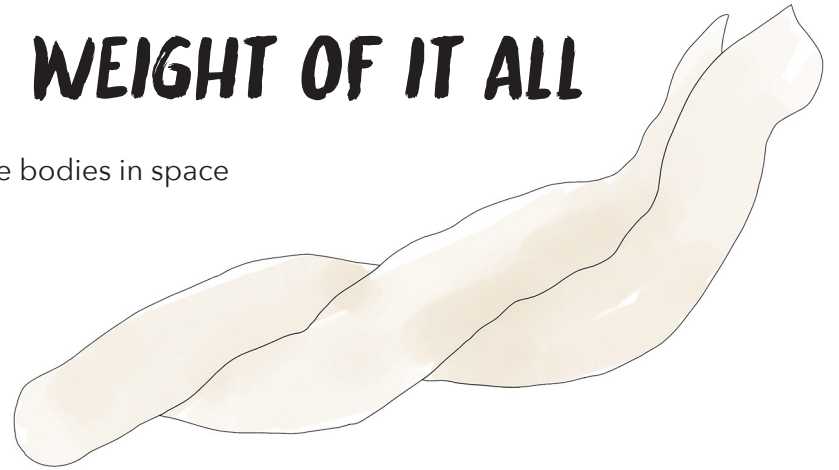


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FEMININE FORMS AND THE WEIGHT OF IT ALL

a performative exploration of feminine bodies in space



An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the postgraduate degree of

Master of Fine Arts
at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Jessica Henson
2023

Abstract

This thesis discusses the weight of having a feminine body, including a suite of sculptural and performative video works. The work draws from personal experiences as well as offering a response to social and political imaginings of feminine bodies, as they are sighted through the male gaze.

With an intention to explore how feminine bodies can occupy space, this thesis became focused on a specific feature of the feminine body, breasts. Used as commercial and political vehicles, breasts are often excessively focused on when it comes to the sexualisation of a feminine body.

Responding to the classical bodies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this thesis subverts the ideal and the known. The sculptural and video works were created and driven by an intention to challenge the male gaze by subverting these sexualised views of the feminine body, using satire, exaggeration, alongside materiality and form. The video works are a combination of sculpture and performance, exploring an exaggerated and grotesque feminine form. Through movement and shapes, the video works explore how a feminine body can have the ability to reclaim how it can exist and be seen.



Acknowledgments

The last two years would not have been possible without the guidance and support from so many people. This masters has been a journey and I will forever be grateful for everyone who has been a part of it.

A very special thank you to my amazing supervisors Catherine Hoad and Meg Rollandi. I am so so thankful for you both. Your knowledge, advice and encouragement have been so valuable and I will forever cherish this year because of you both.

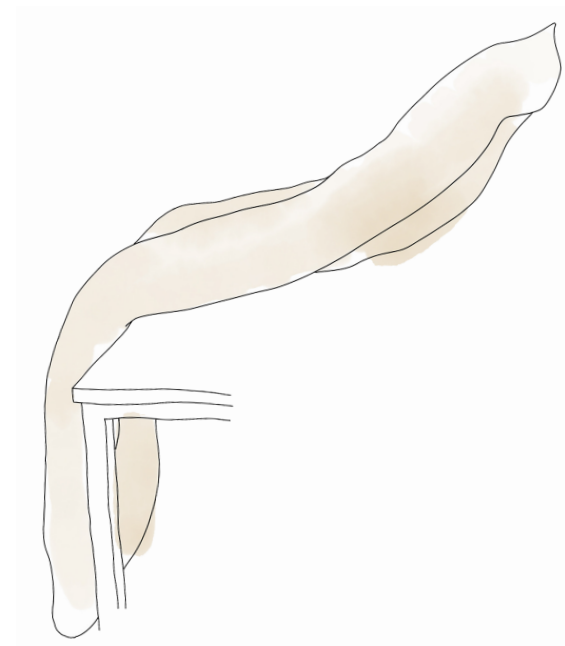
Thank you to Julieanna Preston, Shannon Te Ao, and Hemi Macgregor for all your help and advice during part 1 of the masters programme. Stepping into the MFA I was extremely nervous, so thank you. Thank you to Catherine Bagnall, Richard Reddaway, and Martin Patrick for attending my studio visits this year and for your feedback.

Jasmine. My performer, my go to gal for advice, my dance buddy, and my beautiful friend. I don't know where I would be without you. Thank you for going along with the stupid things I asked you to do and for giving up your days off to help. I cannot express how grateful I am.

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Introduction

I approached the masters programme intending to develop my creative practice but was unsure of exactly what that meant for me. I came straight from completing my undergraduate in Spatial Design having focused on women's relationships within spaces. Coming into the MFA programme I knew that I wanted to continue my investigation and interest along the lines of feminist issues. Masters has served as a space for exploration, experimentation and growth for myself and my practice, with this exegesis serving as documentation of my research and practice.

This thesis at large uses the theoretical framework informed by feminist theory, particularly the theory of Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, and Joey Soloway, drawing on topics of gender representation, and agency of body and viewing. In considering the intentions and influences that contextualise my work, this exegesis explores how such theoretical work engages with classical art, the sexualisation of feminine bodies, the feminine grotesque, and the male gaze. Drawings, sculptures, and performative explorations involving movements and manipulation make up my practice as I explore my understanding of body and how it exists in space.

