

Creepy, Cute and Radically Soft

Unpacking the Importance of Contemporary Feminist Erotic Art

By

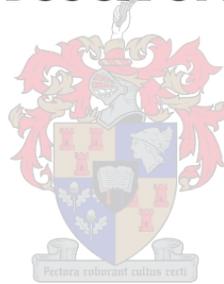
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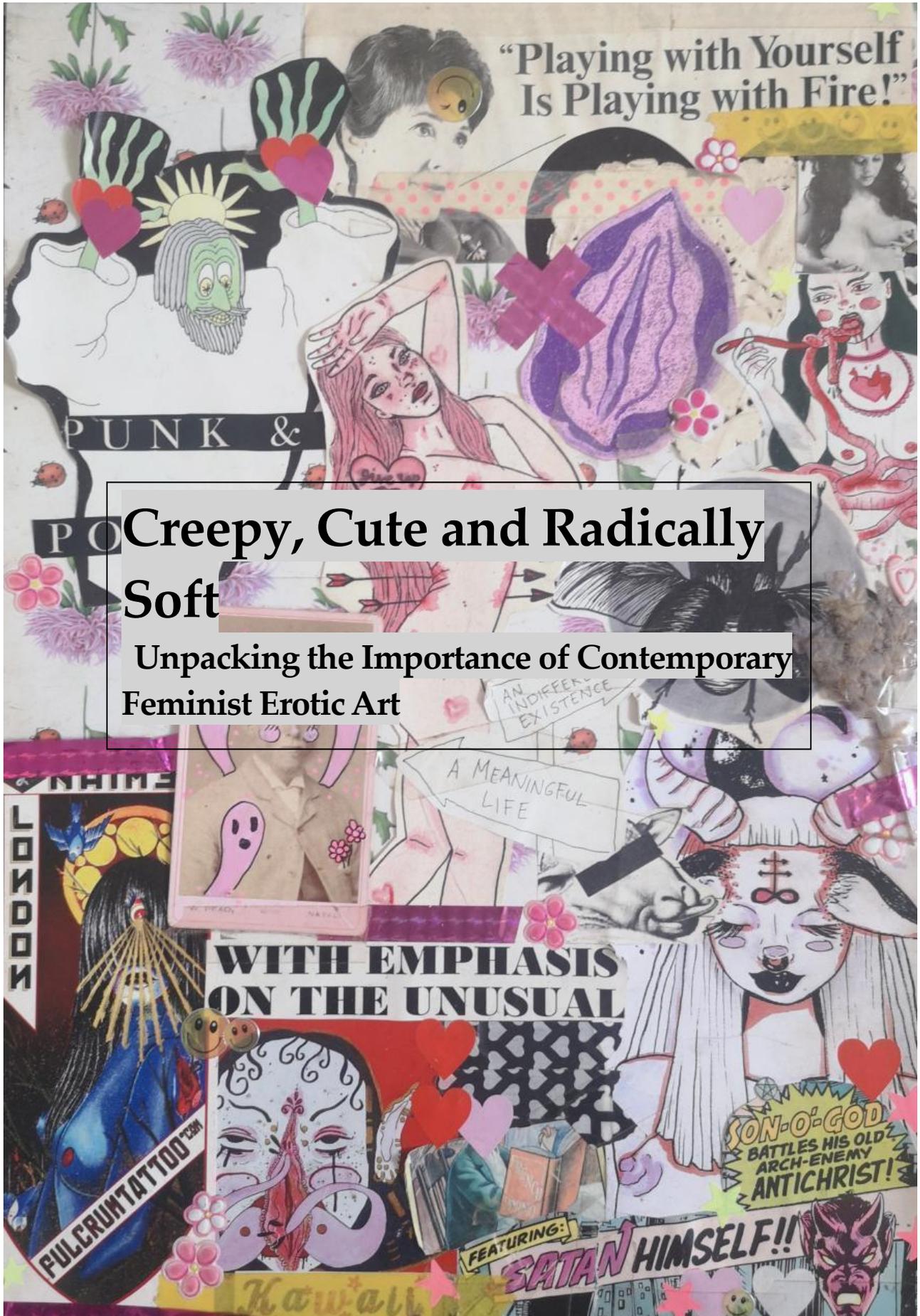
December 2021

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Unpacking the Importance of Contemporary Feminist Erotic Art

Abstract

The value of art that lies beyond surface levels of aestheticism has been discussed in academic depth, yet a feminist erotic art tends to escape such analyses, possibly due to its fringe status both in form and subject matter. It is possible, however, that this 'lowbrow' amalgamation holds many interpretative possibilities and is worth critically engaging with. Thus, by drawing upon my own creative practice as well as works by other feminine and non-binary identifying artists, this thesis unpacks how erotic art can act as a multifaceted tool of catharsis to explore entanglements of sexuality.

An element of oddity is also explored by providing a case study of deviance, or when 'odd' erotic artworks have faced censorship and the possible reasons therefor and implications thereof. This unorthodoxy is further bolstered by conceptualising catharsis through a detangling of the obsessive desire to create fantastical images. Through a comparison to 'lowbrow' or dissident art forms, it is argued that feminist erotic art can exist both as a revolutionary space of reclamation and self-discovery both for the artist and the viewer. Radical softness and eroticism are thus discussed as a tool of repossession.

Further, it is also argued that feminist erotic art can attain both personal and intersectionally feminist community-building power through creating a realm that is both fantastical and relatable for various 'othered' individuals. Accordingly, the importance of sharing sex-positive imagery that softly combats heteropatriarchal norms of representation is highlighted.

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Introduction

The merit of art that exceeds the realm of aestheticism has been discussed in academic depth, yet erotic art and its possible feminist applications tend to escape such analyses, possibly due to a fringe status both in form and subject matter. It is likely, however, that especially the more 'lowbrow' amalgamations (such as I'm interested in) hold many interpretative possibilities and are worth critically engaging with. Thus, by drawing upon my own creative practice as well as works by other feminine and non-binary identifying artists, this study unpacks how contemporary erotic art can act as a multifaceted tool of catharsis to explore entanglements of sexuality and identity.

To begin this exploration, a foundational explanation is given of radical softness, a term first introduced by artist and poet Lora Mathis, as that which reclaims qualities which may usually be weaponised against women. While the term may have originated in conceptions of emotionality, it is posited that additional elements - including sexuality, the bodily and humour- could also be attributed to the idea of radical softness. This builds context for analysis of 'odd' or non-canonical imagery. To expand on this feminist thread, the element of cuteness will also be argued to have feminist power for subversion and progressivity. This point will be substantiated with reference to Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* and *The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde*, as well as Mary Christopherson's *The Power of Cute: Redefining Kawaii Culture as a Feminist Movement*.

A framework of catharsis is also provided through a close reading of Eva Schafer's *Aristotle's Catharsis and Aesthetic Pleasure* in order to establish a complex understanding of the manner in which art can act cathartically. This will be used alongside a theory of the carnivalesque and grotesque presented in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* to form a conceptual basis along which examples of erotic art will be analysed. The joint reading of these texts aims to establish an idea of the grotesque erotic art as an act of carnival or catharsis, thus highlighting the medium's possibility for both self-expression and self-learning. To further ground

these analyses within a feminist discourse this thesis will draw upon Kate Manne's *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, as well as Norma Broude and Mary D Garrard's *Reclaiming female agency: feminist art history after Postmodernism*, and Elizabeth Grosz's *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, the latter of which will also provide insight into Julia Kristeva's formulation of abjection that will be used to bolster arguments of grotesqueness and oddity in the examples of erotic art discussed.

Oddity as a radical element is further unpacked through a case study of deviance, or when erotic art has faced censorship and the possible reasons therefor and implications thereof. This unorthodoxy is bolstered by conceptualising catharsis through a detangling of the obsessive desire to create fantastical images. Through a comparison to lowbrow and avocational art forms, it is argued that a feminist erotic art can exist both as a revolutionary space of reclamation and self-discovery for the artist and the viewer. Radical softness and the erotic representation of women by women are thus posed as tools of repossession.

This culmination of feminism and odd erotica will also be expanded through an emancipatory sex-positive lens through readings including Gayle Rubin's *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality in Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies*.

Further, as this thesis is focused on visual representations and their implications, visual analyses form the main methodological basis and will be bolstered by theoretical pairings. As my own artistic practice informs this thesis, a certain self-reflective methodology is adapted.

The overarching aim of this thesis is therefore to conduct a complex reading of contemporary feminist erotic art, highlighting a certain possibility for both personal and intersectionally feminist community-building power through a realm-creation that is both fantastical as well as relatable for 'othered' individuals. This radicality will be anchored in the tangential objective of understanding this as a dissident medium, its counter-cultural connotations providing an apt platform for the feminine-centred erotic to act as an abrasion against heteropatriarchal norms.

With further reference to form, this thesis also aims to address the cathartic possibility of both creating and consuming such non-normative representations, with specific reference to my relationship with my sketchbooks. Regarding non-normativity or non-conformity, another key intention of this argument is to establish the importance of inclusive and imaginative sex-positive imagery. This will be expanded through analysing the realm of oddity as a space for transgression as well as free expression; one that allows for the realization of various radicalities. The odd will thus be linked to the radical, focusing upon the way in which 'fringe' realities, such as homosexuality and autonomous feminine sexuality contest representative and ideological norms.

This thesis should thus leave the reader with a sense of the importance and radical possibilities of art that is multi-faceted in its non-conformity.

Chapter 1: Expanding on Radical Softness

Why Radical Softness?

Perhaps it is best to first find rooting in a simple definition of radicality as that which goes against the fundamental nature of things, often with aims of social or political change. Accordingly, for radicality to exist there must be something which is being questioned or pushed against. This action is thus generally viewed as something that is active, often achieved through violent measures. The combination of radicality with softness then, may seem a contradictory one. Denotatively softness is paired with mouldability, gentleness, meekness, vulnerability, and so on. How then, can radical softness exist?

What radical softness will be posited against, or the conditions that make the stance of softness a radical one, is the 'hardness' of a patriarchal structuring of society and its consequential culture of misogyny. Though there may be some contention as to whether any of the aforementioned actually exist, Kate Manne's *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* is quite useful in providing this standard. In this she highlights:

I take it that a social milieu counts as patriarchal insofar as certain kinds of institutions or social structures both proliferate and enjoy widespread support within it – from, for example, the state, as well as broader cultural sources, such as material resources, communal values, cultural narratives, media and artistic depictions, and so on. These patriarchal institutions will vary widely in their material and structural, as well as their social, features. But they will be such that all or most women are positioned as subordinate in relation to some man or men therein, the latter of whom are thereby (by the same token) dominant over the former, on the basis of their genders (among other relevant intersecting factors) (Manne, 2018:45).

It is arguably thus not farfetched to classify the current social milieu as a patriarchal one (as well as to acknowledge a predominantly patriarchal history), when

considering the male dominance that undoubtedly still intersects institutions, social structures and ideologies. Manne however poses an interesting question; “Why would any given man in a typical patriarchal setting have a problem with women universally, or even very generally, regardless of their relations?”, and argues that a patriarchal system is not inherently woman-hating, and rather contrastively “we would expect even the least enlightened man to be well-pleased with some women, that is, those who amicably serve his interests” (Manne, 2018: 47). In other words, if a patriarchal system is constructed as to benefit men, women who serve this would not be a problem, and “to put the problem bluntly: when it comes to the women who are not only dutifully but lovingly catering to his desires, what’s to hate, exactly?” (Manne, 2018: 48). To understand then how misogyny exists in a patriarchal setting it may thus be useful to disregard a naïve conception of misogyny as a property of individual misogynists with an overarching distaste for women, and instead consider a “misogynist social environment” that “may but need not be the product of individual agents’ bigotry” but that is mostly centred in “some people’s inchoate discomfort and hostility when more or less any well-entrenched system of social norms is being dismantled” (Manne, 2018: 61). Women that defy a patriarchal ideal through a non-conformance to gender roles and expectations are thus the most prominent targets of misogyny. A useful anchoring is provided by Manne’s proposal that “at the most general level of description, misogyny should be understood as the “law enforcement” branch of a patriarchal order, which has the overall function of policing and enforcing its governing ideology” (Manne, 2018:63). Much like in actual policing and its brutalities, Manne argues that there exists a “misogynist hostility” that “encompasses myriad “down girl” moves – so many as to make the list seem likely to be indefinitely extensible” but examples of such down girl moves include how “adults are insultingly likened to children, people to animals or even to objects” and “as well as infantilizing and belittling, there’s ridiculing, humiliating, mocking, slurring, vilifying, demonizing, as well as sexualizing or, alternatively, desexualizing, silencing, shunning, shaming, blaming, patronizing, condescending, and other forms of treatment that are dismissive and disparaging in specific social contexts” (Manne, 2018:68). I would thus like to argue that defiance of such

misogynist expectations and gendered roles can be read in various forms of radical softness.

Radical Feeling

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare (Lorde, 2017 in Mathis, 2016).

This quote from notable intersectional feminist and activist Audre Lorde is offered by visual artist and poet Lora Mathis as supplement to their originary term “radical softness as a weapon” (2015).

