made.” With this description, though, she demonstrates what Hayles (1992) and Keifer-Boyd (2003) refer to as “gender inscriptions,” or “normative assumptions formed as abstract idealized perceptions of gender” (Keifer-Boyd, 2003, p. 315). Camille further described her perception of feminism as a reversal of traditional male and female roles, hostile to qualities of womanhood that she held dear; these encompassed what she referred to as the “caring side, nurturing side” of humanity. She also felt that the concepts of feminism and faith were antithetical to one another, still associating “feminism” with “radical feminism,” stating, “No, [these ideas] can’t coexist. I don’t think the woman is over the man. . . . It’s meant to be a partnership. The man isn’t to be forceful, but she’s to be submissive . . . [The two are to work] in equal fashion but with different roles” (Personal communication, September 10, 2007). She later seemed to contradict this stance of “women as submissive” when we discussed the various approaches to feminism and theology laid out by Diehl (1990). In reference to women holding only subordinate roles within the church, Camille resisted the term “subordinate,” explaining that women’s roles in church service were not subordinate and that she hadn’t found anything in scripture that said otherwise. Of Diehl’s (1990) approaches to feminism and Christianity, she identified most strongly with the description Biblical/Evangelical Feminist stance, that the Bible does not teach patriarchal hierarchy as God’s divine plan and that men and women are to be mutually submissive to and supportive of one another.

While Camille’s explanations for her work and her interpretation of scripture demonstrate feminist concerns—such as in her discussions of the historical marginalization of women and in her resistance to the subordination of women in society and in the church—she resists the use of the term itself. Her discomfort may arise either from her own misunderstanding of the term (i.e., equating it with only radical feminism) or a fear of others’ misunderstandings of the term in its application to herself and her Christianity. She sees revolutionary/radical feminism as antithetical to notions of womanhood that she personally holds dear: softness and characteristics of nurturing, tenderness, and intuitiveness. Still, she bristles at the notion that women—because of these characteristics—

might be considered less capable than their male counterparts. While she, early on, states that women should be submissive—seemingly to men—she later qualifies her view as one of mutual submission, a partnership, as advocated among Christians in the Bible. Even as Camille refutes the application of the label “feminist” to herself, her artwork, and her interpretation of the Bible, she demonstrates a viewpoint aligned to feminism.

Reese’s Object Addresses the Male Gaze

Reese’s *Object* was her final exam project in the *Art Theory and Criticism* class in 2005. For this piece, she purposefully adopted a feminist point of view as her springboard. In the *Art Theory and Criticism* course, students examined various theories as they affect art criticism and creation, both through research of the theory and the eventual creation of an artwork. For the research and presentations in the class, students worked in pairs, selecting from a list of theoretical stances. Reese and her partner selected the topic of feminist/gender theory in art. For the final exam art project, students worked individually and were free to select from any of the theories on which they had presented, as well as others that we had studied throughout the semester, beginning as far back as Plato.

Reese chose to remain with feminist theory for her project. Her artwork *Object* entails a wooden box frame, painted a cold gray, and faced with glass (see Figure 2). Inside the box is a cutout of Ingres’ *La Grand Odalisque* (1814), reclining on a lettuce leaf. Around her, from chains, hang paper cutouts of bits of meat. The *Odalisque* is adhered to a second piece of glass within the box that the viewer can slide out using a handle at the top of the piece, revealing the same-shaped paper cutout of ground beef. Reese’s piece addresses the objectification of women as subjects for the male gaze (in both historical and current applications of visual imagery) on a general level, but it also recalls a very specific and unwelcome encounter that Reese had with an older married employer in a storage freezer at work when she was a teenager. Reese says this work, in its execution, is very unlike work that she normally makes, which she characterizes as “more subtle.” She selected a more visceral route here

in order to forcefully make her point, especially to men: “[It’s a] naked woman in a cabinet—even a man could understand it . . . I would hope [that even women] would identify with it . . . Every woman has some kind of [similar] story” (Personal communication, September 13, 2007).