I align my practice with feminist thinking. Often associated with 'only women', feminism is a topic that is often misunderstood by many. It is a term that resonates with me and my practice, with my research positioned around topics of female representation. This masters exegesis is a continuation of my feminist exploration, following completing my degree in Spatial Design. My first major work centred around feminism was my honours project, which focused on exploring the disconnect between the ideal and real woman through an investigation of urban advertising. This resulted in me creating a proposed performative installation engaging with our relationship to consumerism and routines of daily maintenance. Having previously

focused on media and imagery, I wanted to continue this research into my masters by further exploring how feminine bodies exist under the implications of such societal notions.

Given the complexities of using terms such as woman and feminine, for the purposes of this exegesis and my practice, I discuss these terms in relation to discourses that enable the binary construct of gender and bodies as 'male' or 'female'. I am offering a critique of how feminine bodies are represented within the binary construct that genders bodies based on physiological appearances. Judith Butler, discusses this construct and how gender exists within "the confines of a heterosexually-based system" (Butler, 524). It is within this system that I situate my practice, as I critique the ways that this system has influenced the treatment of feminine bodies.

In my practice, I am creating and making from my perspective as a woman, so I do feel that it is important to mention 'intersectionality.' 'Intersectionality,' a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 essay, is a term used to link multiple people of oppression. Intersectionality addresses topics of gender identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and class. I am creating from my perspective as a Pākehā, cisgender woman, thus making my practice my privilege to tell and one experience of many. I speak to what I personally know, thus making my exploration into feminism and the feminine body a reflection of my personal experience.

This exegesis is my exploration and unpacking of images, ideals and expectations relating to the body, as I draw particularly on topics of gender representation. As a woman in my early 20s, I am no stranger to the challenges of body dysmorphia and body acceptance. I know that growing up I had things that influenced how I saw myself and my body. I think that one of the main things that drove how I saw myself was my involvement in dance from the age of 4 to 18. Having to keep your body at a certain fitness and image, wearing costumes that

barely covered much skin, and wearing full faces of makeup are just some of the reasons why you would constantly criticise the way that you look. Going to an all-girls high school I was surrounded by hundreds of girls, at an age where naturally you are going to compare yourself to others. Sadly the consistency of thinking about how to look, what to wear, and what to do is a common factor that most, if not all girls and women face no matter what their background is. It is something that I came to learn is embedded into society. Through my practice I am driven by my seeking of body acceptance and embracement, exploring beyond the confines of idealism.

This exegesis is structured around four key themes that demonstrate my creative processes, outputs and research. These are breasts, classical art and bodies, the feminine grotesque, and the male gaze. In this document, I explore these themes as they have informed the development of my creative works, *My Eyes Are Down Here*, *Breastly Beings*, *Breastly Beings in Motion*, *The Dance of the Breasts 1 and 2*, and *Titillating Moments*.

In *Political Lumps of Flesh*, this chapter introduces my focus and use of breasts in my practice, questioning the ownership and representation of breasts in Western culture. Governments and industries have and continue to use images of breasts for propaganda and commercial use, raising the issue that they may not just belong to women. It is in this chapter that I discuss how breasts have become a focus in my practice due to the sexualisation and typical identification of breasts belonging to a feminine body. Presented through imagery and media, film and television, and items for sale, sexualised feminine bodies exist on display.

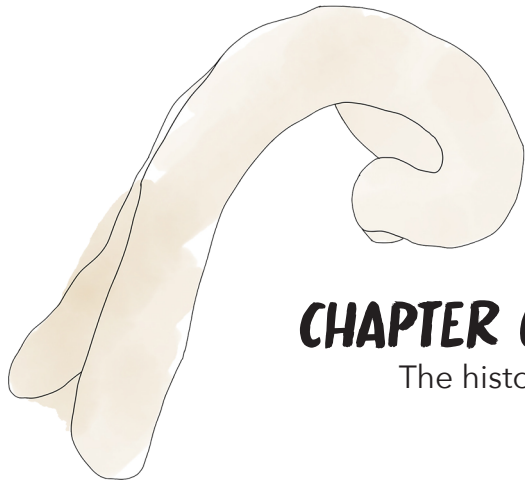
The second chapter is my exploration of classical art and how feminine bodies are represented. During this chapter I discuss my first creative work *My Eyes Are Down Here*, a sculptural work subverting the gaze onto a feminine body. This work is structured around the social

and gender hierarchy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and how this is reflected in the depiction of feminine bodies. I further explore how classical art and the sexualisation of feminine bodies have then translated into today, thus influencing how the modern woman is viewed. Today we carry similar ideals from the eighteenth and nineteenth century in how they view feminine bodies, with the ways in which bodies were depicted still viewed as ideal and desired.

Chapter three is my research into the feminine grotesque. Studied by the likes of Frances S. Connelly and Mary Russo, the feminine grotesque can be defined as a term used to describe a feminine body that is 'not normal'. This chapter contains the beginnings of the use of a performer in my works, as I explore a performative practice. During this time I have embraced the term feminine grotesque, realising the value in which it gives to my practice. It has given me the ability and confidence to push the boundaries of what we as a society, as well as what I know and am comfortable with, when it comes to the body.

In the final chapter, my final video works explore the male gaze as I attempt to create work through a female gaze. Coined by Laura Mulvey the male gaze is the perspective of a notionally typical man and the objectifying or sexualising views projected onto women. The male gaze is evident in everything and is everywhere. It is the treatment of women, the sexualisation of feminine bodies, and the narratives creative in film, music, and media. Using a female gaze, as described by Joey Soloway, I intend to disrupt the male gaze and reclaim agency of a feminine body, through a series of explorative and performative videos.