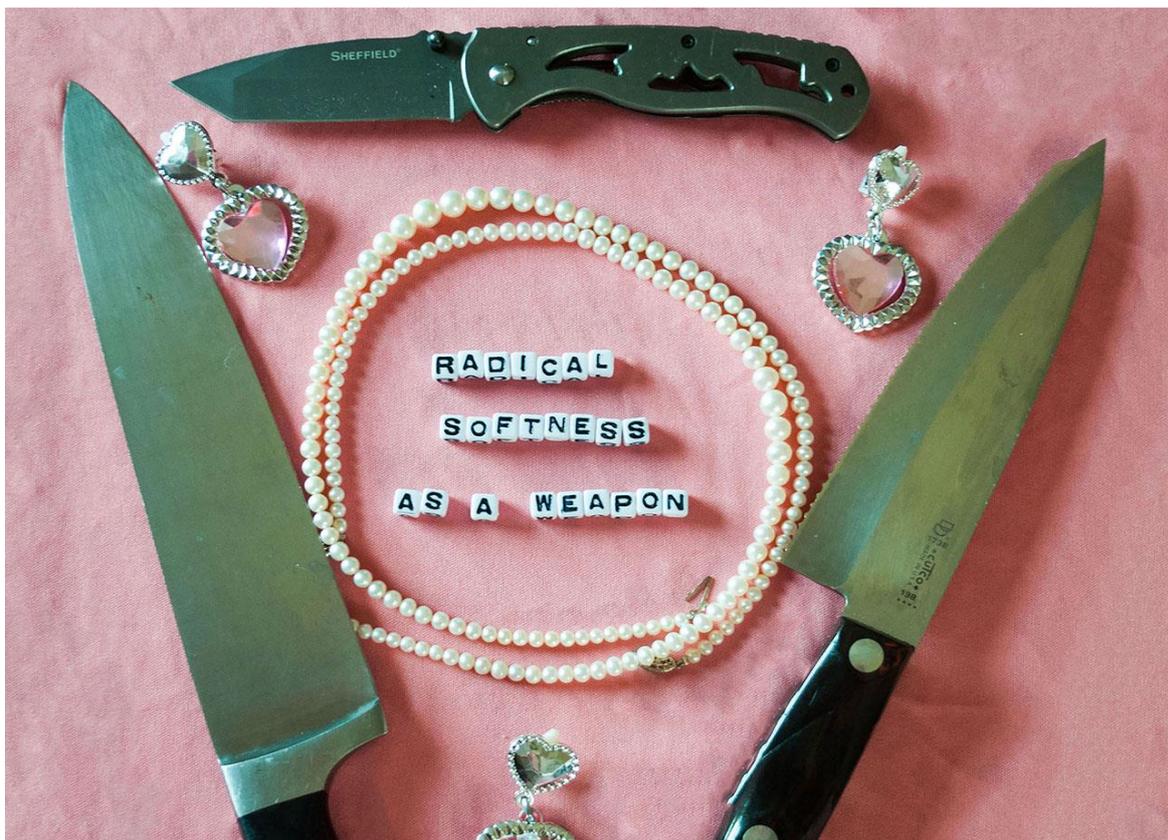


Figure 1: Lora Mathis. 2015. *Radical Softness as a Weapon*. Photograph. From loramathis.com, accessed 13 October 2020. <<http://www.loramathis.com/kipp-harbor-times/3va5mllit8sdiz8r5gs48wm0vuloo>>

In the artwork that brought forth this term (Figure 1); a somewhat kitsch femininity is presented, yet this is juxtaposed with the violent- and arguably masculine-imagery of knives. The two kitchen knives, however, could be read as a nod to domestic feminine gender roles, yet the inclusion of the switchblade possibly moves the meaning from the realm of the soft and motherly to that of the dangerous. Perhaps what also arises here is a blurring of the line between passivity and activity, a concept that will be discussed largely in this thesis. The kitchen knives could be viewed as passive tools of domesticity, while the switchblade bares connotations of action, violence, and protection. By combining all these knives, perhaps Mathis complicates the gendered associations of active and passive, while also highlighting the perception of emotions as violent or dangerous. Another notable aspect of this image is the costume jewelry that contrasts the knives. The plastic clip-on earrings remind me of the ones I would wear as a child playing dress up, paired with plastic high heels for a Sunday walk to get ice cream with my mother. These possibly speak then to a performativity of gender and of a 'plastic' quality of femininity- something that is fabricated, put on, adapted. Adding to the feel of nostalgia this image arouses, the square beads that make up the lettering are reminiscent of those used to make friendship bracelets, maybe speaking to a collaborative and personal nature of femininity – how it is shared and shaped by others. The pearl necklace may also speak to this, as it looks like something possibly inherited, a visual representation of matriarchy, class or possibly 'proper' (or stereotypical) femininity. As a whole then, this artwork could be read as a bricolage of binary-bashing.

This radical softness proposed by Mathis could possibly be read as one of feminist action rooted in tenderness and vulnerability – a softness that also suggests that the personal may in fact have political power, for when dominant power structures deny certain ways of existence, embracing them seems almost anarchistic. In fact, in an interview with *HelloFlo*, Mathis highlights the empowering possibility of softness:

Softness is embracing my voice. It is regaining it after trauma. It allows me to work past shame (although, god, I have so much), and to be comfortable and

accepting of myself. I have always been soft, emotional, and sensitive. But I have not always accepted it (Mathis, 2016).

Softness in the face of scorn and stereotypes may be a reclamation, as vulnerability and tenderness have often been associated with weakness; attributing the feminine with which emotionality is associated the same characteristic. In *Engendered Emotion: Gender, Power, and the Rhetoric of Emotional Control in American Discourse* (1996)

Catherine A. Lutz expands on this gendering of emotionality, highlighting that:

In Western academic discourse, emotions have begun to move from their culturally assigned place at the centre of the dark recesses of inner life and are being depicted as cultural, social and linguistic operators. In the process, we can ask not only about the cultural foundations of things construed as emotional, but about the organising category of 'emotion' itself. One important aspect of that category is its association with the female, so that qualities that define the emotional also define women. For this reason, any discourse on emotion is also, at least implicitly, a discourse on gender. As both an analytic and an everyday concept in the West, emotion, like the female, has typically been viewed as something natural rather than cultural, irrational rather than rational, chaotic rather than ordered, subjective rather than universal, physical rather than mental or intellectual, unintended and uncontrollable, and hence often dangerous. This network of associations sets emotion in disadvantaged contrast to more valued personal processes, particularly to cognition or rational thought, and the female in deficient relation to her male other (Lutz, 1996:151).

Further, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sara Ahmed provides an argument that may be very useful in tying radical softness to emotionality:

The use of metaphors of 'softness' and 'hardness' shows us how emotions become attributes of collectives, which get constructed as 'being' through 'feeling'. Such attributes are of course gendered: the soft national body is a feminised body, which is 'penetrated' or 'invaded' by others. It is significant that the word 'passion' and the word 'passive' share the same root in the Latin word

for 'suffering' (*passio*). To be passive is to be enacted upon, as a negation that is already felt as suffering. The fear of passivity is tied to the fear of emotionality, in which weakness is defined in terms of a tendency to be shaped by others.

Softness is narrated as a proneness to injury. The association between passion and passivity is instructive. It works as a reminder of how 'emotion' has been viewed as 'beneath' the faculties of thought and reason. To be emotional is to have one's judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous. Feminist philosophers have shown us how the subordination of emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body (Ahmed, 2014:2-3).

The passivity associated with emotion – viewed as something that overcomes you or that you succumb to- can possibly be linked to the passivity of radical softness – something that is perhaps radical not despite its passivity but perhaps because of it. Ahmed also highlights a further important factor regarding emotion; that it is not only of gendered consequence but also that “we can also identify the risks of considering feminist and anti-racist critique in terms of a politics of emotion”, as feminists who “speak out against established ‘truths’ are often constructed as emotional, as failing the very standards of reason and impartiality that are assumed to form the basis of ‘good judgement’. Such a designation of feminism as ‘hostile’ and emotional, whereby feminism becomes an extension of the already pathological ‘emotionality’ of femininity, exercises the hierarchy between thought/ emotion” (Ahmed, 2014:170). This dismissal of feminism as emotional in absence of rational thought is one rooted in humanist binaries, however it must be noted that feminism need not claim reason over emotion in response to this, as this would only act to further entrench the reason/emotion hierarchy. Ahmed suggests instead that “we need to contest this understanding of emotion as ‘the unthought’, just as we need to contest the assumption that ‘rational thought’ is unemotional, or that it does not involve being moved by others” (Ahmed, 2014:170).

Perhaps then this idea of weaponising a characteristic usually weaponised against the feminine could be seen as radical, and perhaps expressing emotion openly as

women complicates rigid gender associations while detangling shamefulness and inferiority from emotionality. A question that may be significant to pose here, however, is what exact emotion is contained in this conception of radical softness. It seems the original intention of Mathis revolves around sensitivity, sorrow and pain, but this does not mean that the power of feminist anger should be disregarded, as anger is arguably a vital driving force for feminism; an anger for systems that continue to disproportionately fail women. Perhaps then a specificity of emotion is not vital to the conception of its radicality for the femme-identifying, as the weaponization of emotion proposed by Mathis centers around defying the idea of a characteristically feminine quality associated with lacking; like psychoanalysis's lack of penis/castration anxiety, and that of a feminine emotion stereotypically viewed as that devoid of masculine logic and reason. As a women's emotional openness is conceived as weakness, radical softness reminds us that "we need to subvert what we see as powerful" (Brené Brown: *The Call to Courage*, 2019). Charging feminine emotionality with a sense of empowerment and repossession is thus what makes this act radical, even if not always in a typical sense associated with aggression or activeness.

An article in *Guts Magazine* titled *The Cultural Politics of Softness* highlights that "femme politics in particular are about reclaiming and revaluing what has been discarded and dismissed for being feminine. The turn to softness extends this political impulse by reclaiming and revaluing that which is still seen as too mushy and too much" and further, within a queer and feminist context, softness is possibly a platform that allows a reconstruction of political principles, a place from which we can imagine, and possibly create a more inclusive world (Schwartz, 2018). An artist that deals mainly in a feminist expression of this emotion and multiplicity is Ambivalently Yours, who argues that "the world benefits from people being one thing or another, refusing to see things in a binary language is an act of resistance against the system" and that "In making our identities more complicated and not trying to fit into boxes, that's a powerful place to be" (Yours, 2017).

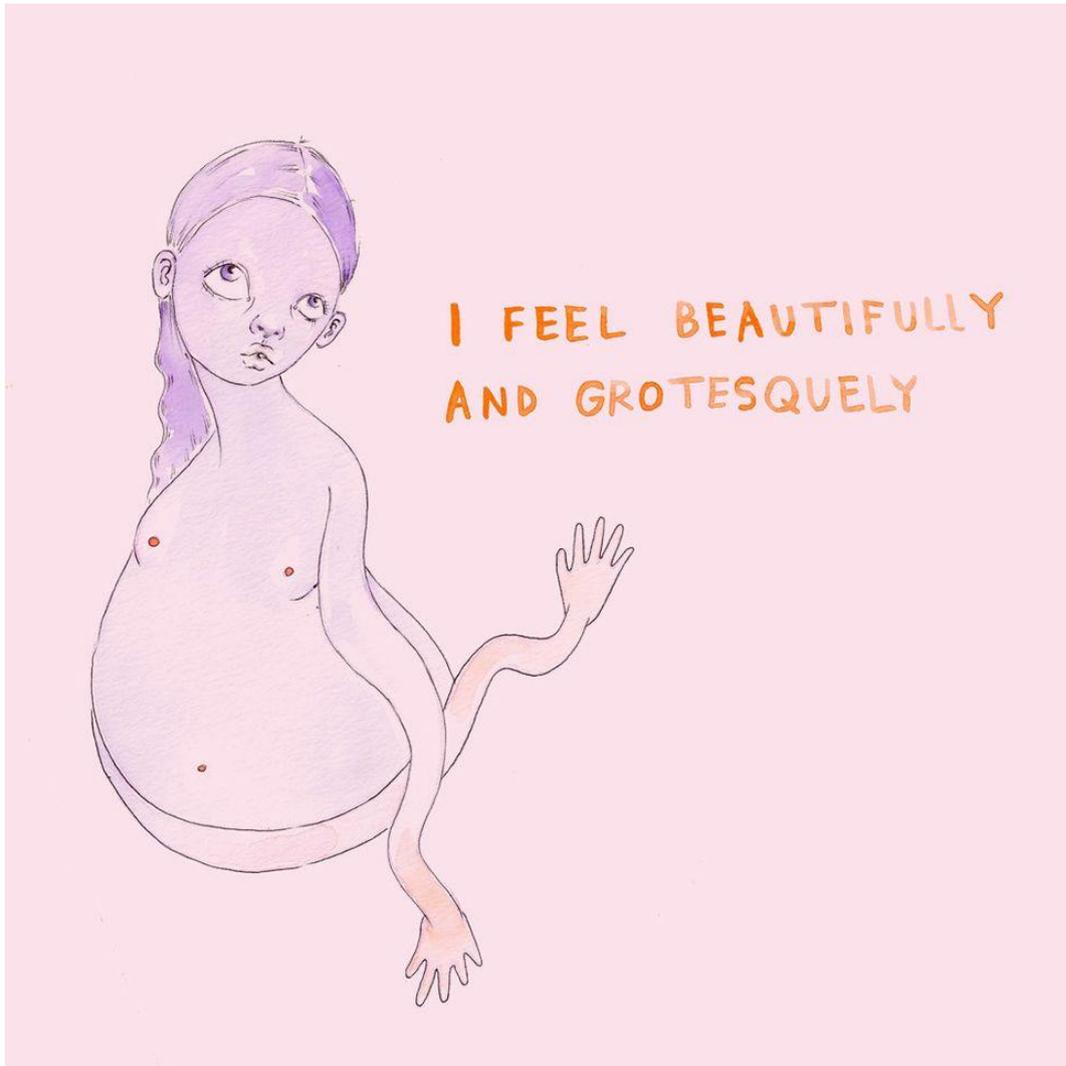


Figure 2: Ambivalently Yours. 2017. *Feeling Out Loud* (6/8). Illustration. From ambivalentlyyours on Tumblr, accessed 13 October 2020. < <https://ambivalentlyyours.tumblr.com/post/156342055213/feeling-out-loud-68>>

The artist attributes the power of ambivalence to the fact that:

For centuries in art, literature, real life and the imagination, the range of roles women could safely occupy was severely limited. Madonna and whore, mother and lover, beauty and hag. Today, though the categories have eased up a bit, women are still urged to choose fixed identities that make them legible to the outside world. Many today, for example, feel compelled to choose between feminist and feminine, unable to balance some radical tenants with more traditional ones (Yours, 2017).

The amorphous, soft bodies thus mirror a non-conformity to rigid boundaries and expectations. In this, “there is something wonderfully monstrous about a woman who refuses to fit into fixed categories” (Frank, 2017).



Figure 3: Ambivalently Yours. 2017. *Feeling Out Loud* (3/8). Illustration. From ambivalentlyyours on Tumblr. Accessed 13 October 2020. < <https://ambivalentlyyours.tumblr.com/post/156167158608/feeling-out-loud-38>>

Radically Soft, Radically Sexual

These gendered expectations of emotionality (as well as the shame attached to flouting them) is possibly mirrored in conceptions of feminine sexuality. As such, I would like to argue that the idea of radical softness, based initially in emotionality, can be extended to various other soft rebellions. Much like the dualism of emotion and reason is separated into the arbitrary binary of feminine and masculine respectively, sexuality and pleasure too face such gendered associations.

Heteropatriarchal ideology would cast the masculine in the light of sexual dominance and as the agent upon which pleasure is focused, while the feminine is viewed as a means to an end and as a secondary consideration. The autonomous, complex sensual woman is often disregarded or regarded as an abnormality.

Though this may not seem an overt example of objectification, in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* Kate Manne draws on the distinctions made by Rae Langton of the different forms sexual objectification may take. “The idea is that a central feature of personhood – namely, autonomy – can be denied in cases of sexual objectification in one of the following two distinct ways:

- (1) the non-attribution of autonomy to a subject; versus
- (2) the violation of the autonomy of a subject (Langton 2009:233 in Manne, 2018).

