

# The Woman Question: A visual exploration of the feminine sphere

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Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Book Arts + Printmaking

The University of the Arts

Philadelphia, PA

December 2017

This document was produced in satisfaction of the thesis requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in the Book Arts + Printmaking Program at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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**Abstract**

This thesis addresses the scope of my studio practice and visual art works during my course of study at the University of the Arts. It encompasses work in both the Book Arts and Printmaking MFA and Studio MFA programs. Through research into women's domestic and social roles, particularly during the era of first wave feminism, my thesis work explores femininity and the history and legacy of gender bias through the lens of contemporary personal experiences. This thesis discusses the emergence of these concepts in my work, as well as the visual language that I use to describe these concepts. This thesis paper elaborates on my labor-intensive processes, my influences, and how these inform the content and formal aspects of my work.

## Introduction

My thesis work addresses the contemporary female experience and the legacy of female suppression, drawing from historical perspectives, personal experience and family history. Through the processes of handmade paper, print and book, I explore the materiality of the female body in connection with symbols and text. My work makes connections between historical texts about women and the objects and symbols associated with women and their sphere. Mining 19th century medical texts, feminist speeches, literature and family history, I seek to illuminate persistent misconceptions about the female gender while exploring the physicality of the female body. By examining these parallels through layers of printed imagery and book pages, I develop a visual language that gives voice to my experience of the world.

I am interested in craft and handmade objects, specifically paper, books and print. I use the sumptuous properties and textures of handmade paper, the bite of intaglio and letterpress, and the quality of a hand-sewn book to add weight and presence to my artworks. These processes are labor intensive and resonate with the nature of women's labor and craft through history. I use these materials and the book form not to develop a narrative, but to create intimacy and control the viewer's experience. I want to seduce the viewer with the lush materiality of handmade paper, ink drawing, and print.

## Ideas and Influences

I am drawn to slight imperfection, impermanence, evidence of the maker's hand in a work, and degradation and wear. This aesthetic interest was validated by my study of Japanese art in college, when I was introduced to the idea of Wabi-Sabi, which I understand to mean the beauty of transience, of impermanence and aging. I recall a story of a Japanese garden that was carefully groomed for the visit of a dignitary, and at the last moment, an attendant of the garden shook the cherry tree to allow some blossoms to fall across the otherwise perfectly raked ground.

These ideas are very present in the work of Cai Guo-Qiang, a Chinese artist whose work embodies this aesthetic and has been influential to my ink drawings. Many of his works incorporate fireworks, and the unconscious mark-making in his explosion drawings have really pushed me to embrace randomness and chance in my work. He traveled and worked in Japan as a young man and credits the influence of the culture with helping his work to become pure. He developed a sensitivity to materials, found purity of form and reduced his practice to its essence (Macdonald 32:30-32:54). I am fascinated by the beauty and fleeting qualities of his firework performances: the way that the colored powders create powerful lines and forms in the sky, but disperse and fade almost immediately. In addition to their aesthetic beauty, they have personal significance to the artist. Fireworks are part of his Chinese culture and heritage, and his work reflects deeply on his personal history. This has inspired me to look for and consider the pieces of the culture and history of women in American society that I bring to my work.

In my book, *All Disease*, I develop a visual language about women's mental stability through the juxtaposition of lithographed Rorschach-style ink blots,

illustrations of women's pelvic bones, and text culled from 18th and 19th century medical texts about hysteria. The inkblots are dark and spare images, centered on a clean white page of handmade paper and cut in half by the sewn binding. The randomness of the ink shapes and the seeming randomness of the juxtapositions is intended to heighten the sense of hysteria as the viewer journeys through each page of the book. The inkblot imagery, originally created by drips of ink compressed in a folded piece of paper and reproduced by photolithography, is carefully curated and printed throughout the book. Placed next to clinical images of pelvic bones and words describing womanhood as the predisposing factor to mental instability, these inkblots can be evocative of female genitalia, organs, animals and other associations. The monochrome minimalism of the imagery and text and the ink forms are directly inspired by the traditional Japanese aesthetic.

