Profane Baroque and a Woman’s Experience.

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the postgraduate degree of Master of Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Sacha Lees I 2024

I have employed GPTchat and Grammerly AI to rephrase some sentence structures, which have been cited accordingly. However, I have not utilised generative aspects.

ABSTRACT

"Profane Baroque and a Woman's Experience" is a practice-based MFA research project that reflects my experience as a woman navigating a veneer of liberation. This exegesis addresses enduring gender inequities of women and references early professional experiences as a burgeoning artist. From this formative experience, issues of authorship and hierarchy of voices are foregrounded as subject matter in my canvases. As part of my feminist practice, I fold in auto theory as work emerges from my body as an embodied but highly fractured feminine corporal self. I developed my own feminist identity and voice aided by subjectivities from feminist contemporary painters such as Jenny Saville and Jacqueline Fahey. To subvert value hierarchies, I explore contrasting high and low art by desecrating sacred materials with profane subjects and, as such, critically engage with a legacy of 'feminine aesthetics' in art, in which women and feminine bodies are positioned as objects for consumption rather than active subjects. Sacred and profane themes are innate in seventeenth-century Baroque, and I draw further on the movements' inherencies by placing my dynamic body as the heroine at the centre of the action as it wrestles amongst excessively liberated drapery and contemporary single-use profane objects. I employ varied invented, contemporary and ancient painting techniques, methods and materials to reclaim my identity through materials. These painterly explorations incorporate feminist theories about how bodies and identities are shaped by social forces by Elizabeth Grosz and Simone de Beauvoir and the marginalisation of women in contemporary New Zealand work organisations by Nilima Chowdhury. They also include ideas about waste from prevalent consumerism by Ian Sinclair and Walter Benjamin's writings on Baroque and his concept of history.

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LIST OF FIGURES

Fig.9. Lees, Sacha. “Mute presence”, Salt, vinegar and oil on reclaimed copper-clad laminate, 2023, Wellington.

Fig.10. Fahey, Jacqueline. “Final Domestic Expose - I paint Myself”, Oil and collage on board,1981-1982, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1983, New Zealand.

Fig.11. Lees, Sacha. “Blister”, Oil on Canvas, 2023, Wellington.

Fig.12. Lees, Sacha. “Sketches exploring detritus, figures and fabric”, Pencil and acrylic on paper and cardboard, 2023-2024, Wellington.

Fig.13. Van Dyck, Antony. “Rachel de Ruvigny, Countess of Southampton”, Oil on canvas, c.1640, Photograph © The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.

Fig.14. Lees, Sacha, “Golden Veil, Rotten Core I,” Ammonia, salt, string, vinegar, chicken hearts, gorse, lace and oil on reclaimed copper-clad laminate, 2024, Wellington.

Fig.15. Lees, Sacha, “Golden Veil, Rotten Core II,” Salt, vinegar, string, blackberry and oil on reclaimed copper-clad laminate, 2024, Wellington.

Fig.16. Lees, Sacha, “Golden Veil, Rotten Core III,” Salt, vinegar, ammonia, paper and oil on reclaimed copper-clad laminate, 2024, Wellington.

Fig.17. Lees, Sacha. “Imprinting Imperfection: organic matter experiment”, leaves, salt, vinegar, Ammonia, 2023, Wellington.

Fig.18. Lees, Sacha. “Resulting organic imprint on Copper clad laminate”, 2023, Wellington.

Fig.19. Lees, Sacha. “Anti-alkaline body gel,” 2024, Wellington.

Fig.20. Lees, Sacha. “Embedding a Corporeal Presence” experiment, Anti-alkaline body gel on reclaimed copper-clad laminate, 2024, Wellington.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE:

A Formative Journey through Film and Baroque Masters

Within patriarchal culture, woman is a social construct, Women are deprived of self-determination and self-knowledge at profound levels while they are barraged with others' definitions and imposed identities, roles and meanings.[1]

— Simone de Beauvoir.

A Formative Personal History

Originally from Aotearoa/New Zealand's rural Te Waipounamu/South Island, I entered the film effects industry, bringing a blend of enthusiasm and innocence. I became the sole woman among a team of six young designers in a art concept and illustration studio.

The workplace culture was fiercely competitive, fuelled by my employer's values. His expectation was that work must take precedence above all else. I felt my autonomy was curtailed when he discouraged me from socialising outside of work unless it was with my colleagues. It became clearly evident that I should not question his authority as a colleague was abruptly dismissed for dissent, emphasising my subordinate position and lack of agency further.

My employer highlighted the demand for our roles when the company's success grew, increasing the competitive pressure and anxiety to perform. Like my colleagues, I was hired as a self-employed worker, lacking the legal protections of regular employees, which opened the door to abuse. A dismissal notice period was not required, nor was communication of job security. Dreaded abrupt terminations were the norm, delivered by impersonal letters.

The experience of working a workplace disproportionally dominated by men invited comments regarding my gender, choice of clothing and patronising remarks that echo women's voiced experiences in Homes's 2020 New Zealand study publication.[2] "Critical feminist scholars argue that modern work organisations persistently marginalise and undervalue women, particularly evident in the New Zealand private sector. This resonates with my experience as a woman working at this film company."[3] One of my colleagues voiced to me that any opportunities I received were solely because, as he put it, I was a "cute girl," thereby

belittling me and my accomplishments. Opportunities I earned were also met with hostility and, on a few occasions, a show of aggression from a colleague. Philosopher and author Kate Manne writes in her article that "misogyny polices and enforces patriarchal norms and expectations" and is experienced when women are seen as falling short of expected roles under patriarchal ideologies or "having ideas beyond [their] station."[4] Manne goes on to say, 'misogyny emerges precisely when the assumptions of sexism are challenged, and women demonstrate their brilliance, creativity, and autonomy.'[5] The misogynistic behaviour provides evidence of the gendered power imbalance of my working environment. In response to this treatment, I consequently strongly desired to prove my position to my peers.

My employer valued hard work above all else, and this was the only way I felt I could gain his approval and, therefore, I thought, acceptance from my colleagues. As the only woman on the team, I worked excessively long hours to prove my worth, meeting tight deadlines that earned me the nickname "the machine." This workaholic pace was normalised, and high expectations for my performance were set. Ultimately, this pushed me to sacrifice my physical health to maintain my position.