Thus, sexual objectification can occur through a more covert dismissal of the autonomy of the feminine sexual agent, or through overt disruptions, violations or hindrances of such autonomy. Though the second form is all too common, it is arguable that the non-attribution of autonomy to the woman as sexual subject is the product of a humanist binary that allows room only for conceptions of ‘good sexuality’ which entails monogamy, modesty and heteronormativity, and ‘bad sexuality’ – or the realm of the other. According to *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*, any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad’, ‘abnormal’, or ‘unnatural’ (Rubin, 1998:108). “Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in

"public," or at least in the bushes or the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys, or unusual roles" (Rubin, 1998:108). Though the climate of sexual politics is certainly different from 1998, there are instances in which such perceptions still linger. Perhaps then an analysis of the distinctions between private and public and their according gendered demarcations may be more beneficial to this argument, as 'bad sex' is possibly only bad when it is moved from the realm of the private to the public. This movement, however, is an interesting one as it is often either fetishised or demonised. The phenomenon of voyeurism is something that occurs often throughout the history of erotic art; where pleasure is found in viewing that which, under commonly held perceptions, would be deemed a private activity.



Figure 4: Utagawa Kunisada. 1835. *Peeing woman near stream*, from the series *Hana no miyakoji* . Woodblock print. From Shunga Gallery, accessed 14 October 2020. < <https://shungagallery.com/peeing-beauties/> >

Yet when such private activities are autonomously publicised, it is often met with scorn. For example, the homophobic microaggression of "it's fine as long as I don't

have to see it” urges for queerness to be kept private. Similarly, misogynistic views of sexuality exercise slut-shaming when feminine sexuality is autonomously exercised or presented. This form of repression can also link to emotion as priorly discussed; we are meant to keep it hidden, to show ‘power’ over our human impulses. This overcoming of nature is a liberal-humanist tendency and perhaps instead of glibly referring to a dominant heteropatriarchal state of things, it may be more useful to situate feminist representations as against the liberal humanism of which heteropatriarchy is arguably a by-product. A critique against liberal-humanism is offered in *The Posthuman* by Rosi Braidotti. Here the term is expanded upon as:

An ideal of bodily perfection which, in keeping with the classical dictum *mens sana in corpore sano*, doubles up as a set of mental, discursive and spiritual values. Together they uphold a specific view of what is ‘human’ about humanity. Moreover, they assert with unshakable certainty the almost boundless capacity of humans to pursue their individual and collective perfectibility. That iconic image is the emblem of Humanism as a doctrine that combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress. Faith in the unique, self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of human reason forms an integral part of this high-humanistic creed, which was essentially predicated on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century renditions of classical Antiquity and Italian Renaissance ideals. This model sets standards not only for individuals, but also for their cultures. Humanism historically developed into a civilizational model, which shaped a certain idea of Europe as coinciding with the universalizing powers of self-reflexive reason (Braidotti, 2013:13).

It is possibly thus this very application of humanist ideals that results in misogyny, as well as other injustices and discriminations, as:

this Eurocentric paradigm implies the dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness as respectively the motor for and the

cultural logic of universal Humanism. Central to this universalistic posture and its binary logic is the notion of 'difference' as pejoration. Subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart. In so far as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as 'others'. These are the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, who are reduced to the less than human status (Braidotti, 2013: 15).



Figure 5: Boudwin Art. Nd. Untitled. Acrylic on canvas. From boudwinart on Instagram. Accessed 14 October 2020. < <https://www.instagram.com/boudwinart/> >

The role of the sensually agential, queer or kinky woman can be read as 'abnormal' or as a manifestation of 'bad sex', and the sexual woman and the respectable woman are, within dominant discourse and representation, viewed as mutually exclusive

categories. It is thus possible that an immense subversive power lies in creating representations of and according spaces for feminine and other non-dominant sexualities to exist and flourish, and perhaps in this a radical softness is also enacted. Perhaps simply displaying non-normative femininity and sexuality could then be read as a soft subversion.



Figure 6: Eleni Koumi. 2020. *When you're locked up together because of quarantine*. Watercolour on paper. From loukoum on Instagram, accessed 14 October 2020. < <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9ykjLyB6Lh/>>

Radically Soft, Radically Comical

The artwork below (Figure 7) by Joanna Thangiah bridges a radical feminine sexuality with another possible radical softness- that of the comical.



Figure 7: Joanna Thangiah. 2020. Untitled. Digital illustration. From joannathangiah on Instagram, accessed 14 October 2020. <<https://www.instagram.com/p/B00ZbBOF-Of/>>

In theorising a radical softness, subversion seems to be an essential facet. Alongside unapologetic sexuality and emotionality, feminist humour may also thus be viewed as such. *The Seriously Erotic Politics of Laughter* highlights the commonly held perception of feminists as overly-serious, asking; “do you know the joke about the man who couldn’t find the humor section in the feminist bookstore? Probably. Because feminists don’t have a sense of humor, do they?” (Willett, et al. 2012:217). This “common failure to recognize the importance of humor for feminism” however, may attributed to the fact that “all too often feminists themselves have been treated as a joke while humor has seemed to belong to a more exclusively male terrain” (Willett, et al. 2012:217). Thus while humour is a tool often used at the expense of women and feminists, the possible importance of humour as a subversive feminist tool may lie in the fact that although “it is hard for us not to be well versed in the sad facts about hostile workplace climates, statistics on violence against women, the need for equality in a workplace for women who are primary caregivers”, these facts “do not have the effect they might have on some of us self-declared rational creatures” (Willett, et al. 2012:217). Indeed, feminists are painfully aware of the various injustices against women, yet the recalling of such facts is often not a sufficient tool of persuasion, for if it were that simple, everyone would be a feminist. Reason may thus not be a strong enough of a tool to urge equality. Accordingly:

if reason as a persuasive tool is at best only indirectly effective, and a weak tool on its own, might not the sting of ridicule or the contagion of joyous laughter prove to be more effective weapons for social change? Or, to turn the question around, what devices are more explosive in the social sphere, more discomfiting to our conventional modes of thought, more invasive of our quasi-private store of associations, than the well-placed joke, the display of wit, or the well-honed use of irony? (Willett, et al. 2012:217-218).

Against the stereotype of the stern feminist, the intersection of feminism and humour could also be seen as a radical softness, as it can act to call for social change in a gentle or indirect manner, while subverting a typecast in an act of reclamation. Perhaps a quote from Bella Webb regarding radical softness can be applied to a

feminist humour; “maybe if we softened the edges, life might be a slightly easier pill to swallow” (Webb, 2019). As the realm of the comedic often makes the ingestion of information (especially that with an aspect of difficulty) easier, it could be viewed as a radically soft tool of feminist dissemination.

Radically soft, Radically Cute

Much like the manner in which humour has often been weaponised against the feminine, but gains subversive power in feminist reclamation, it is possible that the trait of ‘cuteness’ may have the same radical possibility. In *The Cuteness of Avant-garde*, the dominant understanding of cuteness is highlighted as being “deeply associated with the infantile and the feminine” as well as having the trait associations of “smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy” that induce effects of “helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency” (Ngai, 2005: 814;816). It may thus seem contradictory to make use of a term that – in patriarchal codes of understanding, overt or internalised- encapsulates qualities that are negatively hyper-feminised. Yet, perhaps there is a performative aspect to cuteness that can act quite subversively. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler highlights the feminist power of performativity in urging:

The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them (Butler, 1999:187-188).

Thus, while cuteness may be a constructed feminine identity, it is possible that it need not be wholly discarded in feminist endeavour, in fact; the performance of cuteness as a highlighting of contrived gendered ideologies can act as deconstruction through hyperbole. By embracing a hyperfemininity or childlikeness, feminine bodies can reclaim the tropes used against them in a radical softness, as “the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an “act,” as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of “the natural” that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status” (Butler, 1999:187).

Another argument that can be posted on the behalf of a feminist cuteness is that of reclaiming a childish innocence that for women is all too often interrupted by objectification. This sentiment is encapsulated in an image created by ‘feminist meme’ maker *Exojelly* (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Exojelly. 2020. Untitled. Text imposed over found image. From exojelly on Instagram, accessed 14 October 2020. <<https://www.instagram.com/exojelly/>>

Perhaps here it may be useful to expand on the concept of feminist memes, and also attempt to posit the feminist meme as an art object. In a paper titled *Seize the Memes: Community, Personal Expression, and Everyday Feminist Politics Through Instagram Memes*, Tessa Westfall highlights “the importance of identity-centric personal memes made by women and gender nonbinary femmes” as well as their possibility to act as art objects with personal political power (Westfall, 2018:7). Firstly, a meme can be defined as “static pictures that people post online which combine recognizable imagery from pop culture and the poster’s own added text”, with niche memes like feminist ones using “targeted messaging through image appropriation” (Westfall, 2018: 7:36). An interesting overlapping here is that memes are also generally meant to be comedic, and thus also may carry the subversive power of comedic humour as priorly discussed. Further, memes are also in their very nature created to be shared, which nods to the importance of feeling, representation, belonging or relatability. Westfall also highlights how Instagram feminist memes can act as culture jamming in their disruption of the content that generally dominates the platform, and what is interesting about the combination of image and text is that it communicates an easily digestible packaging of information, yet there is a possibility of disruption of mindless scrolling and for further thought. These intersectional feminist memes can “leave a lasting thought in the mind of the viewer”, and “the fact that this kind of art does real work on multiple levels of engagement is important” (Westfall, 2018: 47). This multiplicity of reception is highlighted in how “one can consume its significance quickly and easily, from just a glance at the side of a bus or a slight pause in your Instagram scrolling” yet “in addition to this superficial skim, one can also dive headfirst into the apparently simple image and text. One can find deeply resonant moments of intertextuality (perhaps intentioned by the artist, perhaps read in by the viewer) that more concretely ground the work” (Westfall, 2018: 47).

In this meme, the power of cuteness as a reclamation of that which has been distorted by a heteropatriarchal society is highlighted. This image of a Hello Kitty clad samurai perhaps showcases the manner in which cuteness can be used as a mask, as armour, or as a tool of subversion. In this perhaps cuteness, or softness by

extension, could be understood as a reclamation of that which women are either told to deny or conversely fetishised for.

Here perhaps, in order to flesh out a definition of 'cuteness' it may be useful to analyse its Japanese counterpart phenomenon of *kawaii*. In an article titled *The Power of Cute: Redefining Kawaii Culture as a Feminist Movement* Mary Christopherson defines *kawaii* as "a term that has taken on a life of its own within its country of origin, Japan. So much so, that the meaning of the word has no precise English translation. "Kawaii" has become such a social phenomenon among Japanese youth that it has even evolved into its own culture. This culture -or counterculture - acts as an opposition to modern standards for how people should behave in society. As young women are at the forefront of this movement, it could be argued that "kawaii challenges pre-established social and gender norms that oppress women, and that *kawaii* empowers women through a celebration of femininity" (2014:1). Accordingly, Christopherson highlights the feminist possibility of *kawaii* with three main arguments:

- 1) *kawaii* is a third wave feminist movement, which allows for its integration into society with lesser resistance;
- 2) *kawaii* goes against traditional social norms, which allows both women and men who are oppressed and unsatisfied with these roles to turn to a new means of establishing their identity; and
- 3) *kawaii* provides empowerment to girls by celebrating femininity and using it as a medium with which to raise themselves on both an individual and broader societal scale

(Christopherson, 2014:9-10).

To unpack this, perhaps radical softness should first be situated within third wave feminism. In *The local is global: third wave feminism, peace, and social justice* it is highlighted that third wave feminists "tend to view themselves as departing from the second wave by being more inclusive, by operating in a different climate, by emphasising personal narratives, responsible choices and individual-level political

activism, and by being comfortable with an uncertainty of knowledge” (Zimmerman, et al., 2009:77). Thus, while second-wave feminists’ understanding of “the personal is political” is that “everyday problems and struggles of women, such as sexual harassment or discrimination in the workplace, have structural roots”, third wave feminism accentuates “the link between the personal and the structural emphasizes the broader consequences of individual action” (Zimmerman, et al., 2009:79). Through this understanding acts such as cuteness, emotionality or sexuality as defiance become personal political acts that are abrasive against broader societal dogmas. Further, third wave feminism is attributed the quality of “comfort with the uncertainty of knowledge that flows from multiple perspectives and rejection of grand narratives” (Zimmerman, et al., 2009: 79). The rejection of binaries and embracing of pluralism by third wave feminism can thus be read in the various instances of radical softness discussed this far, as the contestation that lies in feminist cuteness, emotionality and humour showcases the fallability of grand narratives and static stereotypes.

In line with its positioning of the personal as political, third wave feminism advocates for choice. This is perhaps a vital element of the radicalities discussed thus far, as what they essentially contest are the rigid expectations and associations that form an overarching feminine imaginary. For example, sexual subservience and various other BDSM activities has often been viewed by feminists as antagonistic to goals of equality and liberation, yet it is possible that when this is enacted autonomously as opposed to fulfilling a gendered role or expectation, the goal of feminism is still achieved, as women’s “right to self-determination forms a core value for feminism” (Snyder-Hall, 2010:256). This complexity is further addressed in Claire Snyder-Hall’s *Third Wave Feminism and the Defence of “Choice”*:

Women’s relationship to their own socially constructed desires has long been a challenge for feminism. In fact, the second-wave of the American feminist movement split over issues related to sexuality. Feminists found themselves on opposite sides of a series of contentious debates about issues such as pornography, sex work, and heterosexuality, with one side seeing evidence of

gender oppression and the other opportunities for sexual pleasure and empowerment. Since the mid-1990s, however, a third wave of feminism has developed in the US that seeks to reunite the ideals of gender equality and sexual freedom that came apart during the “sex wars.” Because third-wave feminism insists that each woman must decide for herself how to negotiate the often-contradictory desires for both gender equality and sexual liberation, it sometimes seems to uncritically endorse behaviours that appear problematic. Despite media caricatures, however, the third wave approach actually exhibits not a thoughtless endorsement of “choice,” but rather a deep respect for pluralism and self-determination (Snyder-Hall, 2010:255).

Though this focus on choice as core to feminist discourse is crystalised in third-wave feminism, earlier feminism also reflects such ideas. For example, in Shulamith Firestone’s 1970 *The Dialectics of Sex*, she argues that “communication practices between the sexes served to reflect as well as to consolidate the power differences between them” and she was accordingly “caught by the fact that women smile more and do so apparently because they have to”, and regarding this requirement of subservient smiling, “she proposed that they hold a “smile boycott” and smile only when others please them” (Firestone,1970:90). Though the idea of smiling only when you actually want to may not seem radical, this is arguably an exercise of feminist choice that softly goes against expectations of gender performance.

Smiley Face Semiotics

A woman’s smile as an exercise of choice is reflected in the recurring theme of the smiley face in my artworks, many pieces are adorned with smiley face stickers, others are drawn and painted, sometimes flipped upside down. Yet the women I draw rarely smile, unless in instances of erotic bliss. The smiley face symbol also tends to arise in works of other feminist artists, which I find quite interesting.

Accordingly, I would like to argue that this seemingly banal symbol may actually be packed with multifaceted meaning. While one may be contemporarily familiar with

the smiley face in the context of social media and emojis, the icon is also historically linked to rave culture and the use of acid or MDMA. This underground origin adds a sense of dissidence to the semiotics of the image. With this in mind, an analysis of visual examples will be used to expand on the semiotics of the smiley face.