My aims for this exegesis is to push myself out of my comfort zone, through both research and making. I am challenging the ways in which a feminine body can be viewed and exploring it without the lens of it being a sexualised and objectified object.



CHAPTER ONE: POLITICAL LUMPS OF FLESH

The history of breasts and society's control over them

Why Breasts?

Breasts have become a focus for my practice, in part because of my struggle with my body and breasts, but also because of the many societal implications of being someone with breasts. In this first chapter, I discuss why I have chosen breasts as a focus and my research around them. Breasts are an external identifier of femininity and thus inflict the effects of patriarchy, inequality, and sexualisation to the body. Gender identity, as discussed by Judith Butler, is a performance of “ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence” (Butler, 524). Gender norms have been formed and are governed by cultural conventions, producing the “phenomenon of a natural sex, or a real woman” (Butler, 524). When looking at how these conventions convey not only the physical appearance of a ‘real woman’ but also her sexuality, breasts become an identifying feature.

Western society has an interesting and complicated relationship with breasts, especially in regard to how they are viewed in public. At times it’s acceptable, at times it’s not. Breasts have two competing discourses of femininity: sexual desire versus motherhood. As I will discuss, it is perfectly fine for a bare, plump set of breasts to appear on the side of a warplane as an illustration. It’s fine because it is ‘inspiring.’ However breastfeeding in public becomes a shameful act, something that shouldn’t be seen. As discussed in *The Making of Breasts*, “our society is so uncomfortable with the nourishing breast that debates rage about whether women can nurse in public, even when the right is protected by law” (Webb et. al).

In Western culture, we have treated and viewed feminine breasts as sexual ornaments, and when we no longer view them as ‘sexy,’ we don’t want to see them. It is this sexualisation and treatment of what can be seen as a defining part of the feminine body that has become the focus of my practice. Many female artists have

been using breasts in their work as a powerful tool for reclamation. Carrying heavy societal expectations, these body parts have been reconfigured, deconstructed, and have reinvented women. Renate Bertlmann’s *Breast Incubator* (1984) is a radical feminist work of social criticism, weaponising the breasts as tools of power. Inside a plastic box, with the invitation to touch through the presence of two hand holes, a pair of severed breasts sat. However the invitation to fondle is then declined as sharp blades protrude out from the nipples. These breasts are now weaponised, “rejecting its designated role as a fetish and object of desire” (Bertlmann 2015, as cited by Hawlin), and projecting a previously passive site. Jessica Stoller is an artist working with porcelain, creating ghoulish, sexually suggestive sculptures, creating new realities. In her work *Untitled (stack)* (2013), Stoller created a pile of oozing, misshapen breasts topped with ice cream cones, resembling a magnificent cake. It is the juxtaposition of what we recognise to be of the body and the food that has created the unexpected. Beautiful yet unsettling, Stoller’s work attracts and yet repels us from a site we like to consume.

Who Owns Them?

In *A History of the Breast*, Marilyn Yalom investigates how Western imagination has used and represented the breast, while also questioning ownership and who breasts really belong to. Since the beginning of recorded time, breasts have been used in visual imagery for a number of purposes, making them cultural and political vehicles. Although mentioned previously, I will remind you that when discussing breasts, I am relating to my experience and what I know as a cis-gender woman. Although breasts can and do belong to many different bodies, my research is based on society’s cis-gendered view.

Governments have always had a form of control over women and their breasts, through the likes of propaganda, legislations and laws. All ways in which they can control how breasts are seen or not seen.

Laws have been created to prohibit nudity and thus the exposure of a woman's breast, unless of course it is for the government's own use. Used for their own benefit, propaganda was created during times of war, heavily using imagery of women often with an exposed chest. Women served as inspirational figures and reminders for who and what the soldiers were fighting for. As described by Yalom "men fighting overseas looked to the female bosom as a reminder of the values that war destroys: love, intimacy, nurturance" (Yalom, 138). Women and their décolletage appeared in many forms ranging from posters, on the sides of planes, and in movies, all for the soldier's encouragement. Inspiring icons, the use of women and their breasts served as a reminder that the women's job in the war was to "provide the breast, not the bread" (Yalom, 138).

When asking who owns breasts, perhaps it belongs to the commercial industry. Our society has become so breast-obsessed that the possibilities are endless when it comes to ways to make money off of breasts. From the products women 'need' to the advertisements and marketing, the lingerie industry has involved and manipulated feminine bodies, creating undergarments to control and mould women into shapes reflective of ideals at the time. The origins of lingerie are difficult to trace, but what started off as a corset and a cage, has evolved into the bras we know today, as discussed by Catherine Bardey. Corsets in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries suffocated women, wincing their waist to a desirable size. While uncomfortable and impractical, limiting the most basic of functions, such as bending over, the pain was all in the name of beauty. Bardey discusses how the concept of corsets and distorting a woman's physique was to "indicate beauty, social status, marital status, or to serve as an imprint or brand... to show ownership, quality or stigma" (Bardey, 41).