Rorschach-style inkblot imagery is an important influence in my recent work due to both its historical significance as a predictor of mental health, but also the open-ended nature of imagery and forms that the inkblots produce. It is inherently symmetrical, but also completely free-formed and uncontrolled. The resulting images maintain a recognizable beauty in formal aspects, but allow the viewer to make associations about what the forms mean. A manual of instruction on the administration of the Rorschach test gives broadly suggestive prompts about how to consider and react to these inkblots. I enjoy the dual nature of suggesting what they might mean through positioning and juxtaposing them within my work, but also allowing the viewer to posit his or her own associations.

*Curio*, my most recent book, stretches the meaning of the inkblot images from my earlier piece, *All Disease*. Rather than the images being a signifier or symbol for woman's mental stability, they are abstract forms that recall beloved household objects

and vessels. These objects of domesticity range from highly valued silver serving dishes and amphora jugs to mass-produced kitsch that has distilled the patterns and meanings of their high-class counterparts for a middle-class domicile. The objects in the book are curios, they are on display. I want the viewers to make free associations about what the images in the inkblots mean or what they represent, but still draw connections to the domestic sphere of women. The title, *Curio*, references a 19th century term for curiosity and is often part of the term “curio cabinet,” just as beautiful objects are often collected and arranged in a cabinet. The title may refer to the quotidian objects that are printed throughout the book as a visual narrative, but also refers to the relegation of women’s role to trophy wife or domestic curator. The inkblots are bold images, but subtle and suggestive in their meaning. Their representation is fluid and they confront the viewer’s presumptions by asking the viewer, “what do you see?”

I feel a kinship with the minimalist artist Eva Hesse in the way I develop these forms. When she made her sculptures, she would make choices about material but also allow the media “to determine more of the way it completes itself. Non-forms, non-planned, non-art, non-nothing.” (Begleiter 1:34;16). Her work was considered minimalist in that it was pared down to essentials and, according to the art critic Lucy Lippard, “It was a lot about presence.” (Begleiter 46:01). It was also a departure from minimalism in that her work was very personal and handmade, rather than appearing clinical and machine made. This is especially apparent in works such as *Repetition 19 III* and *Untitled (Rope Piece)*. Her work is full of references to the body, but remains austere and abstract.

Incorporating the stark imagery into the everyday object, my piece, *Vanity Chair*, uses the Rorschach-style inkblot, but in the context of a piece of furniture. The inkblot is printed onto the silk fabric which covers the seat of a vintage 1920s vanity chair. This

style of chair was part of a furniture set that included a dressing table. Women used this furniture while grooming their hair and putting on make-up. The re-upholstered chair is a symbol of women's domestic role and the placement of the inkblot invokes the shame of menses, infertility, beauty and domestic ritual. *Vanity Chair 2* continues to explore these references. The inkblot imagery is screen printed onto a rich pink silk taffeta fabric using thermographic ink which becomes less opaque when exposed to body heat. As one sits in the chair, the inkblot fades, creating a body print of the seated viewer. Thus, by interacting with the piece, by sitting in the chair and altering the image with body heat, the viewer claims the symbol and assumes the role of the mistress of the household.

### **Italian Renaissance and Incunabula**

An early and enduring influence on my work is medieval and early Renaissance Italian painting and manuscript books. Having lived in Florence, Italy for a few years, I was inundated with religious iconography in churches, on street corners, in museums and in chapels. My Catholic upbringing contributed to my fascination of the patron saints depicted with the apparatuses of their martyrdom, and the narratives of the New Testament.