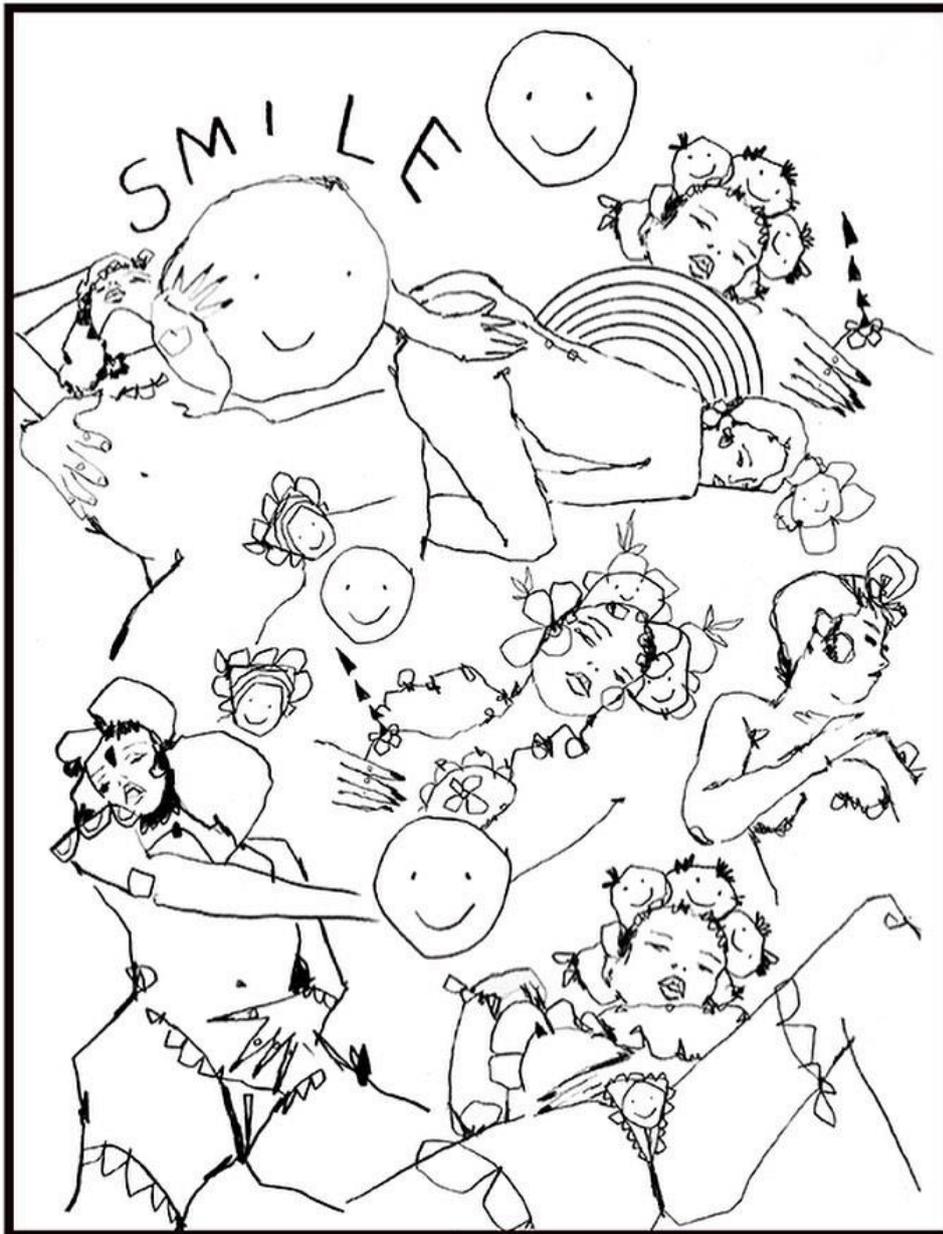


Figure 9: Natalie Krim. 2019. *Smile*. Ink on paper. From nataliejhane on Instagram, accessed 14 October 2020. <
<https://www.instagram.com/nataliejhane/>>

This illustration by Natalie Krim (Figure 9) may speak well to the symbology of the smiley face. What is interesting here is that the only two agents of the sex acts depicted are a woman and the smiling face. This symbol brings forth its associations of innocence, perhaps childhood, making this image of ecstasy appear sweet. The linking that is made here between a sweet girlishness and an autonomous sexuality is possibly a radical one, as it contests the idea that sex somehow soils the feminine—a standard that is generally not kept for the masculine counterpart. The simple, imperfect lines also speak to a certain childish freedom in form.

An artwork of mine (Figure 10) also aims to represent this idea that innocence and sexuality can exist in tandem. The title refers to how queerness not only turned my life upside down, but also that this very act of upturning is perhaps in the nature of queering itself.



Figure 10: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Let Me Tell You a Little Story How My Life Got Flipped Turned Upside Down*. Acrylic and markers on paper. From my sketchbook.

Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* calls upon Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* in which "queer moments do happen", moments "where the world no longer appears "the right way up" (Ahmed, 2006:64). Ahmed highlights that:

of course, when Merleau-Ponty discusses queer effects, he is not considering "queer" as a sexual orientation – but we can. We can turn to the etymology of the word "queer," which comes from the Indo-European word "twist." Queer is, after all, a spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a "straight line," a sexuality that is bent and crooked (Cleto 2002: 13). The spatiality of this term is not incidental. Sexuality itself can be considered a spatial formation not only in the sense that bodies inhabit sexual spaces (Bel and Valentine 1995), but also in the sense that bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit space"

(Ahmed, 2006:67).

As a key factor that feminists fight for is bodily autonomy, the photograph below (Figure 11) aims to address the everyday misogynistic microaggression of men's expectations of women's bodily performance. "You look better when you smile" or "you should smile more" are comments all too familiar for the femme-identifying, so much so that the term "resting bitch face" is used to describe the non-smiling woman. In a newspaper article titled *Sexism Behind Resting Bitch Face* highlights the misogynistic nature of this term, stating:

If I'm not smiling, I'm probably thinking about things that everyone else thinks about. And if that consists of my eyebrows resting, lips sealed, then I shouldn't be labelled with resting bitch face. It's just my face. If a girl is not smiling, or she is just not in a smiley mood, she is then labelled with resting bitch face. Yet when boys aren't smiling, does anyone ever say they have resting bitch face? Are they instantly tagged with the notion that they are assholes? Is there such thing as resting asshole face? Deborah Carr -- a professor and chair of sociology at Rutgers University -- commented on the subject in an NJBIZ article about resting bitch face. "Men have so many ways that they can behave in the workplace. For women, there are higher

expectations -- there is a (social) assumption that women should be warm, nurturing, maternal and encouraging. If you have a woman who either looks or appears serious or unfriendly, that might force people to have a negative view of her because she's not living up to this image" (Harris, 2015).



Figure 11: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *You Look Better When You Smile*. Photograph.

The love letter that reads “Fuck Off” on the subject’s buttocks thus acts as a response to such gendered expectations of friendliness, the image as a whole speaking to feminine bodily autonomy by also highlighting a sexual independence.

The Radically Soft Body

With regards to the body, another form of radical softness that I would like to introduce is that of the radically soft body. The first manner in which I would like to introduce this concept as represented in my work as well as that of other erotic feminist artists is in the vein of body positivity. Though dominant media and forms of representation are slowly expanding to include varying bodies, the formulization of the “perfect women’s body” has some historical entrenchment. Feminist art forms, however, contest mass media by representing so-called ‘imperfections’ that are often edited or altogether left out. The presence of fat rolls, cellulite, acne, body hair and bodily fluids disrupts the construction of a perfect and contained body and acts to radically broaden what constitutes the mental makeup of the ‘normal’ or ‘attractive’ body. This is important because representation can be vital to self-confidence and self-acceptance. Personally, being in recovery from various eating disorders -a plight faced by many women and often attributed to mainstream representations- seeing and creating soft bodies is a radical reclamation. While masculine bodies should not be excluded from discussions of body positivity, that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Another form in which the body exists in a radically soft manner in these artworks is often by disrupting rigid gender binaries and roles, instead introducing soft places to nestle in the in-between. This again ties to the importance of representation.

This ‘in betweenness’ also occurs in an interesting manner when this radically soft representation of bodies is combined with elements of erotica. What possibly arises here is what I would like to call a softened erotic – not to be mistaken for softcore pornography. The distinction between pornography and erotica will be discussed

later in this thesis. What I would like to suggest here, however, is that by combining various examples of radical softness discussed thus far with the erotic a complex image narrative is created. When including aspects of emotions or body oddity for example, the straight forwardness of the conventional pornographic is circumvented. The second chapter of this thesis will explore such complicating or queering of sexual imagery.

Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance

Following these expansions on radical softness, it could be argued that radical softness is a boundless form of resistance. According to the varying applications of radical softness thus far, this idea of boundless resistance seems quite apt, highlighting the plentiful radicalities that softness can inspire or enact. An independent publishing initiative that encourages a queer, intersectional subjectivity, *GenderFail* may provide insightful into this broader application. Be Oakley expands on this boundless potential of radical softness, highlighting it as “a type of resistance that is performed quietly, daily, and often by many queer people outside of the public sphere” as well as “a life force that drives us forward even in times we may feel utterly defeated”, a form of resistance that “is carried on the struggles of our queer ancestors, whose lifetime of work we build upon in reimagining a world that is built for us by us on the crumbling foundations of colonialism, white supremacy and heteronormativity” a form of resistance that is “boundless, working underneath history and politics and then suddenly erupting through” (Oakley, 2020:17-18). Thus, while radical softness may not be an abrasive or overt form of protest and resistance, it “articulates a form of resistance in an alternative public, one that proliferates through alternative forms of dissemination”, it challenges the manner in which the terms “radical” and “resistance” are “often viewed through an ablest lens as active, as against ostensibly passive forms of softness or emotiveness” (Oakley, 2020:20). Perhaps then embracing radically soft forms of resistance,

including erotic illustration, offers a broader and more inclusive platform for feminist dissemination.

Chapter 2: Challenging the Guise of Averting Your Eyes

To further flesh out the radical aspect of softness, a gaze into censorship may be insightful. Indeed, censorship could be linked to the radicality of resistance. Much like radicality by definition is abrasive against something, images that face censorship may act against the separation between the 'normal' or 'abnormal' and obscene. It is this very obscenity that is often attributed as the cause of censoring across varying forms of media, yet the term itself is somewhat murky; obscenity may thus be "an offence so vague that its definition was being questioned from the very moment that some sought to prosecute it", yet there is an "implication that the term encompasses anything that might be seen as a threat to the social order" (Brookes, 2015: 174). An overlap may be seen here, as that defined as radical also tends to threaten dominant social order. A look into censorship may thus provide a pool of radical imagery. Though the history of censorship is extensive, and oftentimes warranted, such as in cases of hate-speech and other bigotry, a particular focus upon the censoring of erotic art and women's bodies on the social media platform of Instagram could speak to the idea of a radically soft feminist erotic.

Cyberspace, Fantasy and Censorship

To contextualize Instagram as a platform, a reading of Andrea Grobler and Ingrid Stevens' *Pornography, erotica, cyberspace and the work of two female artists*, may highlight the manner in which bodies exist on the internet. Here Cyberspace is defined as a space that "represents a public, non-physical space which emerges at multiple locations at once and allows for interaction and/or communication between a number of people at any geographical site" (Grobler & Stevens, 2010: 22). Instagram as such can be considered a cyberspace. What is interesting about such a

platform, however, is that when it comes to bodily representations, its tangential form of reality can contest the manner in which “the pornographic female body is culturally significant because it conforms to the prescribed image of femininity which culture imposes on it”; for in cyberspace “there is a means to transcend the material body which corresponds to cultural objectives” (Grobler & Stevens, 2010: 23). This transcendence of culturally gendered body impositions and expectations may be attributed to the manner in which “the cyber-body is free from cultural disciplinary and normalising processes which determine the inscriptions onto its surface” (Grobler & Stevens, 2010: 23). Distinct from reality then, cyberspace may allow for new, radical normalizations. This radicality may be found in the repositioning of non-normative representations into a normative lexicon. This may be exemplified in the inclusion of ‘non-normative’ queer or women’s body and sex positive imagery into the mainstream. A culture-jamming of sorts may occur when such images interrupt the everyday. The body and representations thereof in cyberspace may come “to exist as a new central theme for the emancipation of the body from its cultural limitations and allows for new experiences and expressions of embodiment and bodybased identities” (Grobler & Stevens, 2010: 23). This is arguably due to the openness of cyberspace, and the according possibilities for expressing desires, interests or tastes without the restrictions or taboos implied by the physical sharing of place and time. Perhaps then, through specific feminist use, Instagram could comprise the possibility to transcend “cultural and social connotations of gendered and sexual difference and identity as determined by masculine ideals” (Grobler & Stevens, 2010: 23). The freedoms of the cyber-domain, however, should not be overextended. While cyberspaces that are inclusive and positive exist, many exist that are not; some resist mainstream cultural norms while others celebrate them. Through my personal experience sharing art on Instagram however, I have felt a great sense of community and connection. I think there is importance in curating the media you consume, especially on cyber platforms; and as users do this, like-minded individuals are generally grouped together. I have thus seen how this different means of representation through cyberspace “allows women

to use a new procedure for telling the feminine truth about gender, sexual identity and sexual pleasure” (Grobler & Stevens, 2010: 24).

If we then regard Instagram as a possible platform for fantastical expressions of bodies and sexualities, there arises a possibility for progressivity and community. Though not discussed in this chapter, this realm of the fantastical will be highlighted as a possibly powerful feminist tool in Chapter 3. Instagram as a cyberspace platform however, could possibly be read as a space of fantasy, which can allow space for radicality. Though the expression of fantasy is not in itself radical, as the occurrences thereof could just as likely uphold and further bigotry, it is possible that the space of fantasy is one that is safe for marginalized groups to find freedom of expression separate from societal and structural boundaries and impedances. There may thus be an “immense power of fiction – the power, that is, to free the imagination from those forces in society that seek to repress it” (Brookes, 2015). For example, where the free expression of feminine sexuality may be met with scorn when enacted or represented publicly, cyberspace offers an in-between in which such fantasy can be explored. Perhaps for this argument it may then be more apt to consider a ‘feminist fantasy’. As a vital factor of various feminist movements is that of hope for change and equality, it is arguable that the fantastical is already in the forefront of feminist thought, for it is this very conceptualising or ‘fantasising’ about new realities that often acts as a driving force. In fact, “[h]ope is central to marginal politics which speaks of desires for equality or simply for a better life” and feminism itself “might be characterised as a politics of hope, a movement underpinned by a utopian drive for full equality” (Coleman & Ferreday, 2010: 313). It should however be highlighted that Instagram is a subsidiary of Facebook, and is as such a commercial entity. Certain criteria must thus be followed, and when it comes to visual representations of fantasy, there is a fallback that sometimes acts to limit them; that of censorship. Though this chapter will not necessarily argue for nor against censorship, examples of Instagram censorship are analyzed in order to understand what kinds of imagery are deemed deserving thereof and the possible reasons why. This analysis will be conducted to bolster the radicality of certain erotic imagery- highlighting that censorship speaks to a perceived controversy or obscenity that may very well be the

feminist impetus of the type of art under discussion. Though I have not been in direct contact with any of these artists, information has been collected through published interviews (Salty's *An Investigation into Algorithmic Bias in Content Policing on Instagram*; Madeline Reid's *The Silent Censorship of Instagram Shadow-banning*; and Rachel Raczka's *Erotica artists are reaching huge audiences on Instagram. But they fear getting deleted*) as well as from Instagram itself.