To regain some agency in a work environment where my autonomy was "severely curtailed," I became fixated on my weight.[6] The scale's numbers provided clear evidence of whether I was succeeding or failing, signalling clear feedback that I desired. The psychological toll of the toxic work situation resulted in the development of the disease Anorexia Nervosa. The prevailing wisdom of the time suggested that for women to succeed in a work environment dominated by men, they had to navigate a delicate balance: 'comporting their bodies in a way that minimised their sexuality while simultaneously avoiding the pitfalls of hyper-mas-

culinisation.'[7] This approach was meant to "defuse any challenge to existing gender hierarchies."[8] The hierarchies I refer to here are exemplified by the masculine and feminine qualities attributed to genders through patriarchal ideologies. My positionality views 'masculine' and 'feminine' as binary constructs that are shaped by language and culture and applied to bodies with all the associated cultural baggage. From this position and the context of my working environment, I attempted to appear masculine enough to fit in and to be taken seriously, yet not overly masculine, overreaching the expectations I felt placed on my gender. I was determined to demonstrate that any recognition I received was due to my skill and hard work, not because I was seen as a "cute girl." My decision to stop eating was an attempt to reclaim my agency and present myself as more masculine/neutral and, therefore thus, less 'othered' in this environment.[9]

My position as a cis-gender, non-disabled pākeha woman fits the conventional model that is typically aligned with patriarchal social norms, and undoubtedly, part of my reclaiming of self in this way is shaped by the persistent and unsolicited assertions about my body over the years. These assertions continued until I was in my forties. From my earliest memory at age eight, I have had to rationalise these remarks. From early childhood, girls are encouraged to evaluate themselves constantly through the eyes of others. Their self-worth becomes increasingly tied to how others perceive them rather than how they perceive themselves. In other words, women are often socialised to view themselves through the perspective of the male gaze[i].[10]

[i] Here I reference Laura Mulvey's development of the concept of the male gaze in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".

After six years in this untenable position at the film company and at a weight too meagre to sink an office chair, the physical stress on my body became unsustainable. I had manifested the messages I received in my body. I was not worthy enough to exist. “This experience was profoundly disorienting, leading to a deep existential uncertainty about my validity—a struggle that persisted long after my departure. When reading Chowdhury’s and Shoukai Yu’s mental health studies, I learnt that my situation was not unique.”[11] Women who face gender discrimination in hierarchical organisations often experience heightened “imposter syndrome” and “psychiatric symptoms” as well as “nearly twice as likely as men to suffer from mental illness.”[12] I found myself no exception to this troubling trend.

Fig.2. Zoffany, Joseph Johan. “The Academicians of the Royal Academy,” Oil on canvas, 1771-1772, Royal Collection, London, England.

"I consider women writers, lawyers and politicians as monsters and nothing but five-legged calves. The woman artist is merely ridiculous - but I am in favour of the female singer and dancer."[13]

— Pierre-Auguste Renoir, France, 1880s

"If all the paintings ever painted by every woman from Sofonisba Anguissola to Gillian Ayres were thrown into the Atlantic, the history of art would not be a jot disrupted."[14]

— Brian Sewell, UK, 1991

I use the above quotes and the painted recording of the Academicians of the Royal Academy as an example to highlight the historically oppressive patriarchal attitudes and practices held in creative institutions. Figure 2 depicts the Royal Art Academy's academic members, including two women. Unlike their counterparts, these women are not portrayed as practising artists. Instead, their presence is limited to "murky" portraits on the right-hand wall, reducing their contributions to the Academy to the level of mere room decoration.[15] While women's participation in art has never been outright forbidden, it has been constrained to perpetuate masculinity's dominance in cultural production.[16]

There is an indelible overlap between the fine arts and the commercial art industries.[17] Over two centuries later, from the visual documentation of the Art Academy, the design meetings at the company I was part of bore a striking resemblance to the culture depicted in Zoffany's painting. This comparison highlights the disparity in how contributions from women have been recognised. During the early design phase that led to the film company's Oscar award, my involvement was notably absent from this pivotal time in the company's published history, bringing to mind distorted Western art history that has been recorded through gender biases.[18] The company's publication's author labelled it as an oversight. Unlike the men of the design team, I was neither acknowledged nor asked to contribute a quote. Given this exclusion and my former colleague's complicity in my absence, it feels less like an oversight and more like an erasure.

Furthermore, a member of the design concept team appropriated some of my sculpted design contributions and collaborations, illustrating and signing them for publication as if they were his own. I ponder what kind of narrative someone might construct to justify their act of appropriation, only to realise that such a narrative might not even exist or may

not have been considered. Kate Manne describes this type of prerogative as a 'deep-seated sense of entitlement, where patriarchal ideology has conditioned him to see himself in the world as a deserving customer rather than an equal contributor.'[19] She goes on to say that 'this mindset leads him to view women merely as servers, reinforcing the notion that they are there to fulfill his needs as a result of his learned expectations.'[20] Or perhaps this sort of behaviour is indicative of a systematic lack of recognition of women's contributions to the economy, including continual exploitation of women's invisible and unpaid emotional labour.[21] "This experience not only had a profound psychological impact on me, deepening my sense of alienation but also adversely affected my career. Due to contractual restrictions, I was not allowed to photograph or access images of my work, leaving me unable to prove that the appropriated designs were indeed my creations. Consequently, I could not demonstrate my skill and contributions to a six-year project in my portfolio."[22]

Fractured self

Previously mentioned hierarchical barriers and the appropriation and erasure of my contributions resulted in a fractured sense of self as I struggled for autonomy in enduring patriarchal hierarchies.

> "I cannot be so many things. I cannot be something for everyone ... Woman, beautiful, artist, wife, housekeeper, cook, saleslady all these things. I cannot even be myself, nor know what I am."[23]
>
> — Eva Hesse

I identify with Hesse's quote as she expresses a battle of self struggling to fulfill the conflicting roles imposed by society. I feel fragmented and unable to reconcile my true self due the many expectations and roles I feel I am expected to play.