Cennino Cennini, a contemporary of that time, wrote a comprehensive recipe book on the preparation of wooden panels for painting, of pigments and tempera paint, and of water gilding. This influence is very present in my work to this day. I often look to printed books of the incunabula era for inspiration in construction, material, weight and content of paper, binding structure, layout and color of text. Medieval sewing structures are used in both *All Disease* and *Curio*: a herringbone binding on double raised cords and sewn-on single raised cords. I am particularly enamored by the works



of Anton Koberger, proprietor of one of the most successful printing presses of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. The books from his presses, primarily Latin and German language bibles, have beautiful crisp, heavy white paper and deep black rotunda and schwabacher typefaces. The layout of the text is stark and uncluttered, a quality that I often replicate with my text.

### **First Wave Feminism**

I have a deep interest in the history of women's liberation movements, primarily first wave feminism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I have become especially involved in the research of the texts of the era, particularly feminist speeches and literature. The striking element of these speeches is their applicability to contemporary society, despite the fact that they are over 100 years old. Speeches calling for equality in wages and positions of power continue to be necessary for women. A particularly influential piece of text is the speech of Lucy Stone, who called for equality and rights in all aspects of women's lives from education and work to marriage and self-determination. It is startling to see that these some of the same issues from the 19th century persist in the 21st. In a moment in history in which our nation had a viable female candidate for president, it was shocking to make the connection that not much has changed in terms of women's societal and family expectations. The language of Lucy Stone permeates my early graduate work as I tried to give voice to my own questions about whether our society is indeed post-feminist.

I further researched 19th century literature, medical texts and other primary source documents to better understand the root of women's frustration from this

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<sup>1</sup> I have concluded it is not.

important historical era so that I could make connections to the contemporary experience as a woman and a wife. I have found works written from the male perspective to be the most enlightening regarding the “woman question”- a phrase that refers to women’s role in society. Medical texts of the era make broad generalizations about women, positing that women are doomed to disease and mental incapacity due to the presence of the womb. Hysteria and nymphomania were products of the capricious womb, which was thought to wander the body, tainting parts of it as it floated from brain to stomach to limb. While the wandering womb syndrome has been debunked, ideas about women’s whimsicality and unpredictability endure in today’s culture.

Contemporary feminist issues such as objectification, traditional roles, and discrimination filter into my experience of the world as a woman in a post-second wave feminist world. In an environment where equal rights are not codified<sup>2</sup> but assumed as a given, I find it is critical to reexamine historical texts to get a better understanding of the legacy of womanhood in American society. This research has been both surprising and confirming, due to the absurdity and persistence of 18th century ideas about women’s morality, rationality, and capacity, and it has become an important component to my practice.

Appropriating text from the works of medical literature was critically important to my understanding of the misguided science behind the dismissal of women as irrational and fragile beings. Doctors, who have been authority figures for centuries, conspired to relegate women to second class citizenship by blaming disparate maladies

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<sup>2</sup> The original amendment giving women equal rights was never ratified, despite having been reintroduced in the 1970s and 1980s.

from insanity to infertility on their moral character and sexual behaviors. Additionally, these ideas are often repeated in literature and plays. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the prototypical lovelorn insane woman is portrayed in the figure of Ophelia. She is a delicate being driven to insanity and suicide over the lost affection of her paramour. This romanticized vision of erotomania became a standard not only for women depicted in literature, but as case study for medical theories on female insanity through the Victorian era (Showalter).

In my work (*wagging his finger at her*), I examine the infantilization of women in the domestic sphere by utilizing text from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, a play written in 1879. This text is drawn from the husband's speech and stage directions when interacting with his wife. He condescends to her and dismisses her by using childlike pet names and speaking to her in the format of a question. The text is accompanied by imagery of candy colored vessels, drawn from my interest in Depression glass. This refers to woman as the "weaker vessel," a biblical term (1 Peter 3:7) which describes the domestic relationship between husband and wife as one in which woman is subservient to her spouse. In the centerfold of the book, an open pelvic bone, representing the woman's power as a vessel, is accompanied by the text of the wife, asserting and acknowledging that she is treated as though she has no knowledge of the world. This moment of self-awareness is a strong statement. This is immediately followed by text in the husband's voice, dismissing her position, suggesting the inevitability of domestic inequality.