In an article titled *Erotica artists are reaching huge audiences on Instagram. But they fear getting deleted* the precarious nature of posting erotic art on the platform is highlighted. A specific instance possibly typifies these concerns:

The artist known as Alphachanneling uses Instagram to share a dreamy world of soft psychedelic sexuality where brilliant lotus flowers burst from the tips of candy-coloured penises. The images are surreal and seductive, and tens of thousands of "likes" appear to agree. But Alphachanneling worries each day may be their last on Instagram. "This morning when I woke up, I saw yesterday's post was removed," they said. "I've had my account deleted before, and it has this feeling of a sandcastle that you keep building, but a wave can just erase it in the second."

Alphachanneling, who uses gender-neutral pronouns, posts fast and posts a lot. They describe their methodology as "spontaneous and loose", and Instagram offers a form of alternative gallery through which to express these works. Unlike a traditional gallery or museum, the platform offers a chance to promote an artistic vision that might only be seen for a matter of seconds (Raczka, 2018).

This form of sharing that Instagram allows for possibly denies ideas of humanist perfection, escapes the traditional gallery's formalities and authority, and allows for erotic images to be added to a visual lexicon – and so acts to normalize. The platform of Instagram also has the possibility to be a perfect breeding ground for such normalization, as erotic imagery occurs on the same visual playing field as other everyday images. This format of sharing may also speak to elements of compulsion and catharsis discussed later in this thesis.



Figure 12: Alphachanneling. 2020. *Welcome Home*. Pencil on paper. From alphachanneling on Instagram, accessed 14 October 2020. < https://www.instagram.com/p/CCcQ3YSB_bO/ >

However, apart from complete removal from the platform due to reporting by a user or by Instagram's algorithm and review, Instagram also implements a form of censorship referred to as "shadow banning". This is a manner in which the platform

can “limit how many people see your content without actually removing you from the site. For instance, your posts won’t be discoverable under certain hashtags, and when searching for your handle, you may not show up even when people follow you already” (Reid, 2019). A case of a user affected by the shadow ban is Louisa Foley, an artist who goes by *arewenearlybareyet* and shares illustrations of nude women with the aim of “subvert[ing] the male gaze by reclaiming ownership of the ‘Nude’ for self-identifying women” (Reid, 2019).



Figure 13: Louisa Foley. 2019. *Don't get your knickers in a twist*. Digital illustration. From *arewenearlybareyet* on Instagram, accessed 14 October 2020. < <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5Q3mmxn7E7/>>



Figure 14: Louisa Foley. 2020. *Fanny Friends*. Digital illustration. From arewenearlybareyet on Instagram, accessed 14 October 2020. < <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCJj96SHkEi/>>



Figure 15: Louisa Foley. 2019. *Sometimes you just end up in strange positions*. Digital illustration. From arewenearlybareyet on Instagram, accessed 14 October 2020. < <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3Xb3nOHGB5/>>

An expansion on Foley's experience may elucidate some issues regarding shadow banning:

Before I realised, I was shadow banned it was hard not to feel like the work I was putting out was crap and I was losing it a bit which really affected my creativity and general self-worth," Foley admits. "Once I did realise, it just made me feel frustrated that Instagram was hiding my work and censoring people's bodies even though I'd created a project to fit around Instagram's guidelines" (Reid, 2019).

Instagram's current guidelines, however, are a tad murky. While the forms of prohibited nudity outlined includes photos, videos and digitally created content, it is highlighted that "nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK, too".

- **Post photos and videos that are appropriate for a diverse audience.**

We know that there are times when people might want to share nude images that are artistic or creative in nature, but for a variety of reasons, we don't allow **nudity** on Instagram. This includes photos, videos, and some digitally-created content that show sexual intercourse, genitals, and close-ups of fully-nude buttocks. It also includes some photos of female nipples, but photos of post-mastectomy scarring and women actively breastfeeding are allowed. Nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK, too.

People like to share photos or videos of their children. For safety reasons, there are times when we may remove images that show **nude or partially-nude children**. Even when this content is shared with good intentions, it could be used by others in unanticipated ways. You can learn more on our [Tips for Parents](#) page.

Figure 16: Instagram Guidelines. 2021. Accessed 10 February 2021. <

[https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119/community-guidelines/?bc\[0\]=Instagram%20Help&bc\[1\]=Privacy%20and%20Safety%20Center](https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119/community-guidelines/?bc[0]=Instagram%20Help&bc[1]=Privacy%20and%20Safety%20Center)>

When it comes to the censoring of images on the platform, "the Instagram algorithm is a beast that we may never understand completely, but what we do know is that images in breach of Instagram's community guidelines are flagged through a mix of manual reporting and AI tech. Instagram also has over 15,000 employees working all around the world to review posts, and look for banned material. With all of this technology and so many employees, it is hard to understand how prejudices still

haunt the algorithm – and yet here we are” (Christie, 2020). The question that arises then, is why are specific non-real depictions of bodies censored by a platform that claims no bias against them?

Another artist’s story may bring insight to this:

Noomi Roomi, a Moscow-based artist who paints ethereal wisps of figures participating in BDSM as @EroticWatercolor, says the only images that have been deleted from her page have been gay drawings or those depicting femdom, meaning a woman dominating sexual interaction (Raczka, 2018).



Figure 17. Noomi Roomi. 2020. Untitled. Watercolor on paper. From [eroticwatercolor](https://www.instagram.com/p/B-xXZsNof7C/) on Instagram, accessed 14 October 2020. < <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-xXZsNof7C/>>

Roomi highlights that when it comes to her audience, she prefers people “who admire diversity and are open-minded, as [her] art promotes equal rights and sexual freedom for everyone, as long as it is consensual” (Roomi in Raczka, 2018). Is it perhaps then the non-normativity of the material that may be the problem?

Salty, a volunteer and membership-based newsletter that fights for “digital visibility for women, trans and non-binary people” as well as “to make sure our stories are not erased from the internet” conducted a survey regarding Instagram’s censorship biases. With regards to the results of this survey, *Salty* highlights; “The demographics of our survey respondents (118 people total) reflects our readership. Many of the respondents identified as LGBTQIA+, people of colour, plus sized, and sex workers or educators. All of these Instagram users experienced friction with the platform in some form, such content taken down, disabled profiles or pages, and/or rejected advertisements” and in fact, “BIPOC users, body positive advocates, women and queer folx feel Instagram is targeting them for their identity” (*Salty*, n.d.). A user that took part in the survey shares their experience:

My posts have been banned from showing up in hashtags because I used a hashtag associated with pornography. So my account has been labelled as pornographic and no longer shows up in searches. I use tags such as body positive, body image, HAES, black girl magic (*Salty*, n.d.).

I have also been subject to shadow banning for using the body positive hashtag, and what may be interesting to note here is that this restriction relates directly to the disproportionate censoring of ‘fat’ or ‘other’ bodies that do not neatly fit Eurocentric heteronormative body ideals. Further, the pushing of this into the category of the pornographic highlights how non-normative body imagery is viewed as obscene.



Figure 18: Reesa Bobeesa. 2020. Cropped image taken from Instagram. Digital illustration. From reesabobeesa on Instagram, accessed 26 January 2021. < <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKcbqpDBAIU/>>

A caption for a reposted crop of an image removed from the account of @reesabobeesa reads:

AND YET I SEE FULL NIPPLES ON THIN WOMEN AND EXPLICITLY SEXUAL POSTS RIFE WITH THE MALE GAZE ON THIS PLATFORM DAILY. Funny. Wonder why that is...

The artist highlights the frustrations of disproportionate censorship and the possible underlying biases that cause this.

Another user who has experienced such censorship is a stripper and artist who goes by the title Exotic Cancer. The artist often shares illustrations and comics that uplift women and their sexuality, or that uses humour to simultaneously mock and highlight the problem of misogyny. A series in which she does this, titled *Shit men say in strip clubs*, however, has been removed by Instagram and the artist has been threatened with account deletion. Again, what is notable about this example of censorship, is that the material itself does not explicitly go against any of Instagram's community guidelines.



Figure 19: Exotic Cancer. 2019- 2020. From *Shit men say in strip clubs* series¹. Digital illustration. From exotic.cancer on Instagram. Accessed 14 October 2020. < <https://www.instagram.com/exotic.cancer/> >

¹ An uncensored version of this image could not be found



Figure 20: Exotic Cancer. 2019- 2020. From *Shit men say in strip clubs* series. Digital illustration. From exotic.cancer on Instagram. Accessed 14 October 2020. <
<https://www.instagram.com/exotic.cancer/>>

The reason these images faced censorship may thus be due to their reference to sex work, as well as their less than flattering depiction of men. For while more normative sexual imagery seems to exist with a fair amount of ease upon the platform, anything that deviates from this is oftentimes intercepted. These deviations often include non-normative bodies, sexualities and power dynamics. Yet, despite these complications, “for many, the erotic art outlet and community on Instagram has been a source of freedom and empowerment, especially for those who feel oppressed offline”, an artist who goes by DarlingKink expounds:

Owning my own sexuality was something very new to me, and I view it as a luxury to be able to put my art out there...Not a lot of women are afforded

the space to be free to express what they want. For me, I've felt stronger as a woman (Raczka, 2018).

My Instagram art account titled initially *gutsandtits* has had three re-incarnations due to being deleted from the platform, and now exists as *guts.and.titz*. Here I share what I refer to as 'creepy cute art', which involves imagery of gore, cuteness, feminine sexuality and emotionality. The majority of the work I share is taken from my sketchbook, and thus in this sharing I position something generally private into the public sphere. For a long time, this was also my only expression of my sexuality, which is interesting as here publicising my internalities through Instagram positioned it as a fantasy realm and place for growth and expression, both artistically and emotionally. Much like DarlingKink mentions, I found power as a queer woman through the platform. Yet, alongside having accounts deleted without prior warning, I have also experienced many cases of shadow banning and post removal. Whether these actions have been warranted or not, an analysis of some images I have had removed from the platform may prove an interesting case for the radicality of erotic art.

Crywank (Figure 21) is an example of something I have had removed from Instagram, and at first the representation of a woman masturbating may seemingly be the cause thereof. Yet other more realistic and explicit depictions of such are allowed on the platform, such as the contrastive *Milkmaid in Milwaukee* (Figure 22) by an artist who goes by Erotic Acrylic.



Figure 21: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2019. *Crywank*. Alcohol markers on paper. From my sketchbook.

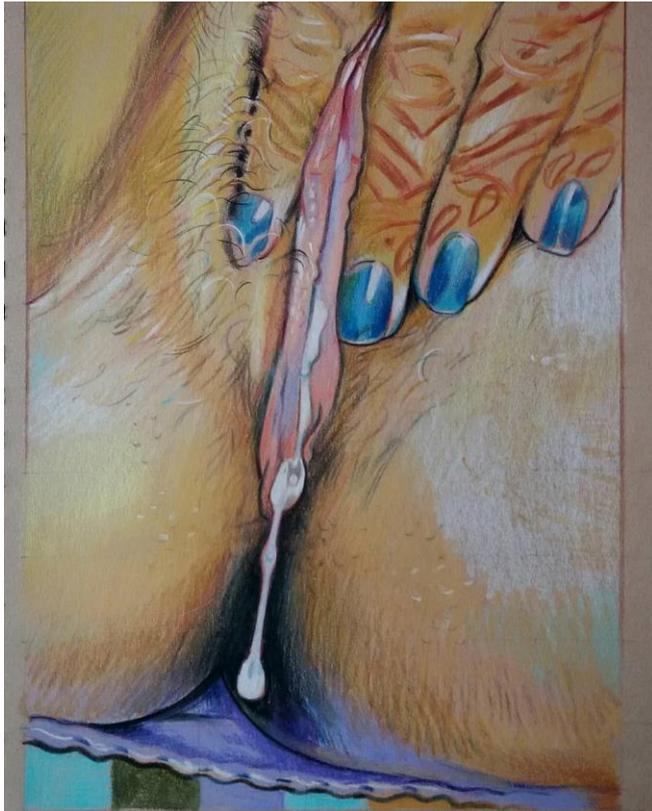


Figure 22: Erotic Acrylic. 2020. *Milkmaid in Milwaukee*. Pencil on toned paper. From erotic_acrylic_v2 on Instagram, accessed 14 October 2020. < https://www.instagram.com/p/B_QDrEThjOQfu9oZ_4a-a0Gu4ed9AYwumir4Cw0/>

Though this user has also been removed from the platform once, they currently have a following of 47400 people, which is quite monumental compared to my image that was removed at a stage when I had less than 1000 followers. If, as in this instance then, it is not necessarily the size of audience faced with the image nor the erotic subject matter that may be the problem, perhaps it is the ‘complication’ of such erotic imagery with elements of cuteness as well as emotion that led to its removal. An image that was removed from my account in 2018 titled *Self-serving* may bolster this idea that it is not the sexual representations that are faced with censorship, but rather images that queer the erotic cannon in varying manners.

Self-serving (Figure 23) too presents a form of a woman masturbating, yet it is complicated with elements of oddity. It is interesting to note that despite this artwork’s multifaceted removals from reality, censorship still occurs.



Figure 23: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2018. *Self-serving*. Alcohol markers on paper. From my sketchbook.

However, in accordance with Instagram's explicit mentioning of digitally created nudity in their guidelines, my digital art has been removed more often than that from my sketchbook. *Fun and Games* (Figure 24) is an example hereof.



Figure 24: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2019. *Fun and Games*. Digital illustration.

The removal of this image may also be notable as it presents a clashing of cuteness, oddity, and sexuality. Such elements do not normally occur in unison with normative erotic imagery, and perhaps this led to its censorship. Accordingly, there lies a dichotomy within Instagram; as it can act as a space that can facilitate fantasy, freedom and community building; or act conversely to hide non-normative imagery and silence marginalised voices. Thus, “There’s an irony to how perfect social media is for art, but at the same time, it’s so precarious. One never knows if it’ll be there the next time they check their phone” (Alphachanneling in Raczka, 2018).