I read of familiar experiences in Chowdhury's 2020 analysis of records from high-performing young women working in competitive work environments where men disproportionally represent employees. The experiences of the women as they tried to manoeuvre inconsistencies between the reality of self and the ideals of society uncovered a consistent identity construction.[24] Their journey relates to my own where I must oscillate my identity in response to the often contradictory expectations imposed by binary patriarchal ideologies, resulting in a fractured self. In my painting practice, I struggle over the "historical present"

in which legacies of gender hierarchies still remain in Western culture.[25] I grapple with how I am perceived and my actual experience in a patriarchal society. Like Eva Hesse, I wish to break from these established messages to have my voice, opening a way for new possibilities and freedoms.[26]

I examine the concept of the self as both fragmented and embodied—"fragment as a body and body as a fragment" to explore ideas around perception, identity and representation.[27] An individual fragment of a body could be viewed as a complete entity. For example, looking out from my own body into the world, I experience my own body as fragments—limbs and sensations that interact with the world. Equally, a whole body could be viewed as a collection of fragments, as in a collection of distinct parts that make up a whole. I explore this concept in my practice to delve into how we understand and represent identity, challenging dominant representations of women's bodies that go beyond objects to be looked at. My experience of self is a constant battle of the mind and body—together yet fragmented. I explore the fragmented embodied experience through the writings of Australian philosopher and feminist theorist Professor Elizabeth Grosz, considering her view that bodies can be a site of social production. This perspective reflects that experiences and identities are interwoven and shaped by broader socio-political contexts. Grosz writes that bodies can be shaped in this manner. She argues that bodies are inherently open to change and are defined by social forces. They're not fixed or complete in themselves but are always becoming due to the influence of the social and cultural environment.[28] I interpret Grosz's view into action in that the more we can challenge dominant ideologies and ideals surrounding bodies, the more opportunities there are for individuals to reclaim their bodies and identities. As more conversations are encouraged, aiding in the discourse for autonomy, the more we

challenge historical hegemonic perspectives on gender.

Surrealist artist legend Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012) embraces becoming through "transformative states", coalescing into a whirling movement, particularly evident in her paintings created between 1955 and 1988.[29] There is an energy that I find compelling in her work. It is not simply about an expression of movement but an undercurrent, an unease of dynamic shifts beneath your feet. This is the kind of energy I am interested in portraying in my work to communicate that my identity and experiences are dynamic in opposition to the passive portrayals of women depicted through the male gaze.[30] For Tanning, 'change is necessary; it is a whirling thought to overturn values — to change the world.'[31] Her extensive career exemplifies this 'necessary change' as her work morphs over time, highlighting the dynamic journey of a woman's life, an experience I instinctively understand, having lived half of mine. Jean Jacques Merleau-Ponty's quote echoes this sentiment: "Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming".[32] Tanning is another example of an incredible female artist downplayed in art history. I was obsessed with Surrealist masters like Salvador Dali and René Magritte's paintings when I discovered them as a youth in library books. Tanning's work never graced the pages of these books, and I was denied the opportunity to learn about her at that time. Fortunately, today, there is far more representation of race and gender diversity in art history, thanks in no small part to people like Linda Noclin, who encouraged fellow art historians to uncover "forgotten female artists."[33]

Film effects to Baroque masters

The experience at the film effects studio left me in a severely broken state. Every part of my being had been drained, and I had lost the connection to my body. The only way to save myself was to escape far away, which led to a positive formative experience pursuing fine arts study in Florence, Italy, in 2004. This home of realism and naturalistic art resonated with my developing fine art practice, which is far from my commercial art practice.

I was captivated by the emotive intensity in paintings and sculptures of the Western Baroque movement and the immersive dreamlike beauty of William Waterhouse's (1849-1917) paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite art movement. I was enamoured by the technical mastery of such great artists and the alchemic-like properties of the materials they employed, transforming them into a rich, lifelike experience with depth and realism. The classical realism atelier I attended tutored a drawing course developed by the 19th-century French painter and lithographer Charles Bargue (1825-1833). The methodical process involves disciplining the eye to reproduce what it observes accurately. Studies I undertook included replications of lithographs, plaster casts and later drawings from life models. I learned processes that concentrated on refined methodologies to train the eye to master the fundamentals, fostering greater confidence and flexibility in the creative process.

This process was well-defined and tangible in complete opposition to the confusing gas-lighting I experienced in the film company, and unlike the empty promises of career advancement and opportunities, this study offered solid skill elevation. The learning process

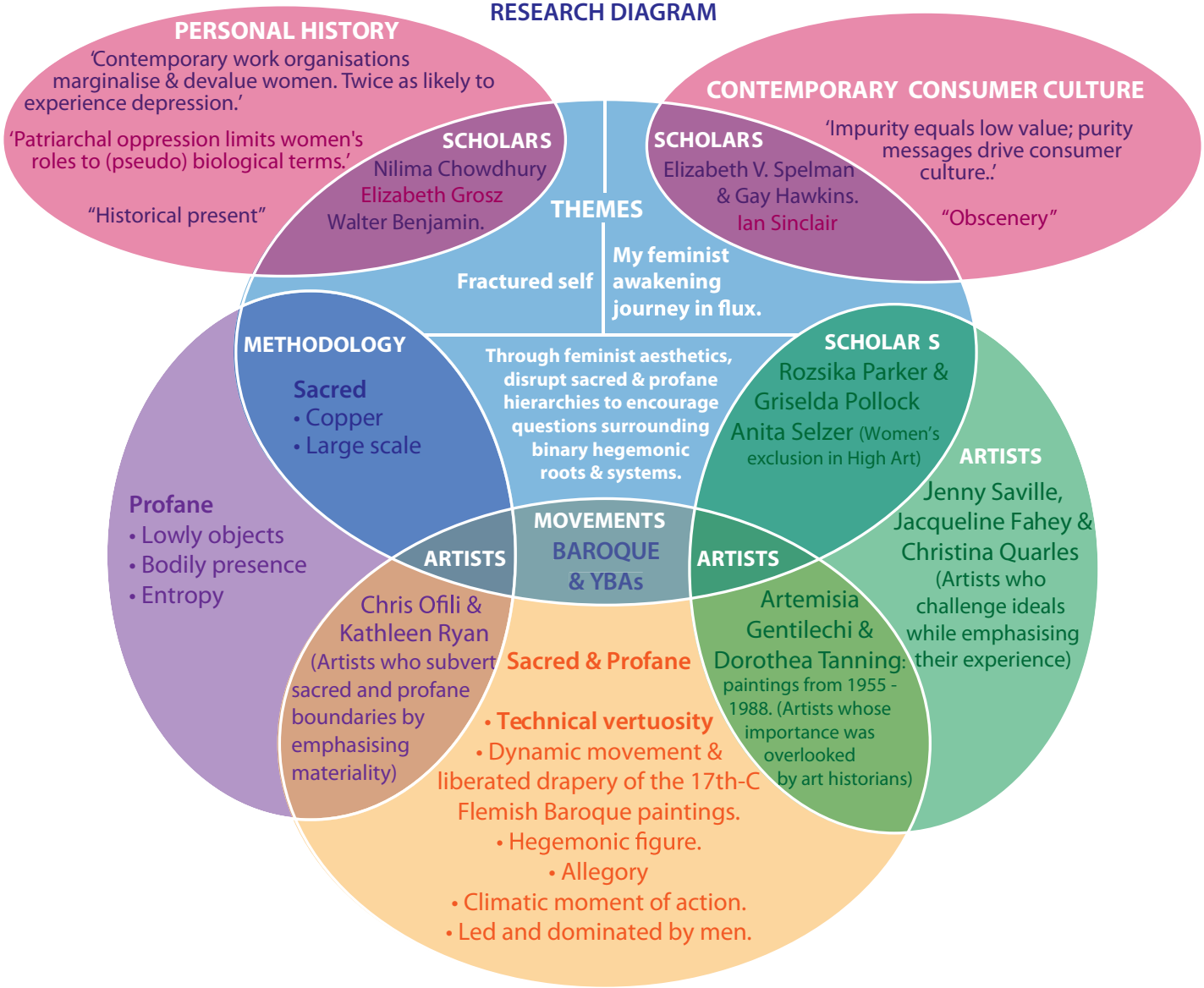
demanded a serious and disciplined approach aligning with how I felt about my practice. I found that in Italy, artists were respected and considered integral to the culture's fabric. This novelty was pleasant as I had not experienced this perspective in New Zealand. It communicated to me that others valued what I had to offer. The experience abroad was richly immersive, renewing my love of art and being the perfect medicine to fill my soul.

