

# **Stony Brook University**



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**Breaking Icons: Passivity and Asexuality in Representation of the Three Graces and the**

**Renaissance Madonna**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Nina Melissa Pascal**

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Abstract of the Thesis

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**2011**

This thesis will examine my artistic practice in relation to a feminist critique of pop cultural imagery through the lens of historical/theological constructs of beauty and passivity. I will look specifically at the ideals of feminine beauty and virtue embedded in classical archetypes such as the Three Graces and the Renaissance Madonna. Discussion of the thesis work will also be situated in relation to the history and symbolic connotations of the Black Madonna.

**For Iesha and Jeremyah,**

These works could not have been possible without you.

To my friends and colleagues, especially:

**To David,**

We finally made it. Thank you for the last three years.

**To Kathryn and Alisha,**

For your love and support, and for making even the most difficult moments worthwhile

**To Dan,**

For your humor, friendship and generosity, and for your “collaboration” in making these works

possible

&

To my family, especially my grandmother, without whom I could not have done this.

Last but not least, to my wonderful Grandfather

I know that you are still smiling

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## Introduction

Images are powerful things. Indeed, to separate contemporary notions of beauty and beliefs about the female body from the influence of visual media is a virtual impossibility. This thesis will therefore examine my artistic practice in relation to a feminist understanding of the idea that the ways in which we perceive our bodies, and the bodies of others, is deeply influenced both by contemporary visual media, and a long history of archetypal constructs of feminine beauty from classical antiquity to the Renaissance Madonna. Since the 1960's and 1970's feminist artists have used their work to disrupt and challenge the masculine gaze that organizes and commodifies women's bodies for male consumption, and to reject the biased confines of a patriarchal discourse that has suppressed an active and unique expression of women's individual subjectivity. As Mira Schor has noted, "A good deal of writing has been about gender or sexual representation, and most of that has been about the representation of women. Woman is the site of representation" (Schor, 30).

The body, however, is still a contested site. It does indeed also seem that the more ground women have gained professionally and politically, the more aggressive has been the sexualization of women's bodies in popular culture and mass media. Discussing pornography as the most potent example of this reactive phenomenon, Gail Dines writes that, "Girls and women, while not major consumers [of porn], are inundated with pop culture images that just a decade ago would have been seen as soft-core."<sup>i</sup> Consequently, genres of pornography like gonzo, which were once considered hardcore, are now the mainstream form of pornography, and readily



accessible via the internet in a way that had not previously existed. The image projected of women in other media forms, such as music videos, and fashion advertising, is now on a parallel with the aesthetics of Playboy in the 1960's and 1970's. Dines goes onto assert that while some have viewed the hypersexualization of women and girls as liberating and empowering, these images must ultimately be seen as poor substitutes for what real power actually looks like- "the economic, sexual, and political equality that give women power to control those institutions that affect our lives." <sup>ii</sup>

Power, as such, is also located in the capacity to challenge cultural productions that enforce the ideals of dominant institution. The works presented in this thesis will therefore be discussed in relation to representations of the female body by artists such as Renee Cox, Jenny Saville, and Alice Neel, all of whom have offered a construction of beauty and female embodiment that is not contingent upon, or reflective of, the power dynamic inherent to the gaze. First and foremost, however, this discussion will be framed by an inquiry into the mythological archetypes of beauty and the theological philosophies that have helped to produce and legitimize the latent misogyny embedded in contemporary American popular culture and quotidian life.

I will look specifically at the archetypes of beauty and passivity manifest in representation of the Three Graces, and to the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Christian canon. Roman Catholicism is fundamentally opposed to a feminist practice, and has had a strong bearing both on the direction of my work, and my interest in a formal study of feminism in the first place. The thesis drawings are engaged specifically with the conventional image of the Renaissance Madonna, and the implications of this conceptualization of idealized motherhood today.

By extension, an underlying motif of the works to be presented relates to the idea of the Trinity. I am intrigued by the symbolic manifestations of "three" that cross both cultural and

temporal boundaries. It appears in ancient Greco-Roman culture in the form of the Three Graces as well as the Fates. In other pagan traditions, it takes the form of the triple goddess, whose three-headed image is representative of three individual aspects of the Goddess as an absolute. These, the Maid, the Mother, and the Crone, (from the Greek *kronos*, or time), would be reflected in the male-oriented canon of Christianity in the form of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. While it is neither the purpose, nor within the scope of this thesis to enumerate the numerous aspects of pagan culture and goddess worship that were absorbed into Christian theological doctrine and practice, I will briefly address the most relevant in contextualizing the work at hand.

Veneration of Mary was not an integral aspect of the early church, and did not in fact take firm root until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The production of the *Stabat Mater*, from which I have drawn the titles of the thesis drawings, is roughly dated to this time. Deification of Mary over the next two centuries was concurrent with trends towards an equally passionate demonization of the body and its sexuality, an attack that fell largely on the ordinary women of late medieval Europe. This culminated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or the *Hammer of Witches*, the de-facto handbook of the Inquisition. It was obsessively concerned with the practices and identification of witches, who were espoused to be mostly women, and it delineated methods of interrogation, conviction and punishment as well.