However, as it is not really possible to know the exact behind-the-scenes processes of censorship on Instagram, there is no certainty regarding the who’s and why’s. Thus, it is possible that it is not a heteropatriarchal standard being upheld at all, but

perhaps these examples can act to highlight which sorts of imagery are sorted (by whatever reasons) into categories of 'normal' and 'abnormal'.

This categorization and the according censorship of women can be linked to aspects of the history of misogyny and the feminist plight thereagainst. Women's bodies have been restricted time and time again, from reproductive rights to facing condemnation for body hair or belly rolls. The woman's voice is all too often silenced, her image and expectations created through the lens of men. Her sexuality confined to the private sphere, imposed upon by ideas of modesty that are unfairly gendered. The issue of censorship as expressed in the case of Instagram thus speaks to a larger issue of the censoring of women. Even though Instagram is not a truly public space, it is possible that with the flouting of such attempts at restriction – when women express their own bodies, sexualities and desires unfiltered by societal impositions – the imagery that arises is radical.

Blurring Lines: Erotica and Pornography

Radical softness may then be enacted through the defiance of attempts at censorship. However, linking to the concepts of vulgarity that tend to inform such censorship, and in light of the images discussed this far, it may be useful to unpack the relationship between the erotic and the pornographic in order to understand how these images function. The pornographic is often defined by a level of obscenity, and perhaps that may be the reason for erotic art that defers from heteronormative standards being corralled into this category. Often positioned against one another, Hans Maes provides a distinction between pornography and erotica with the suggestion that “in the existing literature one finds roughly four ways of marking the difference between artistic and pornographic representations. The line is drawn either on the basis of (1) representational content, (2) moral status, (3) artistic qualities, or (4) prescribed response” and with regards to the first point, “Pornographic representations are sexually explicit and rich in anatomical detail. Art, by contrast, relies on suggestion and, instead of focusing on certain body parts,

tries to capture the individuality, personality, and subjectivity of the represented person" (Maes, 2012:17-18). This line drawn between representations may speak to the 'level of reality' that differs between the erotic and the pornographic; while both are generally understood as representations of fantasy, pornography is often associated with the realism of film or photography, while erotica is associated more with literature and the paper arts. The distinction, however, involves not only realism but also autographic intervention- the more skill that is evident in a representation the less likely it may be for it to be deemed pornographic. Art, or erotica, must involve some form of labour, whereas pornography is generally viewed as something that requires little skill and can be mechanically reproduced. Further, Maes suggests that "while art is necessarily complex and multi-layered, pornography is one dimensional That is because it has only one job to do" (2012:20-21). In line with this definition, perhaps the 'complicating' or queering of erotic imagery discussed thus far is characteristic of erotica. This is not to say that the two categories are mutually exclusive, certainly some pornography has great artistic value, just as some art could be read as pornographic. Yet this base-level distinction is possibly why erotic representations that disturb this supposed singular job of the pornographic are received with some contention. When erotic art doesn't act as simply as straightforward pornography confusion may occur. Emotionality or the abject disrupts neatly packaged titillation, yet perhaps this is exactly what positions certain imagery as erotica rather than pornography.

I aim to argue that the images discussed in this thesis act as erotica, due to their multi-layered acts of subversion. These artworks are pushing boundaries and actively contributing to a new complex and intelligent visual lexicon of the sexual representation of women.

Thus, while it may be more useful for this discussion to consider the pornographic and the erotic as overlapping categories, it is arguable that the medium does still make a difference. While the photograph or film may already be viewed as once removed from reality, the drawing is even further displaced. If pornography is then representative of fantasy, erotic drawings may be even deeper entrenched in the

fantastical, and, as will be further explored later in this thesis, the realm of fantasy may have the radical means for safe exploration and growth.

Apart from fantasy, however, another notable facet that is often associated with both erotica and pornography is the concept of the private made public. Sexuality may generally be viewed as something private, yet the representation thereof counteracts this and accordingly arouses some perceptions of obscenity. Thus, the “proliferation of explicitly sexual representations is defying mainstream representations presented as the norm. Pornography breaks through all public/private barriers to present the hidden as the explicit” (Grobler & Stevens, 2010:20). Though pornography may be read as more obscene than erotic art, with the contemporary occurrence of speaking about sexual pleasure and sexuality gaining importance, “the line between obscenity and acceptability is no longer clear, thus one might say that the line between pornography and erotica is blurred” (Grobler & Stevens, 2010:20).

Perhaps then, to recall Chapter 1, the subversive use of Instagram by feminist erotic artists can be viewed as a soft radicality, and it is this radicality that defines it as art. These images are doing something new, and in a manner that requires mental engagement, creative thinking, and possibly a questioning of norms on the part of the reader.

Queer Gaze, Girlgaze, Grrrl Gaze

When it comes to the reader and how exactly they approach and consume a given text, however, a question that may become pertinent is that of intention and gaze. The question is; do images such as the ones discussed thus far differ fundamentally to heteronormative ones in creation as well as reception? Regarding gaze, Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman highlight that:

Both in and out of college the phrase ‘the objectifying male gaze’ has become a cliché used to identify the way men look at women, almost as a metaphor of patriarchal relations. Within such clichés there is no space to conceptualise

queer relations of looking, or to explain changes in some contexts where women's experience is not completely defined by patriarchal discourse (Evans & Gamman, 1995:15).

How then, can one theorize such "queer relations of looking"? Expanding on queerness, Sara Ahmed argues:

If we presume that sexuality is crucial to bodily orientation, to how we inhabit spaces, then the differences between how we are orientated sexually are not only a matter of "which" objects we are orientated toward, but also how we extend through our bodies into the world. Sexuality would not be seen as determined only by object choice, but as involving differences in one's very relation to the world –that is, in how one "faces" the world or is directed toward it. Or rather, we could say that orientations toward sexual objects affect other things that we do, such that different orientations, different ways of directing one's desires, means inhabiting different worlds (Ahmed, 2006:67-68).

Perhaps then it is arguable that a queer gaze exists differently to the predominant hetero-male gaze due to a multifaceted different reality. Ahmed adds to this idea by highlighting a link to perversion. Also a spatial term, perversion refers to:

the wilful determination to counter or go against orthodoxy, but also to what is wayward and thus "turned away from what is right, good, and proper." For some queer theorists, this is what makes "the perverse" a useful starting point for thinking about the "disorientations" of queer, and how it can contest not only heteronormative assumptions, but also social conventions and orthodoxies in general (Ahmed, 2006:78).

The very 'disorientation' of queerness may thus contain a nature of countering, and with this, a queer gaze could have the possibility for radicality. However, one must be careful of essentialism, and though there may be no single, neatly composed queer gaze, there may be radical instances thereof. Regarding lesbian films, for example, Evans and Gamman suggest that "lesbian film-makers and lesbian

audiences bring different cultural competences to bear on the production and consumption of lesbian imagery” and that the “‘cultural competence’ of the lesbian spectator (and lack of such competence in other viewers) may influence the way representations are viewed and understood by some women” (Evans & Gamman, 1995:36). This may link to Ahmed’s spatial orientating of queerness, adding to the prospect for difference in the queer gaze. Following a Foucauldian model of discourse and denouncing an essential queer or lesbian gaze, perhaps “lesbian viewers may bring certain subcultural experiences and knowledge to the reading of specific texts. This may give these women a different perspective on the erotic images in question” (Evans & Gamman, 1995:37). This may be the case for ‘queer viewing’ in general.

An instance in which women present a different perspective can be seen in the social media project *Girlgaze*. The photography and art-based project is defined as one that “lauds itself for offering girls from around the world an entry into a traditionally male-dominated profession and providing a platform where female artists can share works created through the lens of a ‘girlgaze’” (Looft, 2017:892). The founder of the project, Amanda De Cadenet highlights the importance of representation, stating; “If we don’t have women telling their stories through all mediums, how are we supposed to see ourselves honestly reflected in the world?” (De Cadenet in Looft, 2017:893). Accordingly, the social media project aims to fill gaps in representation by showcasing the different perspectives of women and non-binary creators. Further, the images submitted with the label #girlgaze “focus on several themes: sexuality, beauty, body positivity and mental health” and as “these topics, in fact, are at the centre of the fourth wave feminist movement and as such, Girlgaze is doing commendable work in addressing what were often stigmatized and tabooed subject matters in a way that speaks to young viewers directly and frankly” (Looft, 2017:895).



Figure 25: Alia Romagnoli. 2018. From *Hug That* series. Photograph. From *girlgaze* on Instagram, accessed 15 October 2020. < <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB0ZfaljZM2/>>

The connotations of the word ‘girl’ however, should be noted. This term is often used to infantilize or belittle women, and though *Girlgaze* may wish to remove this stigma from the word, much like cuteness too can be used as a tool of reclamation, I would like to pose the *Riot Grrrl* movement as an anecdote to this, and suggest a form of radical ‘*Grrrlgaze*’. This delineation will be made as “*grrrl*” can be positioned as “a particular political orientation, rather than emphasizing “*girl*” as a

gender” (Siegfried, 2019:24). In *Feeling Collective: The Queer Politics of Affect in the Riot Grrrl Movement*, this movement is explained as:

an underground, decentralized movement made up of young punk musicians who worked to channel a radical feminist and queer politic through mediums of cultural production, or the collective creation and circulation of creative and artistic mediums that communicate collective identity, values, norms, and practices. Riot Grrrl cultural production primarily centered around punk music, zines, spoken word, and other forms of performance and visual art. Most active in the early 1990s, the Riot Grrrls emerged from the intersection of queer feminism and punk do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos (Siegfried, 2019:21-22).

This ‘DIY feminism’ could possibly be likened to the erotic artists that use Instagram as their exhibition space. As women are often excluded or overlooked, this form of self-publication can be radical, and in fact, “queer and feminist artists and activists have often used DIY cultural production to express political relationships and solidarity” (Siegfried, 2019:23). Further, given that “attention to collective embodiment and relationality is foregrounded in contemporary sexual violence activism, as well as in the cultivation of spaces for feminist cultural production” The Riot Grrrls’ amalgamation of “embodiment, cultural production, and political relationality” offers a “compelling historical example of how to mobilize around and through feeling and emotionality” (Siegfried, 2019:23).

Conceptualizing a radical grrrlgaze based on such foundations then, it may be useful to refer to what Siegfried broadly identifies as a “grrrl crush” that mobilizes and queers intimacy in “an overlap and oscillation between friendship, admiration, and desire” (Siegfried, 2019:23). Siegfried further expands on the term:

Typically, “girl crush” is used as a term to designate when a grrrl and heterosexual-identified individual feels some kind of attraction, admiration, desire, or respect for another grrrl. The term, while rhetorically playful, carries an inherently homophobic connotation, as it is used as a way for straight women to clearly articulate that their girl crush is not a “real” (read: sexual or romantic) crush on another woman. This rhetorical manoeuvre

creates the space to express an attachment to another woman while still clearly remaining within the box of “acceptable” heterosexual desire. The term “crush,” generally associated with desire, is coded as asexual through the use of the word “girl.” This evokes and reinforces a long-standing devaluing of femininity. The word “crush” is also typically used to refer to a youthful and insubstantial form of attraction, thus creating distance between the designation of a crush and “serious” love. In contrast to mainstream uses of the term, I use “grrrl crush” as a politicised term to designate the particularities of Riot Grrrl solidarity and political relationality as they both identify and articulate their admiration and desire for other women and girls, alongside evoking an awareness of erotic possibility. Rather than coding “crush” as something fleeting that can be cast aside, the grrrls take it seriously as a way of being, thus imagining and enacting new ways of relating by taking grrrl feelings and intimacy seriously (Siegfried, 2019:23).

A grrrlgaze may then entail an inherent queerness, both in instances of sexuality as well as those of world-orientation. It may comprise a radically soft upliftment of women’s sensuality and emotionality. Elements of fantasy or of feminist hope could be entangled with such a gaze, and it may wear the personal yet communal touch of a DIY feminism. Perhaps the aforementioned examples of Instagram censorship speak to this radicality of feminist erotic art and the persistence of this gaze despite its policing. This form of gaze may thus be integral to creating an erotic or bodily art that is radical, and this may lay in the power of representation of women, by women, for women.

Chapter 3: Finding Radicality in the Fantastical

Forms of an authentically womanly representation can be read in the images included thus far, yet to further this point I would like to highlight how this occurs in my own art practice. The various possible tenets of radical softness that have been discussed, as well as examples of 'abnormal' or obscene art as a case of radicality are themes that should be kept in mind in considering the art I create. This chapter thus aims to further visualize what a radical queer gaze may look like, and provide insight into the processes behind this. To do so, I will draw upon theories of radical softness, catharsis and the carnivalesque; accompanied by the methodology of visual analysis. Through this, this chapter will query the psychodynamics and identification processes of collection and how this relates to my sketchbook, the manner in which 'lowbrow' examples act as queer refusals against hegemony, and how the queer movement from private to public becomes radical. With reflection upon my artistic practice, I also aim to answer the question of what a feminist erotica may look like.

Lowbrow

I often find the type of art I make somewhat hard to categorise. Certain conceptions surrounding the lowbrow, however, are ones I associate with for a myriad of reasons. Perhaps other artists discussed thus far may fit the brief too.

To contextualize lowbrow as a cultural category, one can begin with the foundational understanding of highbrow as posed in opposition to or superiority over lowbrow. The term highbrow was "first used in the 1880s to describe intellectual or aesthetic superiority", whereas lowbrow was "first used shortly after 1900 to mean someone or something neither 'highly intellectual' or 'aesthetically refined'" (Levine, 1990: 221). The lowbrow was tied to associations of the uncultured, and "increasingly, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, as

public life became everywhere more fragmented, the concept of culture took on hierarchical connotations along the lines of Matthew Arnold's definition of culture- "the best that has been thought and known in the world . . . the study and pursuit of perfection" (Levine, 1990: 223). Highbrow or 'cultured' art was thus associated with such ideals of perfection. Art and cultural works accordingly accrued descriptors such as "'High,' 'low,' 'rude,' 'lesser,' 'higher,' 'lower,' 'beautiful,' 'modern,' 'legitimate,' 'vulgar,' 'popular,' 'true,' 'pure,' 'highbrow,' 'lowbrow'", not at random but rather "clustered around a congeries of values, a set of categories that defined and distinguished culture vertically, that created hierarchies which were to remain meaningful for much of this century" (Levine, 1990: 224). Though such harsh binarization and categorization may not be as prevalent in contemporary times, the influence thereof should not be negated.

The lowbrow thus bares associations of the outsider, the perverse, the vulgar and that which does not strive for perfection. Such associations inform my positioning of my artwork within this category (however, as I am positioned within the institution my work should be considered as avocational as opposed to outsider). Further, regarding stylistic inspiration, *Weirdo Deluxe: The Wild World of Pop Surrealism & Lowbrow Art*, attributes cartoon art as the single most powerful influence on lowbrow art. This is a cartoonish nature that is bolstered by a central focus on "a carnivalesque sense of satire and humor", and as such, "[l]owbrow artists revel in the ribald, love the lurid and turn the everyday world upside down", they embrace the carnivalesque and its "liberating comic release from the sometimes rigid and confining classical ideals of beauty and refinement" (Jordan, 2005:11). This is arguably a valuable attribute of lowbrow art, and perhaps a reflection on the idea of the carnivalesque can highlight the radicality of this often-overlooked form.