In the above personal history, I have outlined the expectations I faced while working for a film studio where the culture around hard work and the fragility of my hired position led to a competitive working environment. I addressed the diminishing behaviours I experienced as a woman in a misogynistic workplace where psychological impacts led to the manifestation of an eating disorder. While my role and artistic contributions in the company's history were erased and resulted in a fractured self, my transformative Italian study period enhanced my technical skills and renewed my love of art. I was also introduced to a culture where artists are valued, contradicting my previous encounters in New Zealand. "Both formative experiences have been instrumental in shaping my current fine arts painting practice".[34]

Research diagram

The following diagram illustrates how my personal narrative intersects with my research and methodology to form my current practice. In this project, I critically engage with a legacy of 'feminine aesthetics' in art, in which women and feminine bodies are often portrayed as objects for consumption rather than active agents. Through feminist reframing, I reclaim feminist aesthetics, recovering women's bodies and agency. This is facilitated by an exploration of portraying my own body so that women and 'feminine' bodies are subjects rather than objects, thus prioritising their experiences and validating their uniqueness. I explore disrupting hierarchies of sacred materials and profane objects to encourage engagement around dominant binary hegemonic power structures in Western art and society.

ART PRACTICE RESEARCH DIAGRAM



CHAPTER TWO:

Subverting Waste and Women's Perspective

My MFA journey began with portraying classically beautiful women when scholarly discussions prompted me to shift from idealised beauty to cast-off objects as subjects. This change was driven by a desire to counter the managed imagery and identities of women, often through the male gaze, which promotes the "Western patriarchal mindset" and is perpetuated in our museums, advertising media, and across the Internet, and regurgitated through artificial intelligence."[35] As I navigated this new direction, I grappled with valuing my experience and artistic voice. Inspired by artists like Jenny Saville (1970) and Jacqueline Fahey (1929), who challenge binary standards of beauty and highlight the woman's perspective, I aimed to assert agency, embrace "feminist aesthetics", and challenge societal expectations whilst re-evaluating my identity through painting.[36]

Fig.3. Lees, Sacha. “Untitled”, “Rumination”, “Mute presence”, 2023, Oil on reclaimed copper-clad laminate, Various dimensions.

Research suggests that patriarchal norms and expectations are so deeply embedded into our culture that we may fail even to notice them.[37] A discussion around my choice prompted my recognition of an engrained visual language in my work to include a classically beautiful subject who was a woman when what I sought was to explore themes of feminine liberation (Fig.4). “These scholarly conversations challenged me to reconsider my inclination to conform to prescribed ideals despite my internal struggle against them. I had feared my work would not be valued or understood meaningfully if I turned away from these ideals.”[38] Research and reflection ultimately led to a feminist awakening, aiding a sense of agency and a profound shift in my practice from high-status, feminine, objectified beauty to the ‘useless’ stuff we throw away.[39] I wanted to subvert hierarchies by desecrating the sacred with the profane (Fig.3). My objective was to thread questions around Western ideals of what is useful or beautiful by depicting select low-status objects, the discarded to instigate discourse around values in Western hegemonic culture.

Fig.4. Lees, Sacha. “and she was…”, 2023, Oil on reclaimed copper-clad laminate, 1220 mm x 900 mm.

Sacred Rubbish

I came to fold waste into my practice through interactions with my environment. While jogging, I often encountered discarded objects and fly-tipped refuse. I pondered the forgotten stories behind these cast-off items, wondering about their past significance to their owners and what echoes of meaning I might glean from their silent presence. The refuse brought to mind artists Tim Noble (1966) and Sue Webster's (1967) pile of discarded waste that, when lit, reveals a silhouette challenging the viewer to experience it differently (Fig.5). The viewers are gifted an intimate insight into the couples boozy nights and daily routines. In a similar way, I was curious about what the fly-tipped refuse revealed about our binary hegemonic cultural norms. Typically rubbish, as a socially undesirable material is streamlined away from view, so we remain pure and detached.[40] Author Ian Sinclair refers to discarded popular consumer goods that represent dominant groups (hegemonic culture) as "obscenery".[41] This term highlights the visibility of elements typically hidden, controlled, or discarded by disciplinary systems. I propose that individuals—often women—who engage in essential yet undervalued domestic and emotional labour (invisible labour), quietly supporting economies, could also be classified as obscenely overlooked.