In my piece, *Specimen*, I further develop the idea of clinical examination of the state of women's mental acuity by amassing and reproducing a large number of inkblot images that are overlapped and organized in a grid on the wall. By using inkjet print on Mylar 8x10 sheets, this piece contrasts my handmade material works and is removed of

the sentimentality and humanity present in my other works. The grid format and volume of images suggest formality that is removed from empathy and sympathy. It is a visual reflection of the attitudes of the male-dominated medical institutions of the 19th century that ascribed women's undesirable behaviors to insanity. This wall installation is a clinical representation of women who, for lack of conformity to social norms of behavior or decorum, were deemed mentally unfit.

**Process: Intense Interest in the Handmade**

I am fascinated with printmaking and use it as my primary means of expression. I am particularly drawn to the process of letterpress printing- the Rube Goldberg-esque machinery and gilded pinstripes of old presses. There is an enjoyment in the labor and the challenge of making a form out of handset metal and wood type, the rhythm of treadling and feeding the press to make a print, the aesthetics of old typefaces and antiques cuts. I find the puzzle of fitting specific type sizes and tones into a structure a stimulating problem to solve.

As an undergraduate art student, I gravitated toward archaic and process-rich art-making methods, such as large format photography, stone lithography, and traditional painting techniques of fresco, tempera and gilding. I eventually traveled to Florence, Italy in order to study painting conservation and restoration, which married many of the crafts and skills that I studied. Examining and diagnosing the failing layers of an antique painting was another way for me to engage the painting process. For me, researching historical pigments and substrates, or uncovering the provenance of certain typefaces, are important aspects of preparing new work. The materials, activities and scents are an essential part of the ritual of my art practice.

Traditional lithography and photolithography are often part of my works, as they comprise much of the imagery in my broadsides and books. The rich values and tones of washes and marks are well suited to this printmaking method, whereas the sharp impression of text and line are formed by the relief method of letterpress printing. The resultant rich qualities of texture and surface are evident in both the antique metal and wood type from which I print and in my handmade paper with natural deckle edges.

In addition to traditional printmaking methods, my practice encompasses non-silver photography and monotype printing. The kallitype printing process was popular in the late 1800s through the early 1900s. The unique chemistry and photo processes of the post-Civil War period has an ethereal beauty that is evocative of this time period. Utilizing the kallitype printing process, I am able to create imagery with a sense of nostalgia and history, as I do in my prints, *Bauble 1* and *Bauble 2*. The titles refer to something that is superficially attractive, yet useless or worthless. By comparing imagery of domestic objects of varying value with inkblots suggestive of these shapes, I am considering the idea of women's delight in objects, as the curator of a household. There is a fine line between the frivolity and necessity of shopping and spending money, an activity deeply associated with a woman's sphere. The ability to keep and bedeck a home can be valued as a point of pride, yet derided as a frivolous vice.

Working with handmade materials can often become time consuming and labor intensive. The materials have tactile qualities not present in machine-made equivalents, yet speak to the monotony and time consumption of traditional household women's work and crafts. For example, the repetition and time utilized in the papermaking process is very similar to washing and drying clothing or dishes, and the work of typesetting and printing are akin to tatting, spinning thread and weaving.

In the development of my practice, I feel a strong kinship with process oriented practices of the papermakers in Pulparazzi, a woman's papermaking collective. These women are working throughout the United States and developing contemporary art pieces in handmade paper, utilizing pulp painting to create layered surfaces and imagery in paper. I identify with the interesting ways that the members are pushing the art form, particularly Shannon Brock, who frequently collaborates with the letterpress printer Martin Mazorra. She has made incredible free-formed sheets with pulp painting

that is overprinted with hand set type and carved woodblocks. The results are beautifully unified images that are compelling for their synergy of paper and print.