While women were burned as witches and heretics at the stake, Marian celebrations were officially indoctrinated into church practice. Beginning at moonrise on May 1<sup>st</sup>, and lasting throughout the duration of the month, festivals devoted to Mary mirror the May rites of numerous Pre-Christian practices. Crowns of spring flowers are woven to adorn the statues and icons of the Virgin, a practice directly derived from veneration of the Goddess.<sup>iii</sup> This aspect of

Marian iconography is most relevant to the thesis work in that it also touches upon the suppression of the history of the black Madonna. In her work on the subject, Lucia Birnbaum explores the hypothesis that “the indigenous goddess of Old Europe merged with African, Middle Eastern, and Asian dark goddesses and continued on in vernacular beliefs and rituals associated with black Madonnas.<sup>iv</sup> She writes that, “Black Madonnas, like the primordial divinity, are believed to nurture all life, all the different peoples of the earth, and all the seasons of life: birth, maturity, death and regeneration” (Birnbaum, 4).

In this view, the figure of the black mother was once associated with divinity and revered accordingly. Yet, from the “whitening” of the Madonna in Renaissance Europe, to the horrific experience of slavery and segregation, black women have endured a denigrated and subjugated existence. In contemporary American society, black women and mothers must contend with the cultural memory of slavery and a residual prejudice that persists in a dual form of oppression where race is inseparable from sex.<sup>v</sup>

## **ii. Bodies:**

In resistance to the sexualization and commodification of women’s bodies in nearly all forms of contemporary visual culture, I have endeavored to find and work with models whose

bodies defy narrow cultural definitions of beauty. The “who” in my work is important, for it is within the body and subjectivity of my models that I locate the capacity for a subversive resistance to dominant ideals of normative beauty. The subversive body requires that we rethink our assumptions of beauty and body. It functions as a site for the production of new ways of seeing, and new ways of being. In developing the thesis work, I wanted to “represent” bodies that remain denigrated and undervalued in contemporary American culture. In the interest that the models I worked with to produce this body of work not remain an abstraction throughout the text, I will briefly introduce them and refer to them hereafter by name.

I worked with Linda Unger, a regular model at Stony Brook, for my representation of the Three Graces. As stated briefly before, the Graces are typically depicted as archetypes of ideal feminine beauty. The construction of this ideal has, of course, varied across cultures and over time, but apart from fairly recent feminist production, varying images of the Graces have always conformed to the dominant ideals of femininity in their respective moments of creation. I chose to work with Linda for this project specifically because her body falls outside contemporary mainstream ideals and challenges the cultural preoccupation with youth. This is not to imply that I do not locate beauty within her body, or any “aging” body for that matter. It is, rather, precisely because I do locate beauty here, that it retains its subversive potentiality. I use the word “aging” gingerly, and for lack of a better one, because the body is inherently a non-static entity. It is in fact, always shifting, always aging. When I use the word, I refer to a body that is generally no longer “seen” within the narrow and limited, contingent space of idealized youth and beauty. It is nearly impossible for these standards to be met and sustained for long, if indeed they can ever be met at all.

The elusive pursuit of mythic beauty and the cultural obsession with youth is, nonetheless, a burden that still rests heavily on women. It is particularly evident in the explosion of cosmetic surgeries and technologies that are accessed with growing frequency in the United States, and the ways in which these trends are normalized in mass media and pop culture. This has manifested, for example, in the explicit image campaigns and tremendous success of television shows such as “nip/tuck”. One such image provides a rather poignant link between the ideals attached to classical female archetypes and our own contemporary understandings of beauty and proper femininity.

Within an opulent marble sculpture hall, the show’s main characters stand elevated as deities on their pseudo-pedestal/instrument carts. The cold sterility of the surgical implements and various prosthetic hands scattered randomly about are in stark contrast to the warmth of the light that fills room. Between them arises them the mannequin-like effigy of the contemporary beauty, whose missing limbs echo the corresponding lack in the alabaster statue of behind her. Past gives birth to present, as the carved woman of antiquity merges with the bio-technological woman of now. The image of the modern woman literally proceeds out from the form of the classical nude statue: a hyper-sexualized, surgically constructed pin-up that takes shape from the subdued sexuality of her classical foremother. There is a certain sense of self-knowing duplicity at work here, as the image presumes to expose the artificiality of beauty constructs. Yet, it situates agency of that construction implicitly in the hands and the imagination of men, who literally assemble the components of her body piecemeal. With perfect breasts in a bright red bikini, matching lipstick and high-heel pumps, she is the plaything and fetishistic fantasy of her creators, wanting only the completion of her arms, which still reside in their possession. The

exaggerated, nearly metallic bronze gloss of her plastic skin also bespeaks the implications of digital alteration in the construction of the new feminine ideal.

The implications of this image are ever-present concerns both in the approach to my artistic practice and my choice of models. In working with Linda Unger, I have therefore looked to archetypes, such as the Three Graces, from which to position a critique of the cultural privileging of youth, and a resistance to the artificiality and latent misogyny embedded in cultural constructions of beauty and femininity.

For the thesis drawings, I worked with Iesha Foster and her now two-year old son. We met during the spring semester of my first year after I placed an ad in Craig's List looking for pregnant models to work with. She was only four or five months pregnant with her son Jeremyah when I took the first photographs of her. Out of the numerous women who initially responded to my request, Iesha was one of only two that I was able to form a significant working relationship with.