During the 1900's, bras and lingerie adapted throughout the decades, reflecting the ideals and events happening at the time. Tight

bands bound women's breasts during the 1920s, reducing breast size and creating the androgynous woman. Minimising curves and creating a sleek, straight figure with minimal bulk became the trend. In the 1950's breast size and shape became critical for a woman's figure, with the rise of the Barbie doll and sex icons such as Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor. Bras became about boosting the bust line, through the use of foam rubber and inserts, making breasts noticeable. Now the lingerie business is larger than ever with bras existing to serve many purposes, differing in form, fabric and shape. There seems to be more of a choice as to how women should look after their breasts, however, an ideal still exists and breasts are still controlled.

Using these notions of control and ownership over breasts, I look to explore how a feminine body can regain agency. I aim to create work that looks at how feminine bodies could be viewed without a commercialised or sexualised lens, and to challenge the act of viewing.



CHAPTER TWO: LA FEMME CLASSIQUE

Bodies in art and the presence of women

Classical Bodies

My work presented for this thesis project has been developed from a theoretical standpoint that ideals of the feminine bodies have been constructed and carried from Classical times. Critiquing the ideals and body norms, my first work created was *My Eyes Are Down Here*, challenging the gaze we have on feminine breasts.

I define Classicism in line with Tate's definition, "classicism dominated Western art, with classical mythology - consisting of the various myths and legends of the ancient Greek and Roman gods and heroes." (Tate). Using this preference of subject matter, the bodies depicted in these works began to reflect ideals, subjecting them onto everyday bodies. These depictions became reflective of a gender hierarchy, with men and women holding very different statuses within society. When comparing the depiction of the physical appearance of two gendered bodies, this contrast is very evident. Men were depicted in strong and athletic forms, holding powerful poses, whilst women were sensual and soft. In *The Lack of Female Genitals in Art Seems Thoughtless until You See It Repeated*, Syreeta McFadden describes this cause for depiction as representing "an idealised value of male and female roles in society that codified a power dynamic and a social order" (McFadden). Take Michelangelo's *Statue of David* (1504), a colossal marble sculpture depicting a naked David, standing at five metres tall. With his strong legs, chiselled abs and standing in contrapposto (standing with most of its weight on his right foot while the other leg is forward), the figure looks ready to spring into action. In contrast to *David*, Alexandros of Antioch's *Venus de Milo*, discovered in 1820, is a marble sculpture depicting a feminine form. One of the most famous works of ancient Greek sculpture, this work is thought to depict the goddess Aphrodite. The Greek goddess is depicted with a bare torso and drapery covering her lower half. Her body is curved and soft, reflecting ideals of sexuality, love, fertility, and beauty.

In this social hierarchy, men held positions of power in all aspects of society, including the art world. Catherine McCormack discusses how due to this structure, men dominated the art world and thus were the ones who created the "archetypal constructions of womanhood that have influenced ideas of how women should appear and how they should behave" (McCormack, 11). Men created society's structure and earned the money, whilst a woman's place was in the home. With men in positions of power, it was men who defined the ways that women should look, having almost exclusively created the imagery within our culture. Due to this gendered structure in society, women were not accepted in the early art world. Without the presence of women creating art, it meant that the field was created by as well as often being made for men, thus excluding the lens and perspective of women. With this male-centred social structure, women were subjected to being portrayed through the eyes and desires of the men creating their images.

When looking at how women were depicted, it is also important to consider who the artwork was intended for, and where it would end up being 'displayed'. Originally, many if not most artworks were commissioned for personal consumption, created to be displayed in the homes of those who commissioned them. McCormack describes these "paintings of reclining women... as the trophies of elite men" (McCormack, 49), as once again due to the societal hierarchy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was men who were the ones to enjoy the works. Women were merely seen as subjects and objects, while men were always the viewers.

Assertive Bodies

Now I take no issue with the nudity and presence of the naked feminine body in art, but simply the treatment of the body as just a passive sex object. Why can't the presence of a nude feminine body exist without being sexualised?

Sarah Lucas is an artist known for her bold choices of materials and her consistent challenge of how we view gender, sex, and class. Lucas's sculptures break the boundaries of what we know, using ordinary objects in unexpected ways. She uses humour and satire, employing visual puns. Her work is confrontational, often questioning what we know and how we view the feminine body. Sarah Lucas' *Pauline Bunny* (1997) is an original component from her installation *Bunny Gets Snookered* (1997). The sculpture, perched on a chair, consists of a stuffed pair of tights, making Lucas' 'bunny' forms. Their skinny and limp limbs dangle from the chair as the 'bunny' appears slumped-like on the chair. Representative of abject femininity as it sits in the male arena of snooker, Pauline Bunny is wearing a pair of black stockings, suggestive of seduction and temptation. However, the slumped anamorphic form of the stuffed pair of tights provides an image of disempowerment and submissiveness.

My Eyes Are Down Here

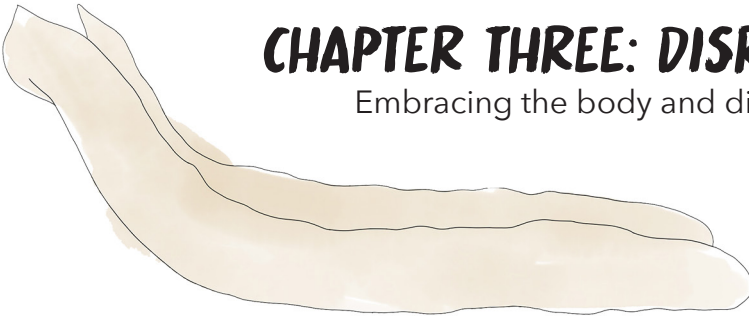
My Eyes Are Down Here was my initial exploration of breasts as well as a way to challenge the ideals on the feminine forms seen in classical works. A play on the prompt said to stop the lustful gaze at a woman's chest rather than make eye contact, I created a 2-metre pair of breasts made out of lining and filling. This wearable breast-like sculpture no longer reflected the idealised depictions of the plump, round breast seen in works like Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. Instead, these breasts were exposed, holding an exaggerated and now unidealised form. Continuing to play on the saying, I decided that I wanted to draw the attention of the viewer to the place that women normally wouldn't want attention to be drawn to. However it wouldn't be nipples placed on the end of the breasts, but eyes. By subverting the saying and thus placing the eyes in the position of the nipples, the body who may own this pair of breasts can now make eye contact with the viewer.