I began to explore placing these cast-off objects within the context of high-art representation, aiming to critique prevailing ideologies of their traditionally low-status classification. I aimed to portray detritus as opulent and alluring, drawing parallels to Chris Ofili's (1968) "Seven Deadly Sins" paintings. The artist Ofili, who prioritises women's subjectivities in his work and Kathleen Ryan's (1984) decomposing fruit sculptures (fig.6) encourage us to reconsider the value of 'profane' items and materials.[42] I am drawn to these artists' provoc-

ative use of unconventional materials, like Ofili's elephant dung and pornographic cut-outs (Fig.7). These examples were a catalyst for me to experiment with new materials and methodologies in my own practice, like treating the paint surface with organic plant materials. Figures 3,8-9 were a result of these explorations, and upon rumination, these paintings subtly convey my previous experiences at the film effects studio. I felt like a mass-produced disposable object—used, discarded, and forgotten. I aimed to create an "archaeology of the present" that reveals how, even years later, that formative experience continues to haunt me.[43] In these painterly depictions, to evoke a sense of an imbued life in my subjects (detritus), I suggest movement in my brushwork. Despite being cast aside like used up waste, I still strive for recognition and self-worth within a prevailing androcentric paradigm.[44]

While exploring a new direction in these works, I fought an inner reluctance to remove the figure from my paintings altogether. Figure 9 is a prime example, as I infer a standing figure in the centre of the field. "Although I received positive feedback about the paintings during a studio critique, I could not shake the feeling that including figuration in my work was an essential part of expressing my experiences authentically".[45] Feminine aesthetics and narratives have historically been managed into objects of consumption for the heteronormative appetite of a man. "Women [have] become the chief subject of art in capitalist society".[46] Throughout history, women/feminine bodies have been distorted and idealised through the male gaze. "Their commodification has seen them bought, sold, and heavily consumed for commercial purposes that promote unrealistic standards and reduce their complexity and individuality. A challenging question arises: How can one depict women/feminine corporeality without invoking consumption from the male gaze?"[47]

Fig.5. Noble, Tim. Webster, Sue. “Dirty white trash (with gulls)” 1998, 6 moths’ worth of artists’ trash, 2 taxidermy seagulls, light projector, Dimensions variable, © Tim Noble and Sue Webster. All Rights Reserved. Photography by Andy Keates.

Top. Fig.6. Ryan, Kathleen. “Pleasures Known”, 2019, Agate, amazonite, amethyst, aragonite, aventurine, black silk stone, bone, calcite, carnelian, chalcedony, Ching Hai jade (dolomite and fuchsite), chrysanthemum stone, citrine, crystal quartz, feldspar, fluorite, freshwater pearls, garnet, hematite, jasper, labradorite, lepidolite, magnesite, malachite, marble, moss agate, onyx, quartz, rhodochrosite, rhodonite, rhyolite, rose quartz, rutilated quartz, serpentine, smoky quartz, tektite, tigereye, tree agate, turquoise, unakite, yellow turquoise, ruby in zoisite, acrylic, glass, steel and stainless steel pins, polystyrene, wood and steel tools, fishing rods, steel trailer, rubber tires, 200.7 x 231.1 x 442 cm, © Kathleen Ryan.

Fig.7. Ofili, Chris. “The Holy Virgin Mary”, 1996. Acrylic, oil, polyester resin, paper collage, glitter, map pins and elephant dung on linen, 243.8 x 182.8cm, © Chris Ofili. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

Fig.8. Lees, Sacha. “Rumination”, 2023, Ammonia, salt, mustard, vinegar, kitty litter and oil on a re-claimed copper-clad laminate, 60 x 40 cm.

Fig.9. Lees, Sacha. “Mute presence”, 2023, Salt, vinegar and oil on a reclaimed copper-clad laminate, 90 x 60 cm.

Feminist Aesthetics and the Women's Experience

> "Any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the masculine"[48]
>
> — Luce Irigaray

> "It is not possible to produce in any simple way an alternative, positive management of the image of a woman. The image of women is the spectacle on to which men project their own narcissistic fantasies."[49]
>
> — Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock

I turn then to feminist aesthetics and the layered and dynamic evolving perspective of women's experiences to help 'construct autonomous representations of women.'[50] This approach aims to challenge historical representations of women and feminity, seeking to claim women and feminine corporeal identities beyond their traditional status.[51]

Artists Jenny Saville and Jacqueline Fahey blend high and low themes in their work, challenging dominant managed imagery of women, thereby representing the feminist aesthetic in their practice. A feminist aesthetic critiques the foundational ways in which gendered value structures are embedded into conceptual frameworks that inform beauty, art and value in culture.[52] By disrupting hierarchies, questions are pursued around the gendered neutrality of such value systems. For example, Saville evokes repulsion in her figurative

portraits, causing an interrogation of "the ethical implications of a cultural system" that values certain types of women's beauty over others.[53] I employ the feminist aesthetic in my practice, creating an intervention of value hierarchies by treating lowly subjects like refuse with lofty respect. Waste, through messages of impurity, deems it low value. 'Purity and convenience promotion became vital to campaigning for disposable goods, and with their expulsion, we feel purified and that everything is again in its place'.[54] The low-value label, therefore, is due to our relationship rather than the undesirability being a condition of the object itself.

Like myself, "Saville and Fahey place their perspectives and bodies at the fore to expand notions of womanhood—pushing boundaries beyond biological factors."[55] Like Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653), Saville's painting *Hybrid* incorporates different models' body parts not to create an ideal beauty like artists Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (1483-1520) or Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) but to challenge conventional ideas of beauty by portraying bodies that diverge from traditional standards.[56] Saville's painterly bodies are not polished, symmetrically proportioned nudes found in classical art, and accordingly, women's bodies are reclaimed from centuries of art dominated by a masculine point of view that has controlled the cannon, dictating standards for feminine bodies and beauty.[57] Works such as *The Mothers,* 2011 emphasise Saville's lived experience and suggest an interpretation of the Madonna and Child, in which she captures a much more realistic understanding of what it is like to hold young children rather than Raphael's serene versions. Saville's fleshy forms based in the foundations of classical art encourage me to reach beyond traditional representations while maintaining the technical links of the old masters.