The carnivalesque, as expanded upon in Mikhail Bakhtin's 1984 *Rabelais and His World*, can be understood as a subversive mode originating in the "carnival festivities and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them" that "had an important place in the life of medieval man" (Bakhtin, 1984:5). This importance can possibly be linked to the seditious power of the carnival at the time, as it "celebrated

temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin, 1984:10). Accordingly, the space of the carnival was one that opened an important dialogue through its ritualistic upheaval of hegemony. The carnivalesque could thus be read as that which has the intention of query through fantasy and laughter. In fact, these two elements are arguably essential to the spirit of the carnivalesque, and tend to coalesce as the carnival's ritual based on laughter- and consecrated by tradition allowed for the construction of a fantastical realm or "second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated moreorless, in which they lived during a given time of the year" (Bakhtin, 1984:5-6). A temporary reprieve from reality was thus established through carnival, a unique kind of fantasy that enveloped creator and spectator alike. The carnivalesque could thus possibly be a radical tool to be employed in art, especially feminist art, as this often implies suspensions of hierarchy. The radically soft power of humour and the element of fantasy that may allow for reformulations of the 'real' world. This is an element that I incorporate into my own work and may also apply to works by other artists discussed thus far.

The carnivalesque is possibly also reflected in the influence of romanticism on lowbrow artists. As "the literary and artistic movement arose in the nineteenth century as a reaction against the ever-increasing emphasis on the ideals of rationality and order in industrialized societies. With its emphasis on extremes of emotion and imagination, romanticism led some artists to explore the pathetic and the horrific, the garish and the grotesque, the excessive and the decadent" (Jordan, 2005:12). Indeed, the grotesque is also an element encapsulated in the carnivalesque:

Actually, the images of the material bodily principle in the work of Rabelais (and of the other writers of the Renaissance) are the heritage, only somewhat modified by the Renaissance, of the culture of folk humor. They are the heritage of that peculiar type of imagery and, more broadly speaking, of that peculiar aesthetic concept which is characteristic of this folk culture and

which differs sharply from the aesthetic concept of the following ages. We shall call it conditionally the concept of grotesque realism (Bakhtin, 1984:18).

This grotesque realism is pinned to the process of degradation, that is “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin, 1984:19-20). My artwork, through ample focus on the bodily, and particularly the tabooed elements thereof, embraces such ideas of the grotesque and abject. Through the use of oozing, dripping, ambiguous fluids, these works speak to the manner in which “the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world”, following the tradition of transgressing the conception of the closed, complete body. Much like in grotesque realism, emphasis is placed on “those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose” (Bakhtin, 1984:26).

The Fantastical and Surreal

Though the aforementioned aspects of the so-called lowbrow may seem aptly fitting to the artworks discussed in this study, I am also weary of embracing binarism as this is something my art attempts to problematize. The placement into a binary or hierarchy with the categorization of lowbrow is something that, “many of the artists resist that label as inappropriate, limiting, or derogatory”, and a term that is often preferred is Pop Surrealism (Jordan, 2005:11).

This nomenclature outlining an intersection of Surreal and Pop Culture aspects defines the cartoonish and strange style, yet it is also particularly interesting when considering the erotic feminist work at discussion in this study. For, “[w]hile Surrealism has often been accused of misogyny due to its obsession with woman as

erotic muse and object, it is important to realize that women Surrealists were equally fascinated with all the aspects of Surrealist discourse” (Mahon, 2007:138). This may link to the idea proposed of an alternative gaze expressed through women artists, a radical softness enacted through the re-appropriation and reclamation of the woman as aesthetic and erotic focus. Further, women Surrealists also “often turned to animal symbolism in their art as a means of drawing on matriarchal, indigenous, or shamanic myth, and thus of empowering their self-image as woman and artist” (Mahon, 2007:141). This animal symbolism is quite an interesting facet, as the animal paired with erotic intent can also be seen in historical examples such as the Hokusai’s iconic *The Dream of a Fisherman’s Wife* (Figure 26), as well as in contemporary feminist examples such as the art of Klio Wong (Figures 27 and 28).



Figure 26: Hokusai. 1814. *The Dream of a Fisherman’s Wife*. Woodblock print. From Shunga Gallery, accessed 20 October 2020. < <https://shungagallery.com/hokusais-the-dream-of-the-fishermans-wife/>>

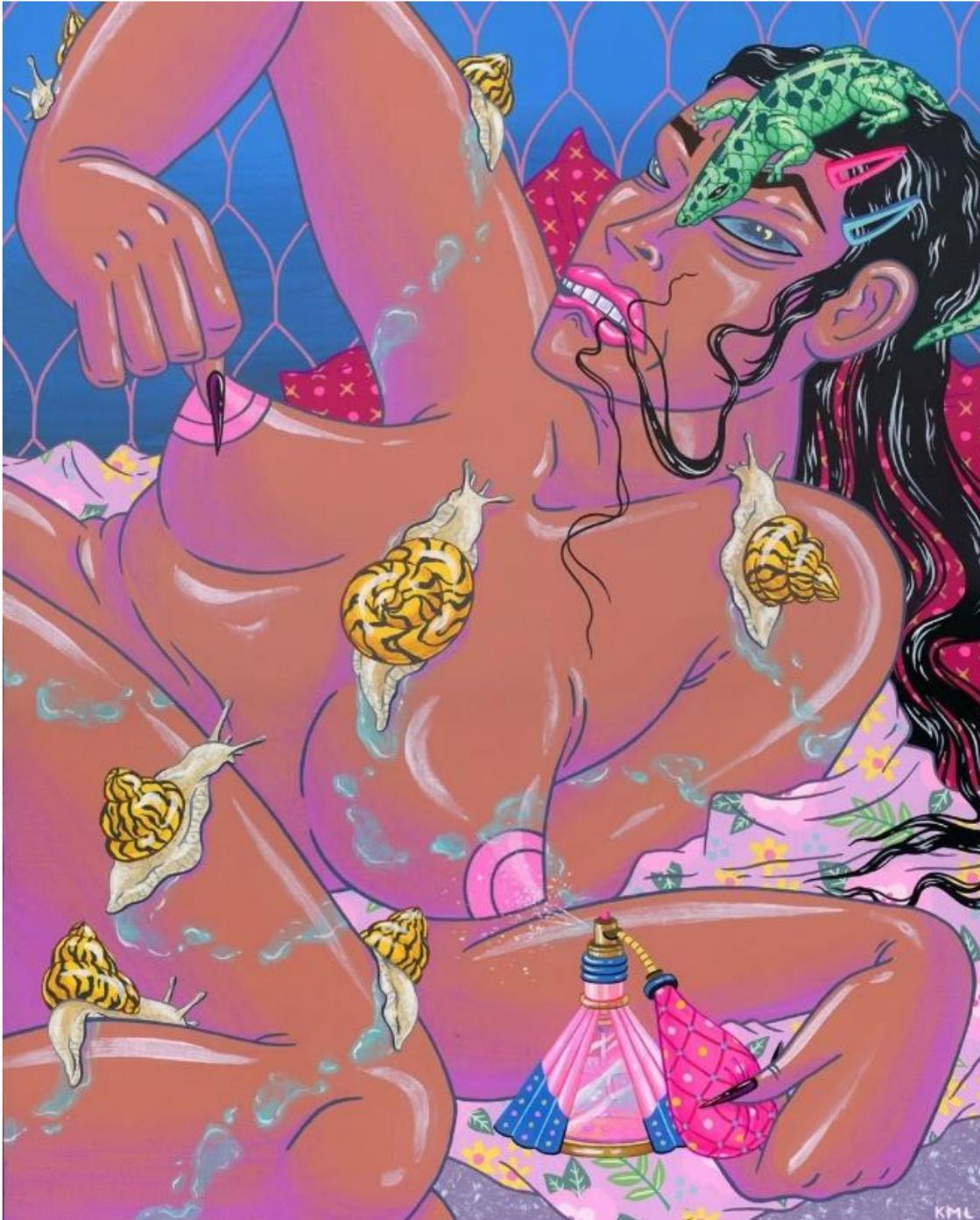


Figure 27: Kristen-Liu Wong. 2020. *Snail Trails*. Acrylic on board. From [kristenliuart](http://kristenliuart.com), accessed 20 October 2020. < <https://www.kristenliuart.com/paintings?lightbox=dataItem-kekq7xvh2>>

Further, in these images one can possibly read the animal not as a literal recipient of sexual desire but rather as a representation of unbridled, feminine sexuality. Perhaps they represent fantasy in this sense; the fantasy of a world in which women's pleasure is not regarded with scorn nor judgement.



Figure 28: Kristen-Liu Wong. 2020. *Like a Dagger to the Heart*. Acrylic on board. From [kristenliuart](http://kristenliuart.com), accessed 20 October 2020. < <https://www.kristenliuart.com/paintings?lightbox=dataItem-kekq7xvg>>

The animal also substitutes the masculine in these images of erotic fantasy, subverting what constitutes sex-imagery. In a similar vein, the erotic animal and other elements of the fantastical and surreal also play a large part in the art that I create.

These artworks, may thus be interesting insight into the malleability of brow distinctions or cultural boundaries and how fine art borrows from 'lower' forms.

Peter Swirski highlights that the "brow-based distinctions are still in place, it's just that today we are freer to navigate between them" (Swirski, 2017:3). What perhaps arises then is a "Nobrow culture" that "situates itself outside the high-, middle-, and lowbrow divisions, even as it crisscrosses them all. As an aesthetic and creative strategy, it borrows freely from on high and from down below and shamelessly combines them into a seamless whole" (Swirski, 2017:3).

Queer Refusals

Whether lowbrow or nobrow, one could thus possibly consider the art I create as a performance of refusals and becomings, as it refuses the confines of 'highbrow' perfectionism and focuses instead on a certain rawness. This rawness can be understood as a form of naivety or simplicity that focuses on expression and catharsis over form, yet also speaks to conceptions of the raw and unfiltered body, sexuality and emotions. Rawness also takes form in my uninhibited stream of conscious creation process. Rawness and the process of becoming, as well as the manner in which this may be used as a feminist tool may be further illuminated by reflection on Rosi Braidotti's *Becoming Woman: or Sexual Difference Revisited*, in which a common posthuman concept is highlighted; the importance of becoming and marginality. Braidotti asserts:

A feminist who wishes to repossess and re-invest images and representations of Woman is really dealing with fragments and figments of the phallogocentric imaginary. Irigaray argues that this imaginary needs to be repossessed by women precisely because it is loaded with phallogocentric assumptions that reduce Woman to unrepresentability. Repetitions engender difference, for if there is no symmetry between the sexes, it follows that the feminine as experienced and expressed by women is as yet unrepresented,

having been colonized by the male imaginary. Women must therefore speak the feminine, they must think it, write it and represent it in their own terms. This is the 'virtual feminine' which I set in opposition to Woman as Other-than or different-from, that is to say, specularly connected to the same as its devalued Other (Braidotti, 2003:45-46).

Indeed, the canon of representation of women is arguably quite skewed, and thus in the images of women by women there is possibly an abrasion against this male imaginary and a push towards autonomous feminine becoming through new iconography and representations. Braidotti further expresses that such "[a]lternative figurations of the subject, including different feminine and masculine subject-positions, are figural modes of expression, which displace the vision of consciousness away from phallogocentric premises" (Braidotti, 2003:48). The movement away from phallogocentrism can be viewed as radical, and read in accordance with Deleuze's central conception of "a general becoming-minority, or becoming Nomad, or becoming-molecular" that involves "a crossing or a trajectory" as "nothing happens at the centre"; instead, the "space of becoming is one of dynamic marginality" (Braidotti, 2003:48-49). The process of becoming can thus possibly be fathomed as a queer movement and failing of centrality and hegemony, striving for change from a position of 'other' or 'outsider'.

The concept of failure, however, may provide an insightful parallel here, particularly in the sense of *The Queer Art of Failure* proposed by Jack Halberstam (2011). Here failure is posed as a by-product of Capitalism, as a "market economy must have winners and losers, gamblers and risk takers, con men and dupes", and accordingly, this system "equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth even as profit for some means certain loss for others" (Halberstam, 2011:88). In this manner, choosing to work mostly in my sketchbook and create work primarily for my own catharsis is an exercise in failure of sorts, for it undermines the idea of art made for the sake of profit. However, alongside this understanding, one can also "recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique" (Halberstam,

2011:88). Accordingly, lowbrow art forms may question the conceptions and prescriptions that accompany commercial or mainstream art, possibly allowing for a certain radical freedom through imagination and fantasy unrestricted by ideas of perfection. My sketchbook can be read as an illustration of deliberate failure due to the erotic and odd subject matter, as these images are not necessarily 'mainstream' and would not generally be deemed appropriate to hang up in one's house, for example.

While there is not a homogenous feminist or queer experience, the queerness of these images fails the heteronormative cannon through visions of subjective feminist fantasy. Such images can be linked to the manner in which "Queer studies offer[s] us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems" (Halberstam, 2011:89). Indeed, queer representations (even idiosyncratic ones) can have the power to deny a "heteronormative common sense" that "leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct and hope" and instead embrace other "subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense" that "lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity and critique" (Halberstam, 2011:89).

This embracing of failure could also be read in my endeavour into a practice-led arts degree without any formal training, as in this I attempt to position failure as a force in its own right. Through the combination of this and the manner in which my artwork acts as lowbrow, I thus attempt to dismantle the binary of success and failure, detangling failure from conceptions of negativity and lacking and instead positing it as a form of paradigm expansion.

Another notable expansion on failure, however, is offered through quotation of Quentin Crisp, who "transforms the apparent pathos of the gender queer into an asset" with the statement; "If at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style" (1968:196). With this, Crisp makes "the crucial link between failure and style" (Halberstam, 2011:96). This idea of failure as a stylistic element is one that could possibly be associated with the artwork that I create, both in its representation of

queerness as norm-bending as well as its rejection of mastery, and indeed the “concept of practicing failure perhaps prompts us to discover our inner dweeb, to be underachievers, to fall short, to get distracted, to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose our way, to forget, to avoid mastery” (Halberstam, 2011:120 -121). However, while mastery in the vein of technical perfection is circumvented, mastery of self may be actualised through means of catharsis and limitless fun. For me, this form of failure feels very punk in its DIY nature as well as its stance against the heteropatriarchal establishment.