Figure 2. Reese’s *Object*, 2005, Mixed media, 24”x36”x4”.

Reese said that as a Christian, she has some discomfort with the brazen delivery of her message, fearing that other Christians would find it offensive; it was “fun to be that vocal, but I step back from it and think, ‘Whoa, that offends me, and I made it’” (Personal communication, September 13, 2007). In fact, in all of our discussions—no matter how fleeting—in which this artwork comes up as a subject, Reese has expressed disappointment, and even embarrassment with it; she even left it behind when she graduated. In a paper in which she reflected upon the work at the time of its creation, she wrote:

From the beginning of the project, I found the concept of the piece to be exciting and clever. Before the actual creation of the work, I considered the piece, at least conceptually, to be art in my own mind. However, upon completion of the work, I discovered that the clever concept I created was, in fact, not real art. Rather, it was merely a somewhat-grotesque project that does not qualify, at least in my mind, as art in any way. In other words, I found myself the victim of an accidental paradox. Initially I had been excited by the concept, yet looking back at the end of the work sequence, I found myself dejected by the creation of the actual work. (Personal communication, December 6, 2005)

During our more recent interview, I asked Reese if now, almost two years later, she could elaborate on her disappointment in the piece and why she felt she could not even qualify it as art. “It helped me figure something out for myself,” she explained, “but everyone defines art differently” (Personal communication, September 13, 2007). In exploring how she defined art, we examined three features that she felt to be important in art—concept, aspects related to craft/technique/execution, and self-expression—and how *Object* attended to these features. It was in the area of self-expression that Reese felt *Object* failed, not in that it wasn’t expressive of *something* but inasmuch as it did not communicate who *she* was: “The piece comes off angrier than intended, it’s not my personality.” She did though, feel that the piece effectively addressed the concept that she chose, saying, “I loved exploring myself and made peace with [*Object*] . . . I found I did have a place on that [feminist] scale” (Personal communication, September 17, 2007).

Reese, in defining “feminism,” feels that the term has both negative and positive connotations; on the positive side, it simply means equality—the right to be heard, to have a voice, to be appreciated. She admits to having “aspects of feminism within.” By way of example, she points to becoming a mother as a key experience in her self-awareness of a desire for equality and recognition for her work and accomplishments as she balances her newly expanded life roles. Reese also does not view faith and feminism as mutually exclusive concepts, holding that the two concepts “can definitely coexist.” While she recognizes the difficulty that

many Christians have with the term, she feels this discomfort is based on an inaccurate assumption of what feminism can actually mean. She explains that respect is a “huge part of faith, obedience to God . . . how can [respect] be separate from religion and God?” (Personal communication, September 13, 2007). When we examined Diehl’s (1990) feminist stances toward Christianity together, Reese identified, on some level, with all of them, with the exception of Radical/Revolutionary Feminism; from Mainline Feminism down through Strict Hierarchalist/Traditionalist, though, she found concepts with which she could sympathize. It is ironic, however—given her comments during the interview—that the stance with which she indicated the strongest identification was that of the Moderate Hierarchalist/Liberated Traditionalist, one that Diehl says is not a feminist position at all.

By her own admission and demonstrated in her artwork and her discussion of her perceptions of Christianity, Reese notes “aspects of feminism” within herself; still, there is an element of shame that she associates with *Object* and how she expresses her anger within it. When one considers, however, the circumstances surrounding the symbolism in the piece—the fear and betrayal of the unwanted encounter with her adult employer, the claustrophobic and suffocating nearness of the advances in a confining walk-in freezer, the desperation of feeling trapped with nowhere to go (perhaps both literally and figuratively)—the element of anger within the work is understandable, even perfectly justifiable. It may be that Reese views her anger expressed in the piece on a general level, rather than as specific to this particular infuriating violation. This may be why she is unable to reconcile herself to her expression of anger in *Object*. It may also be that—in a society where the victim is often blamed for such violations—she may be conditioned to harbor some guilt that this event ever took place at all, as if the older and responsible party’s violation of trust was somehow her own fault. It is important that Reese understands the source of her discomfort with *Object*, as well as the justifiability of her anger over the specific event that provided impetus for its creation.