I am also interested in contemporary intersectional feminist approaches. American artist, Christina Quarles (1985) pushes back at narrow definitions of race and binary notions of sexual identity. Her figurative depictions "suggest an alternative physicality defined by ambiguity" aiding to deconstruct historical binary gendered aesthetics reflecting her lived experience as a queer, mixed cis-woman and thus expanding the notion of womanhood.[58] In particular, I am interested in Quareles obscureness in her figuration. With a similar intent, I explore leaving parts of my figurative forms unresolved, rejecting interpretations of dualistic classification.

Similarly, Jacqueline Fahey's collaged paintings prioritise her unique experience of womanhood, mirroring fellow New Zealand artist Joanna Margaret Paul's approach. In *Final Domestic Expose—I Paint Myself* (Fig.10), Fahey places herself in the centre. Her pose is reminiscent of a traditional reclining nude figure, yet it has a humorous twist. Instead of conforming to the passive role of a traditional artist's model, she asserts her identity and presence amidst a chaotic scene filled with elements of daily life. My depicted body is dynamic and in motion, challenging historic passive feminine aesthetics in art. Like Fahey, I also place myself as the hero at the centre of the moment of action, yet my identity and parts of my body are concealed in my paintings as I depict my experience looking out, not gazing at.

My body looks out, like the women in Chowdhury's study[ii]; it attempts to navigate perceived gaps between contemporary reality and ideals set long ago by binary patriarchal ide-

[ii] Page 21.

ologies. My explorations of featuring parts of the human body (my body) on the canvas are aimed at making claims for myself as a hero, centring and legitimatising myself as a subject, folding in the practice of auto-theory to gain authorship: "bodily experiences as a means of processing knowledge production."[59] In this way, 'the act of painting for me is an extension of my subjective experience', and I assert the legitimacy and importance of my lived experience.[60] As my practice develops, I am curious to see how the relationship between the body and material unfolds on the canvas. The pain of my past experience persists, and my evolving feminist awakening is in and remains in flux.

Scholarly conversations led me to evaluate the repeated tropes of beauty surrounding portrayals of women/feminity that reinforced stereotypes in my work. Through a feminist awakening, I embraced feminist aesthetics by explorations depicting cast-off subjects, thus subverting binary hegemonic value hierarchies. I also came to value the often dynamic experience and perspective of women.

Fig.10. Fahey, Jacqueline. “Final Domestic Expose – I paint Myself”, 1981-1982, Oil and collage on board, 907 mm x 1814 mm.

Fig.11. Lees, Sacha. “Blister”, 2023, Oil on Canvas, 40 mm x50 mm.

Figure 11 is an early exploration of consumption and commodification of the feminine ideal.

Fig.12. Lees, Sacha. “Sketches exploring detritus, figures and fabric”, 2023-2024, Pencil and acrylic on paper and cardboard, Various dimensions.

CHAPTER THREE:

Baroque Influences

Studies at the Italian atelier[iii] gave me a strong foundation in classical art, influencing my practice even today. The seventeenth-century Baroque Movement was particularly influential in four key ways: the limitless fold to infinity, the nobility associated with liberated drapery, the often draped heroic or hegemonic figure, and allegory. I leverage the embedded Western language of painting traditions through my explorations. I unravel Western-gendered hierarchies to elicit conversations about historical depictions of the feminine aesthetic and an examination of the ancient roots of its philosophy.

[iii] See chapter one.

Profane Baroque

> "The Baroque comprises, first, the choice of material and subjects of the greatest dramatic tension."[61]
>
> — Friedrich Nietzche

Baroque art embodies 'extravagance and excessiveness' exemplified by its' opulent materiality and dramatic narration of its subjects, often depicting their peak moment of heightened drama, signalling emotive intensity.[62] Baroque art celebrates nature and realism by depicting naturalistic skin tones and immersive, realistic scenes imbued with a sense of theatricality, in opposition to the restrained idealised attributes of the proceeding Renaissance movement.

The Catholic Church employed artists such as Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), who mastered tenebrism and naturalism to depict emotionally charged religious themes—dramatic moments depicted in the Bible intermixed transcendence and mundanity to engage and captivate the audience.[63] In this way, Baroque art epitomises the "ugly-and-sublime" as concepts of heaven and hell are emotionally intertwined.[64] Conflicting attributes of the sacred and profane were instrumental in inspiring the power and glory of the Catholic Church.[65] This was pivotal in the "counter conquest" of the Protestant faith.[66] For this reason, Baroque could be considered propaganda for the Catholic Church; with this in mind, my depictions propagate my perspective as a woman of patriarchal legacies as I attempt to navigate the contemporary veil of liberation.

The aforementioned description goes some way to describe the attributes of the Baroque; however, by nature, Baroque defies categorisation. This, in part, is what fasci-

nates me about the movement. This quality harmonises with my desires. Like the Baroque, I wish not to be contained or defined. Phrases like Baroque "overflows attempts to categorise and contain" and "Baroque artworks undo boundaries" assist me in embodying the journey of unfolding possibilities when I am standing at my easel, in a similar way that Dorothea Tanning's captured 'transformative states' do.[67] Perhaps a feminine outlook and experiences like the Baroque are too vast to defy categorisation, and perhaps French philosopher Gilles Louis René Deleuze said it best when he described Baroque as "the fold to infinity".[68]

Liberated Drapery

I explore in my artistic practice the concept of "liberated drapery" as seen in seventeenth-century Flemish Baroque painting and Italian sculpture in which flowing drapery became a deeply ingrained element of visual aesthetics and symbolised nobility and an elevated ideal.[69] The relationship between flowing garments, Christianity and virtue is rooted in Roman citizens' peacetime garb. Christian hierarchy adopted the draped garments and promoted them through artistic conventions. Sir Anthony van Dyck's (1599-1641) portrait painting of an aristocratic figure draped and ringed by copious "liberated drapery" epitomises such principles promoting the sitter's lofty and noble status (fig.13). This "fullness in dress" was so esteemed leading to extreme excesses causing the introduction of legislation to restrict the size of ruffs during Queen Elizabeth I's reign.[70] The brush of the Baroque artists, who were predominantly men, depicts such draperies as in service to women's bodies, whereas, in reality, I consider whether these draperies were actually in service to the subjects or if they were a means of controlling and stupefying them with their excessiveness, like restrictive corsets. The corporeal forms in my paintings are entangled in materials that no longer serve the body in a traditional sense, suggesting a conflict between the subjects in contrast to the former depictions of women framed in picturesque, liberated drapery.