This concept, as most of my concepts do, started with a simple sketch before its physical form was created. This is a way in which I find I can quickly construct an idea and imagine how it may look. In my original sketch for *My Eyes Are Down Here* I replaced each nipple with a singular eye. However, once I had made the exaggerated breasts, one eye on each breast didn't seem right. I wanted to play into this idea of extreme exaggeration as well as playfulness, leading me to the creation of multiple eyes to be placed on each breast. Multiple embroidered eyes of varying sizes and colours were placed onto the ends of the breasts creating a rather monstrous form. Hung on the gallery wall, the breasts existed without a body. Its disassociation from a body questioned what the form was, making it somewhat unreadable from a conventional viewpoint or gaze. With the multitude of eyes staring up at you, the view becomes subverted with the wanted attention drawn to the area of the breasts that women wouldn't usually desire to be focused on.

My Eyes Are Down Here was a fun starting point in my practice, one that allowed me to see what I liked and disliked about working with sculpture. From this work I discovered that I was drawn to form over details, and that I was most intrigued with the base of the sculpture, not the embroidered eyes. Drawing from subverting the norms of the feminine bodies seen in classical works, the exaggerated form of the breasts is something to continue to explore.



Figs 1 & 2. Henson, Jessica. *My Eyes Are Down Here*, personal photographs by author, May 2023.



CHAPTER THREE: DISRUPTIVE BODIES

Embracing the body and disrupting the norm

Into the Grotto

In response to these social imaginings of 'ideal' and classical breasts, in my work I became interested in the notions of the 'grotesque,' particularly as a means to reimagine feminine bodies. My interest in the grotesque drove my works *Breastly Beings* and *Breastly Beings in Motion*, using shape and form to reimagine breasts.

The accustomed use of the word 'grotesque' means to be gross and horrid. However, originating from the Italian word 'grottesca,' meaning grotto, it holds a much more comprehensive definition. A grotto is a cave, one which Frances S. Connelly describes as "an open mouth that invites our descent into other worlds" (Connelly, 1). The grotesque encapsulates a world of possibilities functioning as an expression and exploration into a realm of the unknown. The grotesque cannot be defined as having one set of attributes or being of an agreed style. It is curious, unpredictable, and it is unknown. The grotesque is typically described in negative terms, to which I believe is due to the misunderstanding of the term, as well as the element of the unknown. The grotesque is the realm of merging what we know with the unknown.

It is important to mention that the grotesque is culturally relative and responds to cultural conventions, hierarchies, as well as social roles. The purpose of the grotesque is to contradict and challenge those conventions, subverting what is known within the society that the grotesque 'thing' is situated within. Playing with what we know and what we may find familiar, the grotesque ruptures those boundaries, threatening what we understand and find 'normal.' In order to cause these ruptures, the grotesque acts as a transitional and in-between state that contradicts reality. It is an overlapping gap that blurs lines and creates endless possibilities. Described as a "catalyst, opening the boundaries of two disparate entities, and setting a reaction in motion" (Connelly, 8), the grotesque is a collision of worlds.

Breastly Beings

As grotesque figures aim to disrupt and subvert normalcy, I sought to challenge how we view bodies, particularly breasts. Taking what I liked about *My Eyes Are Down Here*, I took the exaggerated form of the breasts, creating a wearable sculpture attached to a bra. The presence of the bra draws in the notions of the control and containment of the feminine body. It brings an awareness that these breasts belong to or are representative of a feminine body, despite its unusual and grotesque form. *Breastly Beings* is a series of photographic works exploring how I was able to manipulate, shape and position these breasts as they hung in a gallery.

The amplified size of these 2-metre-long breasts challenges how they are viewed, at times questioning if they are even breasts. Due to their lack of detail and absence of nipples, these long and lanky forms push them to the point of subverting their own identity. In the room they hang as an anthropomorphic form, independent of any form of a body. As I position each breast I play with what shapes I can create. What can I make them do? What can I make them say? Twisting, overlapping, spreading. The breasts were photographed in a variety of positions exploring the possibilities and notions they may tell. Using a chair as a prop, the breasts become more animated and human-like. A caricature. What are they? Are they breasts or are they legs? I enjoy their ambiguity.

Feminine Grotesque

The feminine grotesque's focus is on the feminine body, disrupting and exceeding the 'norms.' These 'norms' of the feminine body are culturally constructed, reflecting the ideologies of the space that the said body exists within. The feminine grotesque is not just about a disgusting feminine body, but about questioning as to why we may find it this way. In *The Feminine Grotesque*, Mary Russo compares two



Figs 3 & 4. Henson, Jessica. *Breastly Beings*, personal photographs by author, April 2023.