In my own work, I incorporate custom-shaped deckles, pulp painting, and watermarks in order to add elements of surprise and delight to my visual narratives. *All Disease* includes several poured pulp forms that mimic the inkblot images printed throughout the book. *Curio* features centerfolds that are cotton pulp silhouettes of domestic objects couched onto translucent abaca sheets. The nature of these pulp images allows a dialog with printed images in the folios beneath the centerfold.

### **Context: Contemporary Book Arts and Artists**

I situate myself in the contemporary craft revival in letterpress, along with artists like Jen Farrell of Starshaped Press, Jessica Spring of Springtide Press, and Kseniya Thomas, founder of Ladies of Letterpress. This approach to the printmaking medium has become dominated by women who have rescued traditional letterpress equipment and redefined as an artistic practice what used to be a male dominated tradecraft and reproductive technique. The redefining and feminizing of letterpress as an artistic process is similar to redefining women's role in contemporary society.

Book arts, while having distinct historical practitioners, such as William Blake in the late 1700s and Futurists and Dadaists in the early 20th century, did not gain ground as an art form until the 1970s. Keith Smith is one of the leaders of the art form, having written numerous books about binding styles and book structure. Two of his works have been highly influential to my practice in terms of my bookbinding skills and consideration of book layout, flow, and structure. These are *Non-Adhesive Binding: Books without Paste or Glue* and *Structure of the Visual Book*. Most of my sewing knowledge was learned through repeated practice of his binding instruction. Additionally, my understanding of how to pace content and create a visual cadence within book structures has been enhanced by reading his books.

Julie Chen of Flying Fish Press represents the high watermark in terms of letterpress printed book structures and book objects today. Her work is impeccably made, highly collectible, and innovative in terms of content and structure. Many of her works take on the shapes of board games, toys and pop-ups. While my work does not directly borrow from her structures or content, her career is both inspirational and motivational.



Early in my practice I tended toward text based expressions using letterpress printing, where I obscured words through the use of overprinting, isotype process and allowing text to run off the page. I found inspiration in the work of Jenny Holzer, who wheat pasted fliers and projected proclamations in public spaces and on buildings around New York City. Unlike this work, my proclamations, rather than grand philosophical truisms, tended toward quiet cries of desperation or didactic displays of appropriated texts. This language appeared in small broadsides, handheld cards and books. They were small personal outbursts, appealing to the experiences of women similarly situated, but not public calls to action.

Glenn Ligon is an artist whose exploration of history and appropriated texts both inspires and intrigues. His works *Runaways* and *Narratives*, utilize found text from historical documents about slavery and incorporate the printmaking methods of lithography and etching. His statement that, "I was interested in contemporary traces of the conditions under which former captives wrote their narratives." (75) demonstrates his interest in the connections between the present and history. An early work in my graduate studies attempted to make a similar connection to history: my letterpress printed stack of handbills titled *Leaflet*. This piece borrows from a historical abolitionist broadside; however, the language is reconfigured to appeal to women. The prints utilize typefaces and metal type from the mid-nineteenth century, but the paper is contemporary fluorescent copy-shop material. This firmly situates the work in the present, even as the language and style remain antique. My thesis work moves away from a direct visual influence of the 19th century, borrowing from the language, aesthetic and nostalgia rather than the typographic style or imagery. I appreciate the ideas of connecting history to the contemporary in Glenn Ligon's work and this notion

is a catalyst for my thesis and cemented the continuing influence of the era of first wave feminism.

## **Conclusion**

As I trace the history of ideas and issues, I am also working in materials and methods that are historical themselves. As I develop a visual vocabulary, I use processes with vocabularies of their own. These words inform the way I consider and use language in my work. I look toward history as a foundation and a compendium to reexamine and recontextualize.

My thesis is a consideration of my artistic impulses: the handmade, the printmaking processes, the book form, the examination of women's history, the concerns of feminism and misogyny, the glorification of domestic objects, the immediacy of the automatic mark, the free association of undefined abstract forms, the symbolism of shapes. These impulses combine into visual tales of the female experience. While much of my work looks back at history, traditional processes, materials, and ideas, it is rooted in the present experience of the world.

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