The maternal body is powerful and provocative, phallic even. It has figured in my work for a multiplicity of reasons. There is no other kind of body that is more elastic in the rapidity of the changes it undergoes, no other that is so inherently and beautifully transitional. In a sense, it is the most visceral embodiment of the in-between spaces that I naturally gravitate to in my work. The maternal body occupies a space that hovers awkwardly somewhere in between the public and the private. In *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Andrea Liss writes that, "indeed, no body is more cruelly posed at the intersection of the visible and the invisible, the public and the intimate, than the maternal body. Paradoxically... motherhood is too obvious in the sense of being too visible" (Liss, 30).

As such, the maternal body remains inscribed with cultural signification and taboos. It is a contested site, over which is played the politics of women's sexual and reproductive agency. In medical terminology the pregnant body is pathologized, while popular culture negotiates the bodily expectations and cultural ideals of beauty that pregnant women are under increasing pressure to conform to<sup>vi</sup>. Advertisements abound on billboards and over the radio for "mommy makeovers," or combo cesarean section and tummy tucks. One need only perform a Google search, keywords "pregnant body" to see the degree to which the pregnant body is not merely idealized, but excessively sexualized.

In this capacity, much of the trust-building in my relationship with a potential model centered around the alleviation of fears and anxieties over their supposed bodily imperfections. Numerous times, fear that I might not want to work with them manifested in comments such as, "but I have stretch marks," or, "I've gained a lot of weight." At times, even Iesha would request that I "give her a tummy tuck", or exclude the stretch marks from the drawing. When I placed my initial request in Craig's list, I received images from women that reflected the poses and aesthetics of the highly sexualized images of pregnant bodies to be found on the internet. Most of the time, when I filled them in on what I was looking for in my work, I simply never heard back from them.

This raises a number of difficult questions. How did we move from a seclusion of the pregnant body from the public sphere to a hyper-visible and sexualized representation? Are we to locate this exposure within a grand notion of sexual liberation, or does this constitute a co-opting of feminism by the dominant culture? What consequences does the aestheticizing of the pregnant body have for the average American woman?

### **iii. Temporality**

Another conceptual aspect of my work relates to ideas of temporality. In the solo show, *Passage*, time and space entered into the drawings for the first time as both a formal and conceptual consideration. That temporality had grown increasingly important in the production of my work occurred for a number of reasons, the first and foremost, relating to my understanding of the body as a dynamic entity. The body is matter in motion, always in flux, continuously shifting and changing. This itself is multifarious in meaning. Most obviously, the body is perpetually in some state of growth, development or decline, and inevitably, a state of decay. It is also in inconstant motion on the micro-level, a complex network of electrical impulses, and energetic cellular, molecular, and atomic structures. Rooted in eastern philosophy and neo-pagan traditions, such as Wicca, is the belief that bodies exude, and are permeated by, a vital and pulsating energy, which can be manipulated and moved. This view of the body as inherently kinetic led to a desire to find ways of destabilizing it in representation, without recourse to total abstraction. In this aspect, the perception of a tangible temporality is related to the effort to convey the intrinsic kinetic energy of the body.

Secondly, in sifting through the dozens, sometimes hundreds of photos, taken in just one session with my models, it became apparent to me that there was no single image that could fully encapsulate what I was looking for in the work. Certainly, there were many images that were beautiful in their own right. More interesting, however, was the way in which these images worked together, complementing each other and coalescing in such a way as to form something



infinitely more powerful and dynamic. I began to layer the drawings, positioning one body over another so as to suggest actual movement in space. The “ghost images” were erased out just enough to leave a residual trace behind. In this sense, it can be said that I was looking to convey the experience of an “event,” rather than a static moment. By the term event, I refer to the actual experience of working with the model, and to the mediation of space that takes place within such an interaction.

In this capacity, the single image had become increasingly problematic for me. Given the nature of many of the reference photos, too often the work threatened to fall into the realm of the iconic, exactly what I had been trying to avoid. The construction of the drawings through a series of transparent layers suggestive of movement served as a strategy in avoiding such a reading. One hallmark of the classical nude is, after all, a sense of timelessness, of being beyond a locatable moment. A bodily presence that is active and dynamic, however, holds the potential to rupture this stasis. Further, a construction of temporality through the movement of the body in space is also integral to my understanding and experience of time as cyclical and non-linear, where overlap between past, present and future is possible.

By the term space, I do not refer simply to the formal considerations of creating the illusion of spatial depth in a given composition. Rather, I wish to consider the movement of the body through or in space as contingent with time. I do not refer only to my model’s movement as I am observing, but to my own around the model as well. The intersection of my physical space with that of the model’s is an increasingly significant aspect of my work, and this is especially true in the development of the thesis drawings. In a certain sense, these works arise in the mediation of the space that exists between Iesha’s body and my own. That space is both a physical one and a psychological one. This is crucial, as it opens an avenue for the disruption of

the subject/object relationship inherent to the gaze. I want the viewer to be able to enter into that space as well, to be implicated in the act of looking.

## II. The Three graces: Portrait of Linda Unger

The Three Graces, or the Charities, as they were known in ancient Greece, have figured symbolically as archetypes of feminine beauty, good cheer, and at times, fertility as well. Representation of the Graces in fresco paintings, sculpture and vase painting was common in Greco-Roman antiquity. In the most common motif they stand, arms draped languidly around one another, one on either side facing the viewer, and the central figure, standing with her back to the viewer, places an arm on the other two. In Renaissance images, however, representation of the Graces takes on a significantly more erotic charge. In an image by Annibale Carracci from the late Renaissance (c.1590), for example, the figure on the right hand side of the composition rests a hand over her body in a gesture that can only be perceived as masturbatory.