Fig 5. Henson, Jessica. *Breastly Beings*, personal photograph by author, April 2023.

kinds of bodies; the classical body and the grotesque body. The classical body, as described by Russo, is “transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek” (Russo, 8). It is what we know of the bodies represented during Renaissance times, as discussed in my previous chapter *Classical Bodies*. In comparison, a grotesque body is “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing” (Russo, 8). It is the body we are not accustomed to.

The feminine grotesque is about disruption. Disrupting the hierarchies and expectations placed upon a feminine body, challenging what we perceive and accept as normal. In Western society today, women are constantly told and reminded to follow the ‘rules of the hierarchy’ to be accepted within society. These ‘rules’ have been set in place and are projected from a masculine point of view, treating women like objects.

“Be a lady they said. Don’t be too fat. Don’t be too thin. Don’t be too large. Don’t be too small. Eat up. Slim down. Stop eating so much. Don’t eat too fast... Be a lady they said. Wear makeup. Prime your face. Conceal your blemishes. Contour your nose. Highlight your cheekbones. Line your lids. Fill in your brows. Lengthen your lashes. Colour your lips. Powder, blush, bronze, highlight. Your hair is too short. Your hair is too long. Your ends are split. Highlight your hair. Your roots are showing. Dye your hair. Not blue, that looks unnatural...”
(Rainville)

These are just a few lines from Camille Rainville’s poem *Be a Lady They Said*, highlighting how women, their bodies, and their actions are expected to exist. Summarising many of the expectations, often conflicting with one another, that are inflicted upon feminine bodies, Rainville shows that they can’t escape the Western societal demands it places on them.

The feminine grotesques takes us out of familiar territory, taking us away from what we are told and know of a normal body. Many feminist artists embrace the grotesque in their practice creating work that blurs boundaries around the body, often humorous and satirical. Rosie Gibbens is a sculptor and performance artist whose work also exists within this space, raising questions of agency and power with her semi-humanoid sculptures. Her solo exhibition *Soft Girls* (2021) features 'alien' forms out of recognisable objects and appliances. Questioning realities, Gibbens merges what is known with the unknown. Rebecca Horn is an artist who considers her sculptures as 'body extensions' which "are stations in a transformative process" (Horn, as cited by Roth). Made of found objects such as cloth, wood, feather and bandages, Horn's sculptures become extensions of the wearer's body, exaggerating its existing form. Creating a freakish creature when worn, Horn's 1972 work *Finger Gloves* elongates the wearer's fingers altering the relationship they have with their surroundings. Navigating the space between the now deformed hands and an object becomes a different challenge. When trying to pick up or interact with an object, the lengthened fingers creates a distance as well as an obstacle that didn't previously exist. It is through these exaggerated gloves and the relationship the wearer now has with space, that transforms the wearers body into a grotesque form.

Breastly Beings in Motion

Breastly Beings in Motion is an iteration following *Breastly Beings*, this time with the addition of a human form. Worn by the performer as she navigates the space around her, she explores her relationship with the sculpture. The shapes and silhouettes she creates are influenced by the presence of her own body as she wears it. The limitations of herself combine with the limitations of her new breasts. Influenced by the presence of her body and her choices, the performer manipulates and moulds the breast sculpture. Guided by the instruction of 'play' the performer explores the possibilities of the breast sculpture. It is an

experience unknown and an experience of discovery. From wrapping and moulding the breasts around her body to tying them in knots. How do they exist within the space? From flinging them around the room to lying down and using them as pillows. How do they move within the space? With the presence of the performer's body, the sculpture becomes more identifiable. Being placed on a body in the location where one would usually find breasts, the sculpture becomes more familiar and 'normal'. However, the boundaries are blurred with the unexpectedness and alienness of their size and form. The breast sculpture breaches the boundaries of the reality we know, the reality we are immersed in.

What I enjoyed about this exploration is the branching into performance and the movement of the work. My decision to use a performer instead of myself was initiated from wanting to see another feminine body wearing the breast sculpture. To be able to see their movement from a 'watching' perspective and to see what they could do. I am intrigued by the relationship that the performer has with these breasts and how she chooses to manoeuvre them. The work exists within the 'gap' rupturing what we know of the body as the viewer, and rupturing what the performer knows of her body. As I photograph the performer and her choices of actions, unlike the feminine figures of the classical works, she is not a passive figure. Whilst I may have control of the lens, I am not the one controlling the shapes that are created and thus captured. My role in this work is thus to capture the exploration and relationship the performer has with these new breasts.



Fig 6. Henson, Jessica. *Breastly Beings in Motion*, personal photographs by author, May 2023.

CHAPTER FOUR: MY FEMININE GLARE

An act of reclamation, subverting the male gaze



Male vs Female Gaze

In this final chapter I discuss my attempt to challenge the way that feminine bodies are viewed, creating a female gaze and reclaiming the image of feminine bodies from the male gaze. Through this reimagining I created a series of work, *The Dance of the Breasts 1* and *2*, and *Titillating Moments*. Today we live in a world surrounded by imagery, which affects how women reflect upon themselves and their image. Existing in many forms, occupying both the physical and digital space, we see images of feminine bodies reflecting society's ideologies and expectations. Often used for sale and consumption, we see women exist through images for social media, advertisements, commercials and branding. We see skinny, perfectly skinned, glowing women selling us a product that we can't live without. Fashionable and influential celebrities post on social media promoting the newest diet fad so that we can become healthier. Women are constantly forced to face daily reminders that they can always do and be better. But what is it that has created these sets of ideals and expectations that women are manipulated by?