In my painterly depictions, I push the concept of liberated draperies further and incorporate contemporary materials such as lightweight packaging plastic and natural and synthetic fibres, including taffeta, brushed cotton drill and viscose. I paint them as intentionally torn and stained to challenge conventional beauty notions and disrupt their traditional

“lofty and impossible ideal, “ questioning who such roles serve.[71] I employ the materials that the corporeal forms grapple with as a metaphor, especially the packaging plastic sheets for the struggle to shed the “inferior” status imposed on women within hegemonic hierarchical “binary value systems.”[72]

To gain the necessary painting reference for my practice, I performed photograph explorations in which I wrestled with piles of material and waste to capture the embodied experience. Lightweight packaging plastic behaved uniquely contrasted with the other materials and objects as it was drawn to and clung persistently to my form, even when I tried to brush it away. The plastic drawing itself to my body echoes my experience with the constantly reinforced patriarchal expectations of misogyny. Likewise, plastic also clings to our earth as if a relentless zombie emerges from the grave of our consumption and waste and remains pervasive in the most remote of locations.[73] In this way, I recognise comparisons between the introduced enduring patriarchal oppression through “restricting women’s social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms” and the introduction of human-made plastics that are difficult to reduce our contemporary capitalist reliance upon and remove from our environment.[74]

Fig.13. Van Dyck, Antony. “Rachel de Ruvigny, Countess of Southampton”, c.1640 Oil on canvas, 132.5 cm x 219.5 cm, Photograph © The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.

Hegemonic Figure Entwined in Allegory

The heroic character in Baroque was often adorned in drapery and was more than often dominated by a subject who was a man reinforcing hegemonic values. By engaging with Baroque tradition, particularly its narratives about who is depicted as a hero on the canvas, I reinterpret this narrative through a feminist lens by placing myself as the hero and bringing my perspective as a woman to the fore, confronting how these specific metaphors, allegories or narratives, have perpetuated stereotypes.

> "Allegory emerges from the depths of being to intercept the intention, and triumph over it."[75]
>
> — Walter Benjamin

Allegory played a crucial role in the Baroque for interpreting and preserving history, serving to recover moments obscured or erased.[76] Benjamin's phrase highlights to me how allegory served to convey complex, layered meanings rooted in intrinsic truths of the human experience that often modify the artist's original intention, offering a richer, more nuanced understanding for the viewer. I appropriate the use of allegory from the Baroque movement, yet turn away from religious narratives and face philosophers and writers for inspiration in conceptualising the historical baggage of hegemonic hierarchies.

Walter Benjamin's "The Angel of History" offers a framework to assist my understanding

of the interplay between historical forces through the present, past, and future.[77] Benjamin frames dramatic tensions of forces that struggle over control of the "historical present", caught between catastrophe and hope.[78] The subjects in my paintings are entangled in this struggle as they battle for freedom amongst dominant power structures that stem from historical forces. Author Iain Sinclair's depiction of hegemonic culture critiques the unthinking acceptance of such cultural and economic control. He writes that regimented progress marches "acquiescently [and] mindlessly to the 'military/industrial two-step".[79] Sinclair's perspective highlights how societal forces lead people to follow a predetermined path without critical engagement. Like the static-filled plastic sheet clinging to my body during the photo shoot that follows back its designated path when I push it away, so do dominant hegemonic power systems. Both authors address the influence of robust systems on society, as do I in my practice, by employing allegory to weave my personal narrative with enduring historical themes to explore how my experience intersects with broader historical forces.

To disrupt patriarchal ideologies founded and promoted through the imagery of the Catholic church, I harness techniques of the Baroque movement, inverting the meaning of allegorical symbols.

Fig.14. Lees, Sacha. “Golden Veil, Rotten Core I.” 2024, Ammonia, salt, string, vinegar, chicken hearts, gorse, lace and oil on a reclaimed copper-clad laminate, 900 mm x 1200 mm.

Fig.15. Lees, Sacha. “Golden Veil, Rotten Core II.” 2024, Salt, vinegar, string,Ammonia, blackberry and oil on a reclaimed copper-clad laminate, 900 mm x 1200 mm.

Fig.16. Lees, Sacha. “Golden Veil, Rotten Core III.” 2024, Salt, vinegar, ammonia, paper and oil on a reclaimed copper-clad laminate, 900 mm x 1200 mm.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Copper, Gorse, Vinegar and Sweat

Previous experiences in my life have made me feel vulnerable, in doubt of the legacy of my work and the loss of a personal identity that has become fractured. Reclaiming my identity through materiality is a crucial element of my methodology. Employing oil paint on copper-clad laminate, I explore methods for imprinting my corporeal presence onto the surface of the copper-clad substrate.

Fig.17. Lees, Sacha. ‘‘Imprinting Imperfection: organic matter experiment’’, leaves, salt, vinegar, Ammonia, Copper clad laminate. 2023

Fig.18. Lees, Sacha. ‘‘Resulting organic imprint on Copper clad laminate’’. 2023

Copper extraction has a devastating ecological and social impact.[80] The corroded copper-clad laminate I have salvaged to use in my practice is a residue of an evolving electronic industry in which more flexible and efficient technologies are replacing circuit boards. I discovered that 16th-century Italian artists used copper for its aesthetic appeal and preservation qualities, as oil paintings on copper resist common types of degradation found in works on canvas or wood. My experiments to expose some of the raw copper rather than cover the entire surface led me to consider ideas around entropy in surface treatment.

I am interested in how entropy can 'defile' this semi-precious material, which seems like an extension of my explorations into the profane act of painting towards the sacred canvas. I relinquish control over to the entropic qualities of this material, collaborating with natural forces, and I am always excited and nervous to see how the surface transforms as the outcome is often not what I have in mind depending on the variables out of my control, including humidity and temperature. I am enamoured by its oxidisation properties and potential to contaminate the sacred with the entropic.

In early experiments with this material, I explored imprinting organic matter onto the surface (fig.17-18). I chose to capture hole-ridden foliage, deeming them worthy of preservation. I was also intrigued by how noxious weeds like gorse, an introduced weed into Aotearoa scarred the copper surface and at the same time serves as a memento mori (remember you must die). The memento mori serves as a reminder to question what is really important in life.