Frank Zollner notes that, “In the fifteenth century, there were....several possible interpretations of the Three Graces, depending on the respective context. They could, for example, serve specifically to display the female virtues.”<sup>vii</sup> Zollner cites in the example of the portrait medal bestowed upon Giovanna delgi Albizzi at the time of her marriage. The front of the medal bears the bride’s image, while the back bears that of the Graces with an inscription invoking the desirable virtues of chastity (*Castitas*), beauty (*Pulchritudo*) and love (*Amor*). During this time period the presence of Three Graces in works of art is symbolically linked not only to notions of feminine virtue, but also to fertility and sexual fulfillment within the bounds of sanctified marriage for procreative purposes only.”<sup>viii</sup> If beliefs in the idea of sexual fulfillment (orgasm) as a necessary to conception persisted into the late Renaissance and early

Baroque period, it may explain the presence of such a gesture in Carracci's image. However, the gesture itself is made possible because the Graces exist beyond ordinary women. That is, they may be safely gazed upon because they are an idealized conceptualization and representation of women who are without a true humanity, and therefore, without a material sexuality.

In discussion of the naked/nude dichotomy, Lynda Nead writes that, "Nakedness is a mark of material reality, whereas nudity transcends that historical and social existence, and is a kind of cultural disguise" (Nead, 16). In representation therefore, the nude, is stripped of the markers that convey a distinct sexuality, be these bodily "imperfections" or pubic hair. Consequently, these are aspects of the body that I have retained in my work. As I discussed in the introduction, the decision to work with Linda stemmed from the desire to create an image of the Three Graces that would challenge the privileging of youth as a necessary parameter of beauty. There is beauty in the robust curves of her body, which denote a full and developed sexuality that cannot be reduced to, or compared with, the plastic image that is presented in the nip/tuck advertisement.

In representation, however, the Three Graces do not ever convey this sense of lived sexuality and experience. They are not human women, and this is the condition of their nudity. A condition that is also, however, contingent upon their perceived virginity, as the permissibility of the sexual gesture, is intertwined and dependent upon the cultural ideals of modesty, purity and chastity symbolically attached to them. The *Portrait of Linda Unger* (fig.1) is based on the motif of the Graces as depicted in Botticelli's *Primavera*, which is also understood as an allegory of marriage and fertility. While shooting the reference photographs in my studio, Linda posed separately in the manner of all three Graces in the painting. After combing through them, the selected images were combined into one.



(fig.1) Portrait of Linda Unger as the Three Graces, charcoal on paper, 51" x 51"

The drawing was one of six that were shown for the solo show, *Passage*, in the Lawrence Alloway Memorial Gallery. A 51-inch square format was used for each. Prior to the thesis

exhibition, these were the largest that I had attempted. The original sketches were done in oil on paper. They were small, fast paced, with muted color, and were more abstract than the final works turned out to be. In executing the final work for the show, however, I decided to return to drawing. Most of my efforts over the two years prior had been concentrated on painting, and feeling bogged down by the preciousness of working on canvas, I was compelled to shift mediums. Drawing utilizes its own particular vocabulary, and this allowed for a simplicity and freedom of movement in the work without the added complication of color.

The momentary sense of liberation facilitated the sense of temporality that I was looking for in the work. As I mentioned in the introduction, it was in this exhibition that time and space first entered into my work in a really tangible way. To elaborate on some of the ideas that were introduced, my desire for temporality stemmed not only from a belief in the body as dynamic and kinetic entity, but also from the desire to rupture the static image of the iconic nude. As Mira Schor has so poignantly observed,

“In the animal world staring is confrontational, an act of aggression. In our species it is acceptable for the stare, the gaze to go one way: man looks at woman... But what if the object of the gaze began to speak? Which also means beginning to see, etc. What disaggregation of the subject would that entail” (Schor, 15).

Movement implies life, and agency. It implies the ability to speak and act. It is in this aspect that the idea of movement and temporality is most significant to the work. The appearance of the “fourth” grace on the right in the back is a ghost image, meant to suggest her movement as she steps forward to the front. Images are inherently static, but what happens when the objects contained within them begin to move, when they threaten to step out of the boundaries and enter into the physicality of the viewer’s space? Our relationship to such bodies

must be considered in a different way. The gaze is troubled if the subjectivity of the model can be made to collide with our own outside the picture plane.

### **III. Thesis Exhibition: Stabat Mater Gaudiosa I & II, Madonna and Child Seated**

The Renaissance Madonna stands or sits in perfect tranquility and stillness, serenity emanates from her as she gazes down at her Son. Her image is ubiquitous, the perfect embodiment of an idealistic all-loving and self-sacrificing mother, yet she is separated from other women in one very critical factor; by way of her perpetual virginity and her liberation from Original Sin, Mary is denied a human sexuality. In Jack Holland's view, the cult of Mary has had long-standing detrimental consequences to the status of women round the world, with little basis in scripture.<sup>ix</sup> While Mary is exalted, she is not the agent of her exaltation, and the cause of that elevation is her very passivity and asexuality. The gradual sophistication and institutionalization of theological doctrine from the fall of the Roman Empire through the late Middle Ages served to separate Mary from ordinary women through opposite means of exaltation and demonization.