In my research, I was drawn to the notion of 'the male gaze' as a model to make sense of these ideals. Coined by Laura Mulvey and critiquing how women are represented in cinema, the term 'male gaze' refers to the projection of male views, fantasies and desires onto the feminine body, manipulating and adapting her in ways that suit the male point of view. Where the feminine body is viewed as the passive object and the male is viewed as the active looker, the male gaze is the "traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to cannot-to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 62). Mulvey breaks the male gaze down into three parts; the person behind the camera, the characters in the film, and the spectator. The manipulator, the watched, and the watcher.

Joey Soloway (at the time known as Jill) discusses the ways in which we can challenge the male gaze in their TIFF talk *The Female Gaze*. Soloway argues that the female gaze isn't simply flipping the male gaze, and thus objectifying men, but communicating what it feels like to be the objectified. Soloway, a television creator, showrunner, director and writer discusses the female gaze in relation to art and making, and how we can use the female gaze. Watching their talk, one point that they make that has stuck with me is how "art is propaganda for the self... Protagonism is propaganda that protects and perpetuates privilege" (Soloway).

The Dance of the Breasts

When discussing my practice, I feel like the ways in which Hannah Wilke discusses her practice, in her 1976 work *Intercourse with...*, also summarises my intentions:

"Since 1960, I have been concerned with the creation of formal imagery that is specifically female, a new language that fuses mind and body into erotic objects that are namable and at the same time quite abstract. Its content has always related to my own body and feelings, reflecting pleasure as well as pain, the ambiguity and complexity of emotions. Human gestures, multi-layered metaphysical symbols below the gut level translated into an art close to laughter..." (Hannah Wilke)

In my practice, it is my relationship with my body, my feelings and my experiences, as it exists within our patriarchal society. I have had challenges with my own body acceptance, with an element being in relation to my breasts. Finding them at times as an annoyance, a physical burden, and simply just not liking them. To explore this during my final phase, my series of video works uses a performer, my sculpture, and a camera. Although I am not seen on the camera, I exist in these works as the camera operator, choosing how the viewer is allowed to witness the performer and her movements and shapes.

My decision to use a performer instead of myself as the subject of my videos was initially due to my lack of confidence and not wanting to be on that side of the camera. However I soon became intrigued by the notion of someone else performing these actions that were, while exaggerated, actions that I related to. I became curious with the idea of someone else having to wear these extremely oversized breasts while having to navigate a space that they were unfamiliar with. Not being the performer also allowed me to have more control of the camera and what was being shot. I could select how and what I wanted to shoot while I was filming the performer, allowing me to create my gaze. I would say that my initial videos were not as successful at capturing myself within the works, however, I view them as important in my practice, a reflection of the transition and growth of finding and placing myself deeper into my work.

In *The Dance of the Breasts 1* the camera is still as the performer navigates the space that it films. This video, split into three panels, shows a series of motions and shapes as the performer navigates the breast sculpture through a series of actions that I have instructed her to perform. These instructions come from my own experiences with my body and breasts, although heightened and exaggerated, shown through the movement as well as the size of the breast sculpture that the performer wears. Heaviness, burden, annoyance, freedom, suffocation, and control, are words to describe the relationship I have with my breasts. Many of which I expect may resonate with other women and people with breasts. Maybe some people can relate to the videos finding the humour in the exaggerated size and shapes created. Maybe others won't understand, and that's okay.

Although I enjoy the ways that *The Dance of the Breasts 1* captures the shapes and movements, playing them side by side, I felt like my contribution and presence in the work was missing. Yes I had created the sculpture that the performer was wearing and I was directing her, but I felt that by having the camera static, I did not control the camera.

Reflecting on how Joey Soloway views the importance of the camera in contribution to the female gaze, I decided I wanted to have more control. This is my work and my camera. This is my privilege and my storytelling.

The Dance of the Breasts 2 is my experimentation with the camera and ways in which I can influence how and what is being shown. Like *The Dance of the Breasts 1*, this video explores similar movements and actions from the performer, this time being shown through varying camera angles. Throughout the work the relationship between the performer and the camera changes, differing in distance, angle and motion. I use the camera to explore the performer and her movements, controlling what the viewer sees as she goes through the motions. There are moments when we see the full shot of her body, showing the full length and sheer size of the breast sculpture she wears. In contrast, there are moments where the viewer sees very little of the performer, instead capturing an intimate moment up close as she wraps herself within the breasts. These intimate moments create an unfamiliar gaze, as only selective parts of the performer and breast sculpture are visible.



Fig 7. Henson, Jessica. *Dance of the Breasts 1*, still from video by author, May 2023.
<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/76bxf597ceog471j470pk/The-Dance-of-the-Breasts-1.mp4?rlkey=wu5jw3fk0xek7p54r9tgbgon&dl=0>



Fig 8. Henson, Jessica. *The Dance of the Breasts 2*, still from video by author, September 2023.
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/cl/i/0jcgI7yjkypxpt5wqq8j9/The-Dance-of-the-Breasts-2.mp4?rlkey=pypdwcnsbpat32m565196j4n&dl=0>



Fig 9. Henson, Jessica. *The Dance of the Breasts 2*, still from video by author, September 2023.
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/cl/fi/ojcg17ykyxpt5wqq8j9/The-Dance-of-the-Breasts-2.mp4?rlkey=pypdwcnsbpat32m565196j4n&dl=0>