Rebecca Warps Standards of Beauty

Rebecca created *Warped* as a final exam project for a course in *Painting* in the spring of 2007 (see Figure 3). For this project, students selected a social issue to research and address in the creation of a painting. Rebecca chose to address the issue of unattainable and unrealistic standards of beauty that are imposed upon women by society that often result in warped self-perceptions and even eating disorders. She photographed herself from behind, nude, for the creation of *Warped*, combining these images with dark painted background and vivid red text that stands in contrast to the monochromatic imagery. She says in her paper about her work:

The piece is a self-portrait, which at first was a little unnerving, since it is a nude, but even though it makes me uncomfortable to have my own flaws uncovered on the canvas for all to see, my discomfort just reinforces my point. I chose words that describe my personal feelings on this forced ideal to “etch” into my back. . . . The contrast between the black and white photo and the strong black background make the image a strong one, which was intended to make the viewer slightly uncomfortable and get them to think about the image and how it relates to them. (Personal communication, May 1, 2007)

Rebecca acknowledges the piece as a feminist piece in that it depicts a struggle with a uniquely female problem:

I do believe that women feel they must live up to unrealistic standards of physically [sic] beauty [that have], in some ways, come out of our history of being made objects of sexual pleasure and beauty, but I do not think that burden has been solely placed on us by men. We have brought it upon ourselves in some ways, but I feel that women are silently crying out to be liberated from this deadly obsession. (Personal communication, September 11, 2007)

She goes on to say that she wants the viewer to be uncomfortable with the image, as well as to be inspired to some kind of action. In this way, the message of her piece is similar to that of Camille's, who said she wanted her piece to empower women to be proud of who they were (including their feminine attributes) and to resist conforming to societal pressures (Camille, Personal communication, September 10, 2007). Rebecca adds that she appreciated the opportunity to make work that was meaningful rather than "art for art's sake," a work that is expressive of a hurtful issue both on a personal level and to society at large. She says, "If this painting makes one person think differently about themselves and where their beauty lies, then I would consider it a success" (Personal communication, September 11, 2007).



Figure 3. Rebecca's *Warped*, 2007, Mixed media on canvas, 24"x36".

Rebecca, too, drew a distinction between radical/revolutionary feminism and her own beliefs in feminism. Acknowledging that the former is one definition of feminism, she views her feminism as recognizing males and females as equals; like Camille, she believes that men and women are inherently different, not just physically but psychologically. These differences, she feels, complement one another, and she feels that with recognition of those differences comes a responsibility for both sexes "to liberate others from oppression" (Personal communication, September 11, 2007). She does feel that, within the Christian context in which she was raised, feminism was equated with "man-haters" — "my own father has even used the word 'feminazi'" (Personal communication, September 11, 2007). Within that culture, she explains, if one says that one is a feminist, s/he must immediately qualify that admission or explain oneself with reassurances that s/he doesn't want to start an anti-male revolution. She feels that many Christians she knows equate feminism with rebellion against church traditions. Rebecca believes though, that the notions of Christianity and feminism can coexist peacefully and that the Bible supports equality among all people,¹⁹ and she identified herself most strongly with the Biblical Feminist position.

Of the three students participating in the case study, Rebecca seemed most at ease in expressing a connection between her feminist and Christian beliefs. She recognized the varied feminisms that exist and had settled upon a model of feminism that complemented her spiritual stance. This model was rooted in social justice as she saw it advocated in the Bible and included a "pay it forward" sense of responsibility to others: when one recognizes that he or she is blessed and liberated, then one bears the duty of freeing others.