Holland writes, "The Word became flesh in the form of her son Jesus, but the flesh of the woman who gave birth to him became an abstraction. In a sense, the abstraction of Mary through her elevation into a sexless, saccharin goddess-like being, far beyond human nature, acted as a counterpoint to the incarnation." (Holland 103).

This certainly seems to be true if taken into consideration with Leo Steinberg's account of Renaissance depictions of the sexuality (genitalia) of Christ. Steinberg argues that the prominence of Christ's penis in representation from the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century on was a conscientious



and symbolic gesture on the part of Renaissance artists to emphasize His humanity, that indeed the Word had become flesh.

In many of the images discussed, the Madonna is shown to be gesturing towards the genitalia, covering them with her hand in order to emphasize them, or openly displaying them for the confirmation of the adoring Magi. He writes that,

“ One gesture in paintings of the Madonna and Child offers it meaning direct; and it graces some of the most cherished creations in Renaissance art...wherein the sex of the Christ Child takes emphasis from the mother’s protecting hand. In movements of sublime tenderness deeper than modesty, Mary’s hand shields-and converts into symbol-her Son’s vulnerable humanity” (Steinberg, 73).

The demonstrative emphasis of Christ’s penis may therefore be considered as a symbol of his true humanity. Yet the display itself is only made possible, because Christ is free from the shame of Original sin. In this capacity, the question of Mary’s own conception and birth became an increasing source of anxiety. Holland writes that, “It became unthinkable for some theologians of the church that the perpetual Virgin, Mother of God and Queen of Heaven, should have been tainted with Original sin, sharing our fall from divine grace which is a direct consequence of our sexual lusts” (Holland, 101). This preoccupation took several centuries to resolve, but in 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed the doctrine of Mary’s Immaculate Conception, making her the only human being to have been conceived in perfection, apart from Jesus, with no built-in tendency to sin. This was, as Holland concludes, rather extraordinary progress for a young Hebrew girl, especially in consideration of the lack of references to her that actually exists in the bible.<sup>x</sup>

In order for then for Mary to be fit to be the Mother of God, her sexuality had to be deemphasized. She is never figured nude. There are many images of Mary nursing the infant Christ with one breast exposed, but again, as Steinberg argues, this gesture too was likely meant as a confirmation and emphasis of Christ's humanity. It is representative of the simple need to eat.

Steinberg also calls attention to a gesture he terms the "chin-chuck", a motif that may be traced back to New Kingdom Egypt to denote supplication or erotic adoration, and in the Christian canon became symbolic of the "Infant Spouse".<sup>xi</sup> He argues that, "by assigning it to the infant Christ, the artist was designating Mary's son as the Heavenly Bridegroom, who having chosen her for his mother, was choosing her for his eternal consort in heaven." (Steinberg, 5). In this capacity, a representation of eroticism between mother and child has been seen almost exclusively through the veil of Christian iconography as it pertains to the Madonna and Child, with such eroticism made possible only because they are not bound to the stain of true human sexuality.

The image of the Renaissance Madonna stands therefore, in conceptual opposition to women's humanity and sexuality, her perpetual virginity and asexuality an unattainable and impossible standard of idealized perfection. In the thesis drawings, I have made specific references to the Madonna and Child both in the titles and the gestures. These images frame a response to the misogyny that lies beneath the cultivated asexuality of Mary, as well as the fear of the body that underscores such ideology.

The titles for the two end panels, *Stabat Mater Gaudiosa I* (fig. 2) and *Stabat Mater Gaudiosa II* (fig.3), are derived from the *Stabat Mater*, a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Roman Catholic hymn to Mary. Two versions of the poem were written, the *Stabat Mater Dolorosa* and the *Stabat Mater*

Speciosa. Both titles are taken from the first line of each poem and translate, respectively, to the “the sorrowful Mother stood” and “the beautiful Mother stood”. The former reflects upon the sorrows of Mary in witnessing the crucifixion and death of her Son, while the Speciosa describes Mary’s joy at the Nativity. Considered one of the seven greatest medieval hymns, the Speciosa begins, “Stabat Mater Speciosa, iuxta phoenem gaudiosa”, or “the beautiful mother stood joyously at the crib.” The drawing titles are derived from these two lines.

The joy of interacting with her son in such a candid manner comes across in nearly all of the photographs I took of Iesha and Jeremyah, but this was not all I was looking for in the images. Drawing from psychoanalysis, Liss observes that, “moments of the everyday erotic between mother and son are few, if not rare, in cultural and artistic representations...The mother is figured as narcissitic, off balance, emotionally ill, or more if she does not adhere to preordained cultural limits.” (Liss, 30) To use her phrase, it was precisely these moments of the “everyday erotic” that became the most important in the development of the thesis drawings. Not in the chaste, “shameless” manner of the Virgin and child, but in a way that is emphatically and unavoidably human. There is no veil to look through here, no theological mask.

The photographs that I was most hesitant to work with originally were those that I realized were the most powerful. These were the images that were the most intimate, those in which I felt most voyeuristic to have observed. There were moments when Jeremyah would kiss his mother on the lips, and lovingly touch her face. There were also moments when he would play with his genitals, usually while being nursed. During these same intervals, he might twist one nipple while latched onto the other. These were the subversive moments that I eventually realized I was looking for in the production of the work.