Titillating Moments

After reflecting upon *The Dance of the Breasts 1* and *2*, I looked back at Joey Soloway and their breakdown of the female gaze and how this could be achieved in cinematography. Broken into three parts Soloway describes it as:

1. The female gaze is a way of feeling seen. It is a subjective camera rather than one that just looks at the camera. It is a considered gaze, using the frame to evoke a feeling of being in feeling. For Soloway, it is not just showing 'this thing' but feeling it with them as they direct the camera. The camera is more than the capturer. It plays and it feels, for feeling is seeing.
2. The camera shows what it feels like to be the object of the gaze. It becomes the gazed gaze with an intense awareness of being watched. As viewers, we are aware that we are watching someone or something. We understand its power.
3. The female gaze returns the gaze. The object and person of the gaze is aware it is being watched. They see you seeing them. They are aware of the male gaze imposed upon them, but now they gaze back.

Using this framework as a conceptual core for my approach to my final video work I considered what I wanted to be seen. I came to the decision that I was giving too much away in my videos and that they were too linear. The sequence of shots and movements captured appeared more like a series of tasks rather than an exploration of form showing the relationship between the performer and her new breasts. To render this, my intention in *Titillating Moments* was to capture moments rather than actions. To create a feminine gaze where we see the performer, and as a viewer, we seem present in the watching. To

create feeling in what we are watching, the camera breaks away from traditional shots, at times following the directionality of the shapes created by the performer. The purpose of the camera is to capture the relationship the performer has whilst navigating the breasts. Shot in a dark space the focus is drawn to the pale breasts she wears. Dressed in black, at times the presence of the performer's own body becomes unknown. Her body is often only shown through the ways that the breasts interact and connect with her body. Used as a tool, the performer's body aids in the creation and stories told by the breasts. They show the twisted relationship we have with them, and the heaviness it can carry to have them.

These moments that the camera captures are often intimate. Up close to the performer's body, it never gives too much away. The closeness of the camera captures the materiality and form of the breasts that she wears. It records the wears and tears that the breasts have gone through, showing the stretch of the fabric as it wraps around a body. These intimate moments create an unfamiliar gaze, at times questioning what we are watching. The focus becomes on these breasts, once gazed upon with a sexualised lens, now gazed with a sense of intrigue, as it is not always clear how these breasts have been twisted or wrapped. Power is reclaimed to the performer's body as she knows you are watching. She returns the gaze, making eye contact with the camera. This gaze breaks the fourth wall, as the presence of the watcher is known. "I see you seeing me. I see you" (Soloway).



Fig 10. Henson, Jessica. *Titillating Moments*, still from video by author, October 2023.
<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/xoa3diueeinw0czyis5/Titillating-Moments.mp4?rlkey=fkvi874k63ebcdzjjlpuli4f&dl=0>



Fig 11. Henson, Jessica. *Titillating Moments*, still from video by author, October 2023.
<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/xoa3diueinyw0czyis5/Titillating-Moments.mp4?rlkey=fkvi874k63ebcdzjblpuli4f&dl=0>



Fig 12. Henson, Jessica. *Titillating Moments*, still from video by author, October 2023.
<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/xoa3diueeinw0czyis5/Titillating-Moments.mp4?rlkey=fkvi874k63ebcdzjblpuli4f&dl=0>

Conclusion

I give thanks to my trusty breast sculpture, for it has done me well all year. Whilst the fabric and seams may have stitches, the filling has become lumpy, and the fabric in places is stretched and sagging, it felt wrong to remake it. Whilst I did consider remaking it several times, I now instead see each defect as a reminder of what it has performed and explored. It shows the life it has had through this year. I treasure my breast sculpture like that one old, saggy bra that all women have, that they refuse to throw away because it's actually the most comfortable of the lot.

Using breasts as a tool for navigation, this thesis has provided a space and opportunity for not only the growth of my practice, but also the growth of myself. It has challenged the ways in which we can view breasts, no longer just associating them as sexual ornamentation. Breasts are seen as a dirty thing when not being subjected to sexualisation, and so it has been a challenge to allow them to be seen as just another part of the body. Using form and scale, I have been able to explore the presence of breasts through play, whilst commenting on issues women face in relation to their bodies. Although it doesn't solve the sexualisation of feminine body, nor did I ever expect it to, it opens a way in which we can change our perspective.

Working with new mediums and ways of making, exploring new issues of feminism, and exploring an aspect of myself within my work, this thesis has been a step outside of my comfort zone. I now go into the world with gained knowledge, newfound courage, and increased passion to continue to question and explore feminist issues.



Fig 13. Henson, Jessica. (*untitled*) *Breast Sculpture*, personal photograph by author, October 2023.

Figure List

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Fig 13. Henson, Jessica. *(untitled) Breast Sculpture*, personal photograph by author, October 2023.

All illustrations by author.

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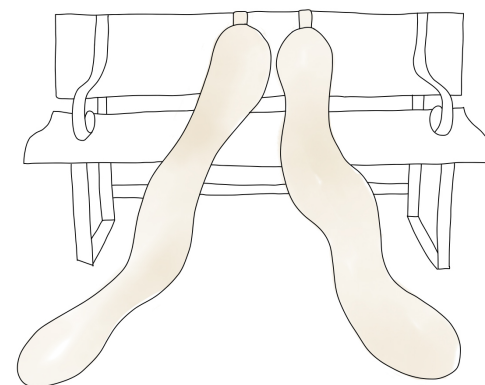
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