¹⁹ She also points out that the Hebrew word for helper, a term applied to Eve in the Biblical story of the Creation, translates "helper in times of dire trouble," a view that she feels supports God's intention for a partnership between men and women. "It is important to remember," she says, "that woman was not created in the image of man, but in the image of God" (Personal communication, September 11, 2007). Rebecca's interpretation counters traditional view that woman was created as a helper to man; instead she envisions the man and woman as mutual helpers, in equal partnership, as God's intent.

Reflections and Conclusions

All three of these students—while creating works that address themes that are unique to women’s concerns, and even while using feminist terms (i.e., “other,” “male gaze,” and “woman as object,” and “marginalized”) to discuss their works and their beliefs about women and Christianity—express discomfort in the use of the term “feminism.” All three of them equated the term with radical or revolutionary feminism, a level of feminism traditionally devalued by the church. It is no surprise that feminism—as with many other groups including Christianity, Islam, or the politically liberal or conservative—would be categorized according to its most extreme proponents by Others *outside* the group. What is surprising, though, and perhaps a challenge unique to feminism (and unlike the other groups I list above) is this: that feminism would be characterized according to its most extreme proponents by those from *within* the movement and who adhere to many aspects of a feminist belief system. In honoring the ideas of equality and freedom advocated by Christ and interpreted from Scripture, should this same also apply to equity for women in the church and in society at large? I especially reflect upon Camille’s vehement denial of the word “feminism” in referencing her work and her self when her language, theme, and visual imagery so strongly support feminist concerns. I can’t help but return to the question of the word “feminist” itself: Is it enough that students engage in and share feminist concerns of equality and social justice? Is it necessary that they embrace the terminology, too? Perhaps it is necessary—or at least desirable—in that denying the word “feminism” may signal a denial that there is a problem with perceptions of women’s roles in society in the first place. If we drop the word, maybe we no longer have to examine existing inequalities.

In reflecting upon Camille’s work and interview, too, I wonder about my own teaching. Yes, in my classes we examine these issues of gaze, women in art history, and the depiction of women in visual culture imagery; but—outside of *Art Theory and Criticism* class—how often do I refer to what we’re doing as feminist pedagogical practices? Are my students failing to make the connection between these worthwhile critiques and their foundation in feminism? Is that why the students in the case

study can so easily accept the critical practices but balk at the terminology?

Garber (2003) points out that feminist authority is “grounded in connection and sometimes identification;” likewise, Weidman (1984) characterizes Christian feminism as arising from community. There may be a particular role here for Christian higher education in teaching students the varied approaches to feminism within an environment that understands, too, the Christian student who may be a Liberated Traditionalist or a Traditionalist/Strict Hierarchalist. In such an environment, Christians may debate, make art about, and share perspectives on the interpretation of Scripture, the function of context, the experiences of women, and the role of women and equality within the church and society-at-large in a way that is respectful of a diversity of viewpoints and opinions. This study indicates that further inquiry is needed to explore the extent to which Christian colleges and universities deliberately and overtly include feminist theory and pedagogical approaches as part of their curricula. Amburgy et al. (2004) say:

Values are taught by the curricular choices, the pedagogical approaches used, and most critically by that which is absent and/or unmarked. If not exposed for its impact on eroding democracy, silence is a powerful and dangerous educational practice, whether institutionalized in schools or transmitted through public pedagogy (i.e., the teachings from surrounding events and signs). (p. 97)

Amburgy et al. (2004) go on to cite Isserman and Kazin (2000) in concluding that participatory democracy demands a participatory citizenship. Silence and participation, and their nuanced consequences as these concepts concern Christian women—perhaps the largest demographic of the church community—must continue to be examined within Christian higher education and the church by those, as Garber says above, most able to identify with and connect to that community in order to effect the greatest change.

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