In the center panel, *Madonna and Child Seated* (fig. 4), the images I chose were from a segment of photos in which the baby was determined to play with his penis, twisting it and pulling it, while he interacted with his mother. There were a number of very direct photos in which the baby, while so engaged sitting on Iesha's lap, stared back at the camera with the most defiant of expressions. It was the most adult look I'd ever seen on the face of someone so young, and no less unsettling given what he was doing with his penis at the time.

At nine feet tall, and five feet wide, these are the largest works that I have executed to date. When mounted on the panels created for their display, the overall height of each measures just over ten feet high and six feet wide. While the decision to hang the drawings on wood panels arose initially from limitations particular to the University Gallery space, they ultimately afforded a conceptual link that I cannot now actually separate from the work itself.

In the solo show, the drawings were allowed to hang freely from the wall, which was painted a rich, neutral grey that both offset the white of the paper and complemented the dark tones of the charcoal. For the thesis exhibition however, painting the wall was an impossibility. The usage of the panels presented not only an alternative solution to this dilemma, but also provided a fitting connection to the history of medieval triptychs and altarpieces. Each panel was lightly brushed with the same grey used on the walls of the Alloway Gallery, and the warmth of the birch wood was allowed to show through from underneath. When spot lit in the gallery for the exhibition, the richness of the undertones created the rather stunning and unexpected appearance of light emanating from behind. As if they were three enormous light boxes, the panels literally glowed on the wall, a fitting effect, given the subject matter of the drawings.

Turning back to the impetus behind them, it was imperative that the drawings retain the integrity of Iesha's subjectivity. While the Madonna is glorified and exalted at the expense of her humanity, I wanted the very opposite to be true of these works. That the drawings should radiate the full weight of both her humanity and that of her son, as well as the intimacy of their shared bond, was the foremost concern in creating them. With this in mind, as well as the height of the gallery, I made the decision to use a larger scale for the exhibition. Each figure in the drawings is presented slightly larger than life. They are just grand enough to impress their weight upon the viewer, but not so much so as to be rendered beyond the ordinary. In this sense, the size was calculated to convey their importance, while still allowing for them to be accessed in a very real and tangible way. The feet were also grounded close to the bottom of the paper, and the panels were hung on the wall low to the ground, so that their bodies might appear on a level close to that of the viewer. In *Stabat Mater Gaudiosa I*, the foot of the foremost figure is actually cropped at the bottom of the paper with the result that she appears to rise up from the floor itself. In this capacity, Iesha is not above and beyond the reach of other women, but concrete and present in the here and now.

The most immediate conceptual device employed, however, in linking her to the present moment, is the inclusion of her multiple tattoos. Their presence brings her unambiguously into a contemporary context, and by extension, help to disrupt a purely iconic reading of the drawings. Tattoos are often deeply personal things, and so convey a specific sense of identity and individuality. They may document the most significant events and experiences of a person's life. For Iesha, the tattoos on each arm have a profound significance to her. One arm bears a faithful print of Jeremyah's footprints with his date of birth inscribed below. On the other, is the tiny set of feet belonging to the son she miscarried prior to my meeting her. Jayden had died in

the fourth month of pregnancy. Within these two tattoos are expressed all her joys in the birth of one son, and her sorrows in the death of another; on one side, the mater dolorosa, and on the other, the mater gaudiosa.

I have endeavored to preserve the integrity of Iesha's humanity in all of these aspects, in the nakedness of her body and the beauty of its so-called "imperfections," the unabashed honesty of her interaction with Jeremyah, and the unique markings on her body. Yet, in these drawings, she is also a refusal of the historical whitening of the Madonna. That there was an established history of the black Madonna in European history prior to the start of the Renaissance was unbeknownst to me before beginning this project. There are, in fact, dozens of medieval and gothic black Madonnas scattered in Cathedrals and churches across Europe, but there are, needless to say, virtually none in the United States.

The conventional white Madonna is roughly concurrent with the 15<sup>th</sup> century beginnings of the Renaissance, and the rise in the veneration of Mary. As stated earlier, Lucia Birnbaum presented the hypothesis that the "whitening" of the Madonna served to eradicate the last traces of goddess worship that were absorbed into the Christian veneration of Mary. She writes that,

"Black Madonnas may be considered a metaphor for a memory of the time when the earth was believed to be the body of a woman and all creatures, historically expressed in cultural and political resistance, and glimpsed today in movements aiming for transformation....Differing from white madonnas, who may be said to embody church doctrine of obedience and patience, and differing in shades of dark, what all Black Madonnas have in common is location on or archeological evidence of the prechristian woman divinity, and the popular perception that they are black" (Birnbaum, 3).

Birnbaum goes on to note that some black Madonnas are dismissed by clergy as "sporca", or dirty, in Italian.<sup>xii</sup> The pejorative connection of black with dirty is difficult to overlook. As a Hispanic woman of color, I been troubled by the way the in which the image of

the white Madonna (and the white Jesus) serves to tacitly reinforce cultural ideals of white hegemony and white beauty against which all others are measured. Yet, as Birnabum explains, in cultural perception and memory, many Madonnas that have been whitened are still, nonetheless, commonly perceived as black.