Taking the lead from Artemisia Gentileschi's 'bodily presence as both model and painter,' I

experimented with imprinting my corporeal presence into the copper surface.[81] By seizing authority over my representation, I deem myself worthy of capturing. Here, I am reminded of how Gentileschi's method compares to French artist Yves Klein's 1960s painting performance, in which he used nude women as 'human paintbrushes' to create body prints in his distinctive blue hue.[82] Feminists later argued that Klein's direction of the naked models reduced them to objects for the male gaze, reflecting patriarchal values.[83] In stark contrast, my use of bodily imprinting can be seen as reclaiming agency and autonomy rather than appropriating others' bodies. Perhaps by doing so, I 'carve my mark in a historic landscape, hoping to exorcise the ancient thing that is devouring me.'[84]

My 'human paintbrush' exploration shared similarities with Andy Warhol's oxidation paintings on copper; however, instead of urine, I used my body sweat to oxidise the surface.[85] These bodily sweat experiments didn't provide enough acid to have a strong enough surface reaction, leading me to the creation of an anti-alkaline body gel that I cover myself in before I push my bare form onto the copper surface (fig.19-20). I expose and risk myself in these bodily experiments and consider whether they "can become that unproductive form of narcissism."[86] The experiments (fig.20) are now buried under stratification layers of paint in my final MFA work.

As I progressed through my MFA journey, explorations of substrate scale have seen my work grow in magnitude comparable to that of history paintings (scenes from history, religion or mythology), which are traditionally at the top of the painting hierarchy.[87] However, I subvert this hierarchy, as religious indoctrination is not my intention. I have found painting in large-scale is intuitive to figuration. I stand in my own body, brush in hand, and paint a

reflection of my embodied fractured feminine experience as it looks out from the canvas. As my artistic voice grows in confidence, I notice my grip loosening on my brush, which has started translating into my mark-making. When painting in large-scale the mark-making has become an extension of my body. I find large-scale empowering, likening it to a bold and brave performance. As I continue my painting practice, I would like to explore the unfolding stage further by embracing further qualities of abstraction to see what I can uncover in the process.

I explored capturing an indelible preservation of my body, a supposed lowly subject through materiality. This included reclaiming my own representation and identity while allowing the entropic qualities of the copper to perform on the substrate, evolving over time as my experiences and identity are in flux. I have gained a deeper understanding of my bodily relationship to the medium and the narratives I wish to convey when painting at large-scale.

Fig.19. Lees, Sacha. ''Anti-alkaline body gel''. 2024

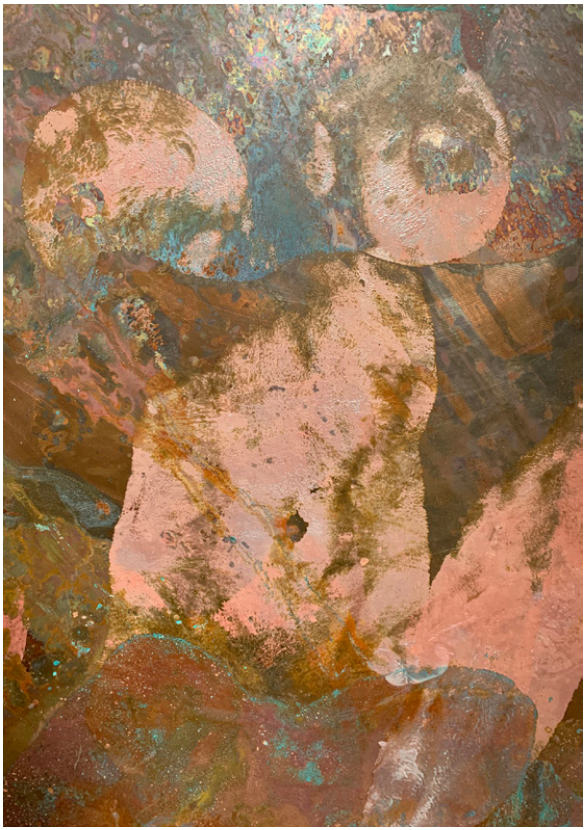


Fig. 20. Lees, Sacha. ''Embedding a Corporeal Presence: experiment'', Anti-alkaline body gel on reclaimed copper-clad laminate. 2024

CONCLUSION

In summary, “Profane Baroque and a Woman’s Experience” reflects my painting practice and reconsiders the legacy of ‘feminine aesthetics’ rooted in Judeo-Christian themes that sustain binary philosophies in contemporary culture, in which I draw on feminist theories and my experiences in a masculine-centric industry. This practice-based research project reclaims feminine aesthetics, centralising women/feminine bodies as subjects instead of objects, prioritising and promoting their agency and experience through the consideration of feminist aesthetic theories.

In chapter one, I began by recounting a personal formative history in which I struggled for autonomy within a patriarchal workplace. A fractured feminine corporeal self, manifested from the physical and psychological impacts of the environment. I escaped to an Italian atelier, which marked a positive direction, where I garnered foundational classical art techniques and rekindled my connection with and love of art.

Chapter two unfolds how an emerging feminist awakening, informed by scholars’ theories, helped me value my lived experiences. A reassessment followed, focusing on the importance of including figuration in my work to fully express my perspective and confront the complexities of women and feminine corporeal representation. I considered cast-off waste from hegemonic culture (including invisible women’s work). I explored placing lowly objects within high-art representation to reframe value hierarchies, sparking discussions surrounding binary philosophies. I also looked to artists who utilise high and low-value materials in their work, promoting the reconsideration of their value.

In chapter three, I discuss inspiration from the technical mastery of seventeenth-centu-

ry Baroque; I exploited its boundless sensibilities to express women's often layered and dynamic experience. I used my own corporeal forms, dynamically woven with sacred and profane subjects and materials, such as liberated drapery and contemporary cast-off waste, to displace binary hegemonic hierarchies. I reclaimed historic space of hegemonic figures disrupting patriarchal ideologies that have long dictated who is deemed heroic on (subject) and behind (artist) the canvas, prompting a reconsideration of whom we deem trustworthy representatives and narrators.

Finally, in chapter four, I discuss my methodology, where I explored being a 'human paint-brush', capturing and reclaiming my corporeal identity on the copper-clad substrate while embracing the entropic qualities that defile this sacred material. I also embraced painting at large scale as it became an extension of my bodily frame and a way to subvert historical narratives, showcasing my lived experience at scale.

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