The thesis works are, therefore, also a way of reconnecting with this suppressed history, and with blackness as beautiful in its own right. In the United States today, there are only two consecrated shrines dedicated to the black Madonna.<sup>xiii</sup> Outside of contemporary African-American culture, the history of the Black Madonna, is predominately unknown. Further, it is clear that the specter of slavery and segregation is still alive and well.<sup>xiv</sup> In *Ain't I A Woman*, Bell Hooks writes about the horrific experiences of black women in the crossing from Africa on the slave ships, and the particular vulnerability experienced by black mothers. She cites the experience of Ruth and Jacob Weldon, an African couple who experienced the horrors of the slave passage, and who saw “mothers with babes at their breasts basely branded and scarred, till it would seem as if the very heavens might smite the infernal tormentors with the doom they so richly merited.”<sup>xv</sup> After the branding, all slaves were stripped of their clothing, and “the nakedness of the African female served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability.” (Hooks, 18.)

In developing the thesis work I was very much inspired by the beauty and strength of African-American artist Renee Cox's self-representations in the *Yo Mama* series, for as Liss notes, “no contemporary image of a naked black woman, even if produced by the woman herself, goes unaccompanied by the shadow of the recent past.” (Liss, 104). In these images, Cox fearlessly displays her naked body while pregnant with her son, and again with him after he is born. “Cox's courageous and exquisite self-representations and family portraits challenge us to

envision black female bodies as new terrain for expanding black maternal visibility, for giving evidence of the tremendous strength involved in vulnerability and caring” (Liss, 105).

Working with Iesha to develop the thesis drawings, I became acutely aware of both the vulnerability and the caring that this describes. The latter, is of course evident in the strength of her bond with Jeremyah. Vulnerability is evident not only in unveiling her body for me (and the much larger audience that would see the work), but also in her subjectivity as a young black woman and mother, who even at the time that I was completing these images had to contend with the pernicious spirit of racism and prejudice.

Working though the iconic image of the Madonna and Child, I endeavored not only to challenge the conflation of feminine virtue with passivity and asexuality, but also to reconnect an image of the black maternal body with the beautiful and the divine.





(fig.2) *Stabat Mater Gaudiosa I*, charcoal on paper 60"x 120"



(fig.3) *Stabat Mater Gaudiosa II*, charcoal on paper 60" x 108"





(fig.4) *Madonna and Child Seated*, Charcoal on paper 60" x 120"

#### IV. Artistic Influences: Jenny Saville & Alice Neel

I have looked at the work of British artist Jenny Saville for several years now. Famous for her large-scale paintings of transgressive bodies, Saville defies cultural ideals of beauty, and has pushed the boundaries of the body in representation. A significant part of her appeal to me resides in the way that she too is frequently drawn to various states of in-between. At times, the bodies in her work are caught within the nexus of life and death, appearing half-alive, half dead. At other times, the model is literally caught between two states of gendered being. In *Passage* (2004), Saville's transgender model has both a natural penis and silicone breasts. The image is straightforward and unapologetically direct. The thrust of the splayed legs consumes the entire space of the foreground and pushes the penis into the viewer's immediate consideration. Clear-cut assumptions of gender are confounded in this painting, but Saville does not offer the body as mere spectacle. Instead, she challenges the viewer to consider the model's viable humanity, and not simply in terms of our own. Every sensuous and provocative curve of flesh as paint, drips of an unfettered sexuality and humanity. There is no small amount of bravery in these images, as a positive representation of transgendered bodies from outside the queer community is still so lacking in contemporary culture. Saville, however, requires that we consider beauty on her terms, and of this she has stated:

“ There is a thing about beauty. Beauty is always associated with the male fantasy of what the female body is. I don't think there is anything wrong with beauty. It's just what women think is beautiful can be different. And there can be a beauty in individualism. If there is a wart or a scar,

this can be beautiful, in a sense when you paint it. It's part of your identity. Individual things are seeping out, leaking out.”<sup>xvi</sup>

A more perfect encapsulation of what it means to break with iconic, male-defined notions of beauty could not be written. Whether it is the wart, or the scar, or the stretch mark on the pregnant body, all take on a beauty in their individuality and the way in which they inscribe a lived experience on the body. Saville's figures are subversive because they prompt us in the most visceral way to consider these aspects of the body as she does, to literally reconstruct our ideas of acceptable beauty and embodiment. Within a Saville painting, it is the strange that becomes normal, and the mainstream that is suddenly rendered queer.

Not long after I first began layering the images in my drawings to construct a sense of temporality, it was brought to my attention that Saville had also recently done a series of large-scale drawings of mothers and children based on Raphael's cartoons of the Madonna and Child. Inspired by the ghost images that are at times seen in old master drawings when the body, or a part of the body is erased and then repositioned, Saville created a dynamic sense of temporality by continually erasing the image and layering back over it. These drawings became a continual source of inspiration while producing the thesis work.

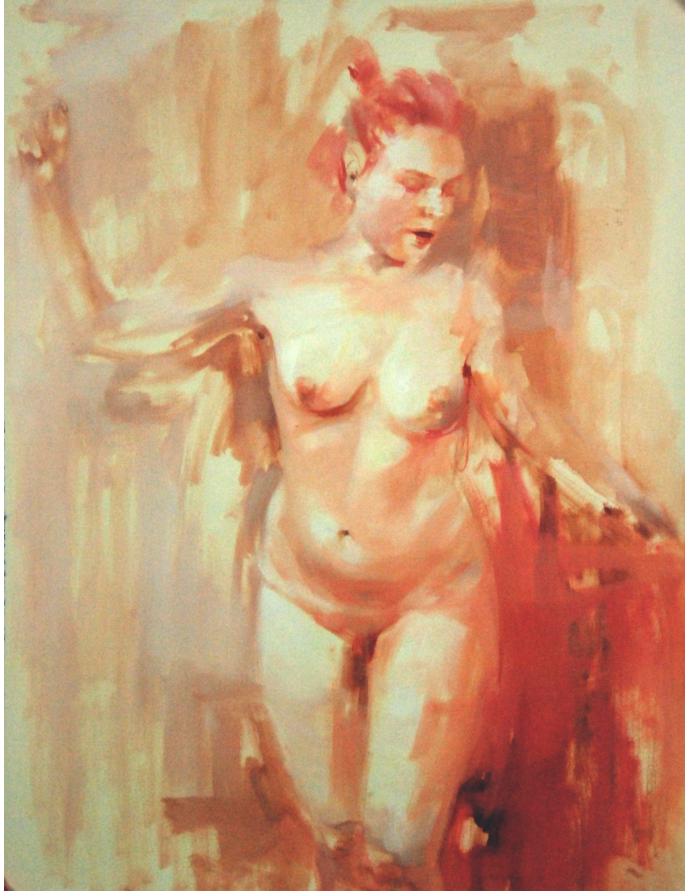
The frank vitality and intimacy of Alice Neel's portraits of women and children were another. What is perhaps most striking is the sense of reality and humanity that Neel creates without recourse to a high level of “finished” rendering. Neel's painterly surface, her use of not quite natural flesh-tones, and her use of outlines, all function to separate her work from the idealized nude. Neel does not sugar coat for the viewer. Pamela Allara writes that, Neel's “pregnant nudes are a subject certain to block a controlling male gaze. Instead of evoking an erotic response, these female nudes arouse the most elemental of men's fears.”<sup>xvii</sup>

This fear is tied to the implicit connection of death in the act of giving life, which is strongly evident in Neel's painting, *Childbirth*. The swollen body, enlarged, darkened nipples and eyes, impart the impression of a corpse. Here, death is more apparent than the prospect of a new life. The power and immediacy of Neel's pregnant nudes is inescapable, no less inspiring in that she braved such subject matter at a time when the figure itself was considered taboo.

## V. Moving Forward

I would like, in conclusion, to briefly present a small study for a new work that I have begun. *Portrait of Kathryn Cellerini in Pink (fig. 5)* is the first time that I have returned to painting since beginning the thesis work. Drawing inspiration from the aesthetic of Kathryn's own artistic practice, which is marked by an exploration of the interior topography of her body, I have used a palette that recalls the soft pink and yellow tonalities of fatty tissues, organs and flesh. On another level, these pink tonalities also reflect upon the vibrancy and warmth I associate with her personality. In keeping with the conceptual aspect of the thesis work, the portrait is conceived of not as a single image, but rather, as a grouping of three separate, multi-layered images. Shown in the photograph is the first layer for one of the images. Like the thesis drawings, these too will be mounted on panels in the manner of a triptych. We listened to upbeat music while taking the photos, and Kathryn simply did whatever came to mind. In this case, there was a lot of dancing involved.

Allowing for these unexpected moments has become paramount in my practice. I am not interested in "posing" anyone into a set preconception. Rather, I prefer that my model's unique individuality be allowed to negotiate the way the work unfolds itself, what it will reveal itself to be. In this capacity, the model is as active a part in the creation of the work as I am. This may be thought of in terms of a counter-history, or counter-practice, where the traditional artist/model relationship is reversed. Only in allowing for this openness, and this fluidity of exchange, can the body reveal itself in a surprising, challenging or subversive way.



(fig.5 ) *Portrait of Kathryn Cellerini (state 1)*, oil on paper, 22'' x 30''



## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> in Dines, pg. xxx

<sup>ii</sup> see above

<sup>iii</sup> See Gerina Dunwich, *Wicca Craft*, pg. 14 for a description of the May rite of Beltane

<sup>iv</sup> in Birnbaum, pg.4

<sup>v</sup> See Bell Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* for an analysis of the complex history of black woman in America and the multiple, conflicting forms of oppression they have been subjected to.

<sup>vi</sup> See McGrath, Roberta, *Seeing her Sex*, for an excellent and in-depth study of the history of gynaecology and obstetrics, and the underlying roots of the pathologizing of the female body in theology and philosophy. Also addresses the implications of photography in separating the mother from the fetus.

<sup>vii</sup> in Zollner, pg. 75

<sup>viii</sup> see above

<sup>ix</sup> see Jack Holland, *Misogyny*, 101

<sup>x</sup> see above

<sup>xi</sup> in Steinberg, pg. 5

<sup>xii</sup> in Birnbaum, pg. 14

<sup>xiii</sup> Black Madonna Shrine, Missouri and National Shrine of Our Lady Czestochowa Italy, Pennsylvania

<sup>xiv</sup> in *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon discusses the idea of haunting as it pertains to the cultural memory of slavery.

<sup>xv</sup> In Hooks, pg 18.

<sup>xvi</sup> In Saville, pg. 15

<sup>xvii</sup> Pamela Allara, "Mater" of Fact: Alice Neel's Pregnant Nudes, *Chicago Journal, American Art* Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring 1994

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