Sketchbook as Cathartic Collection

Accordingly, my sketchbook for me is a representation of both becoming and refusal, for by placing a would-be precursory step in the artistic process as the final artwork there is a denial of humanist ideas of perfection. Perhaps here it may be beneficial to elucidate the special qualities that the sketchbook may contain as art and epistemological object. Foundationally, the term sketchbook is a catchall that “covers other common designations – such as journal or notebook – that indicate a class of objects sharing similar properties and serving similar purposes. That is, they are book format, portable, personal and analogue artefacts used to record experiences, to document reflections and to develop creative thinking” (Power, 2018:199- 200). Yet, although often viewed as a mere mid-step in the creative process, there is room to argue that the sketchbook itself is a powerful and meaningful medium.

Nigel Power proposes a re-imagination of the sketchbook as an encounter; the meaning of which here “goes beyond everyday usages such as ‘unexpected meeting’ or ‘moment of conflict’” and rather “emphasizing the relational – rather than the formal – potential of creative works” (Power, 2018: 201). Power’s studies into the sketchbook as a medium of encounter revealed that:

participants particularly valued the sketchbook's role as an organizing centre for thinking and doing – a space for various material explorations and a compendium of visuals produced over a certain period of time. Secondly, participants regarded the sketchbook as an intensely personal medium, a place in which doubt, uncertainty or vulnerability could be confronted and worked through safely. Thirdly, echoing Penketh's (2010) characterization of the sketchbook as a 'low stakes medium' – participants described their sketchbook as a space for play, experimentation, speculation and risk taking. Fourthly, the provisional and fragmentary nature of many records was also seen as important in that they were somehow pregnant with possibilities for thinking and making (Power, 2018:211).

These results reflect my own feelings towards my sketchbooks. They are intensely personal safe spaces for exploration without the pressures of making 'good' art. Here I am free to fail, again and again. Further, the sketchbook also acts a relational bridging of my internal and external worlds.

Another aspect of the sketchbook format I would like to highlight, however, is that of collection. In *The Queer Art of Collecting*, the drive behind collection is attributed to pleasure, yet this pleasure is not to be understood as "a passive and merely optical response", but rather as "as an active, productive and shaping stimulation of all the senses" (Camille, 2001:2). Further, "[o]nce we accept that the history of sexuality is less about biological impulses than constructed cultural myths, ideas and images, it becomes highly relevant to the history of collecting, since the urge to possess often involves an object choice in psychological as well as material terms", yet unfortunately, concepts of collection are often formed around the "theory of objects as substitutions for traumatic damage to the ego in early infancy, this presents the (usually male) pervert's private stash of art as his shield, substitute and fetish", and in this reduction of "art to a symptom or a cure fails to integrate the social with the psychological impulse to collect, let alone account for the type of object collected" (Jordan, 2005:2-3). Further, "the cliché of the homosexual art collector is unfortunately also bound up with this dubious model of art as sublimation" (Jordan,

2005:2-3). Perhaps my collection of fantasies that exist within the realm of my sketchbook could be read as a form of sublimation, as the images I have created and collected were initially 'safe' ways for me to explore my sexuality, yet this idea of art as sublimation possibly suggests a problematic idea that fantasy should remain contained and sanitised. Of course, not all fantasies should be realised, yet a simplistic understanding of sublimation cannot fully explain collecting. One cannot ignore the importance of the type of object, image, or experience collected.

For example, Rebecca Zorach highlights "a common kind of collectable: women", a term which she applies "only slightly ironically", yet with the full intention to "suggest slippage (though not an equivalency) between the circulation of images of women and that of women themselves" (Zorach, 2001:35). This conception of the women as a collectable speaks to core feminist concerns surrounding the objectification and commodification of women. An example of the rejection of such objectification can be seen in the 1989 campaign by the feminist art activism group Guerilla Girls which "targeted museums, dealers, curators, critics and artists who they felt were actively responsible for, or complicit in, the exclusion of women and non-white artists from mainstream exhibitions and publications" (Manchester, 2005). The poster created for the campaign (Figure 29) asks "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" above an image of a reclining naked woman wearing a gorilla mask, based on the famous 1814 painting by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres entitled *La Grande Odalisque* (1814). The poster also highlights the fact that "less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female".



Figure 29: Guerrilla Girls.1989. *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* Screen print on paper. From Tate Museum, accessed 20 October 2020. < <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793>>

The question posed by this example is interesting, and it is arguable that the issue lies not in solely the number of female nudes present in art institutions, but rather the power dynamics that surround them. The problem may be that while there are numerous artworks of women, they represent male mastery.

This study has argued that radicality can occur when women take representation into their own hands, yet what happens when women collect images of nude women? Does a similar radicality occur, or is the heteropatriarchal power dynamic simply displaced? I would argue that queer collectors may similarly search for empowerment in representation and identification.

For when one does not often come across representations that resonate, they may tend to cling to ones they actually identify with.

For me, my sketchbooks act as curated art objects that encase fantasy worlds, this personal form of curation in which I hoard artworks not to be sold allowing me to create my own encyclopedias of empowerment that encompass body and sex positivity as well as a certain freedom in femininity.

An interesting example hereof is the art collection of the androgynous, bisexual, 'rebel queen'; Swedish Queen Christina Vasa. Queen Christina intercepted what was

always a “male exchange and reception of Correggio’s paintings” when Prague was seized by Swedish troops and “for the time being, along with the complete collection of Rudolph II, Correggio’s *Leda* and *Danae*, as well as a copy of his *Io* fell into the hands of a woman” (Biermann, 2001:53).

When it came to curating her personal collection, the Queen was particularly fond of mythological and allegorical paintings and the according presence of the female nude. Notably, these artworks were “prominently displayed, in spite of their largely erotic content”, and “as far as one knows, she also never had them hidden by curtains, as later became the practice when the paintings passed into the collection of Livio Odescalchi” (Biermann, 2001:53). In juxtaposition to later owner’s male censorship of the female body, this may be read as a proud performance of feminine sexuality. Yet, it is also possible that “the representation of a *woman* as an object of desire [could] have been transformed into a *work of art* as an object of desire, cleansed of its sexual connotation”, though “the reactions of several contemporaries demonstrate, however, that the paintings did maintain their sensual level of meaning, a meaning that was apparently seen to clash with the expectations for the picture gallery of a queen” (Biermann, 2001:53). The taboo regarding the sexually empowered and uncensored woman arguably still lingers, yet would have been quite concrete in the 17th century, and especially uncharacteristic of a woman associated with class. The question that may thus arise is “How did Christina see herself in relation to the content of the pictures? Did the viewing perspective change along with the owner?” (Biermann, 2001:53). What is interesting about Correggio’s *Jupiter and Io* is that there the shadowy male figure of Jupiter present, yet the focus of the sensual interaction is the woman. Perhaps this “invites a perceiving woman to identify herself with Io in a self-confident way”, as in his composition “Correggio concedes Io an autonomous space” in which she is “not merely a passive object but rather an acting subject (Biermann, 2001:53-54). Alongside self-confidence however, the question thus is whether the female nudes of Correggio could indeed possibly stand for the self-confident display of Christina’s own sexuality? Did she take

on a 'male' perspective? Did she view- and desire- 'like a man' or even 'as man'? Or did she give a female connotation to the gender-neutral personifications of a cloud, swan, and a shower of gold, and view them with the desire of a woman? If that were indeed the case, what would keep us from speaking of a lesbian perspective and homoerotic desire? (Biermann, 2001:53-54).



Figure 30: Correggio. 1530-31. *Leda and the Swan*. Oil on canvas. From Wikipedia, accessed 20 October 2020. <
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leda_and_the_Swan_\(Correggio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leda_and_the_Swan_(Correggio))



Figure 32: Correggio. 1531. *Danaë*. Oil on canvas. From Wikipedia, accessed 20 October 2020. <
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dana%C3%AB_\(Correggio\)>](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dana%C3%AB_(Correggio)>)



Figure 31: Correggio. 1530. *Jupiter and Io*. Oil on canvas. From Wikipedia, accessed 20 October 2020. <
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jupiter_and_Io>

It may be strange to link this 17th century example to the previously proposed idea of a *grrrlgaze*, yet I would like to argue that this form of gaze links to the abovementioned aspects of self-confident identification, and homoerotic desire. Though we cannot necessarily know Queen Christina's reason, this is a thought-provoking case study of a woman collecting images of nude women. This resonates with the manner in which I curate images in my sketchbooks as a source of comfort. However, while Queen Christina prominently displayed the artworks in her collection, they were still contained within her private space. This may link to how my sketchbooks are largely private collections, yet images therefrom are shared on the public platform of Instagram. In this, there is a blurring between private and public, for cyberspace allows a layer of anonymity. In this sharing I hope that others may also find comfort in consuming the images that I find such comfort in creating and collecting.

Another element that links to this comfort is that of the sketchbook as catharsis. Here it may be useful to reflect on Aristotle's theory of catharsis and aesthetic pleasure. Though it is clear Aristotle intends the theory of catharsis to be taken metaphorically, tension may be found between the term's connotations of either medical purgation or religious purification. Thus, as the latter may infer moral judgement and neither aptly define catharsis, Eva Schafer expands that "catharsis in the aesthetic sense means neither purgation nor purification of the emotions in any straightforward sense" but rather "indicates the peculiar effect which only works of poetic art have" (1968:134-135). Though this conception of catharsis is largely formulated around tragedy, it is possible that this outline need not be so narrow. While "the traditional interpretation of catharsis attributes to tragedy a therapeutic effectiveness" based upon "a release from unwanted and painful emotions or passions" that is "achieved through stimulation of the same or similar emotions, bringing about an emotional climax unbearable for long, and therefore discharging itself when a certain pitch is reached" resulting in a pleasurable calmness, perhaps other art forms can also achieve a similar release of passions and emotions apart from that of pity and fear (Schafer, 1968: 135).

Relating back to the carnivalesque, perhaps the humorous and fantastical too could be cathartic, as “it is easy to think of the enjoyment occasioned by comedy as related to an emotional transformation in a fashion similar to that in which tragic enjoyment comes about” (Schafer, 1968:138). In this vein of thought, perhaps feminist erotic art with its tendency for humour and fantasy can be read as having cathartic value due to the emotions, passions and aesthetic pleasures it may induce and in turn provide an opportunity to release, as well as the dismantlement of prudery and sexual tension. Though this theorising deals more with the reception of art, similar catharsis is achieved in the creation and collection thereof. For me, working loosely, freely and ritualistically in my sketchbook allows me this. The sketchbook allows me to work through internalities and emotions I struggle to express beyond the artistic sphere. This can be understood in line with Caroline Pedler’s proposition of the possibility for sketchbook as therapist, and emphasis on sketchbooks as “vital places for evolution for so many artists and illustrators” that act as “companions, escape hatches or filters for focus” or “bibles of the unseen” that “can reflect the true nature of an artist and how they see the world” (Pedler, 2020:153). For me, this is the great power of the sketchbook as a therapeutic medium.

Publicising the Private and the Move into the Gallery

Following the trajectory of the sketchbook as a “bible of the unseen”, there is an important delineation between the public and private that occurs. Recalling the overlaps of erotica and pornography, such forms characteristically make the private public. I have mentioned Instagram as a place where I have shared my otherwise private artworks, and as the platform has been discussed in this thesis, it will also function as an extension of my examination exhibition. “Social media operates in a space between public and private domains, a paradoxical [nobrow] space where 'intimate' confessions or conversations are forged without expectation of permanence. Importantly, this semi-anonymity allows engagement in spaces which may otherwise be restricted” (Singh, 2017).

However, this research project also comprises a gallery exhibition. This showcasing of practical works highlights what practice offers compared to other modes of enquiry, for while intellectualising emotions may make them feel somewhat removed, practice offers a visceral and embodied manner of working through internal processes. Further, as the cyberspace platform allows a certain anonymity and distance from the work I create (and, like others, I feel freer to be a 'freak' online), the move into the gallery is somewhat uncomfortable for me. The question is why exhibit in a conventional art gallery and what difference do the different contexts – virtual and physical – make in terms of the meaning of my art? Why move from an ethereal digital space to a 'real', situated one? Is lowbrow art always at odds with or out of place in the white-cube of the gallery? Or can the radical softness of my artworks be understood as an extension of the interest of the postmodern gallery in the curious, the strange and the peculiar? As mentioned earlier, an art exhibition can be a cathartic event; for in revealing the private and linking myself to the work I engender a certain 'coming out'. Indeed, my mother referred to the exhibition as a "coming-out party". At first, I felt discomfort regarding this, but I believe it is important to sit with the uneasiness of this private-to-public transition in support of the argument that the heteropatriarchal body of imagery needs to be disrupted by women and queer artists.

The final exhibition thus begins with a bedroom space, decorated whimsically and almost childishly. An absurdly long, pink, patchwork, plush centipede creeps off the bed. Here a space of cuteness and innocence is merged with one of sensuality, setting the theme for the artworks that fill the gallery. This bedroom space also introduces the aspect of publicising the private, yet it simultaneously represents a space of comfort, safety and familiarity, perhaps to pillow the blow of the transition. In the room-space viewers are able to flip through my sketchbooks which are scattered around, allowing another peek into a private realm. The sketchbooks act as art objects as well as visual diary and logging, and by physically flipping through these sketchbooks, the viewer is placed in a position of closeness and intimacy with the erotic, absurd and silly images that fill their pages. This intimacy invites them into the pastel fever dream. The gallery walls surrounding the bedroom are cluttered

with cheaply framed prints of sketchbook pages, this acts as a visualization of 'failure' and the lowbrow being injected into the institutional. These, however, also act as a visual pathway of progression into the other forms of art that I began experimenting with when preparing for a gallery exhibition or attempting to conflate my practice with a more institutional setting. Indeed, I chose to exhibit at GUS, a white-wall gallery (that also used to be a church) as I am interested in the possible radicality that can be found in this juxtaposition. This choice of space could be read as radical due to the fraught past of the Christian church and feminine sexuality, for that which was once demonised is now celebrated. A challenging of which forms of art can fit within the academic institution also occurs in a blurring of the borders of decency, and there is a queer crossing into a liminal space- one neither safe nor rogue. For, regarding the art institution:

there can be little doubt that the creation of the institutions and criteria of high culture was a primary means of social, intellectual, and aesthetic separation and selection. Here one learned not only how to appreciate art but also how to behave while doing so. Here one became part of a long-standing cultural tradition that linked one not only to the eras of Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Shakespeare, and Beethoven, but-through the art museums-to the classical epochs of Rome, Greece, and beyond. This linkage was real enough; people actually did experience aspects of those eras by learning to appreciate their expressive culture. What was invented in the late nineteenth century were the rituals accompanying that appreciation; what was invented was the illusion that the aesthetic products of high culture were originally created to be appreciated in precisely the manner late nineteenth-century Americans were taught to observe: with reverent, informed, disciplined seriousness (Levine, 1990: 229)

While this notion of art viewing may be quite dated, and has since been challenged by ideas of the embodied or participatory spectator, it is arguable that certain aspects of formality still hold fast in the gallery environment. This constructed set of expectations is something I aim to queer through this exhibition. Indeed, the appeal

of lowbrow as a label is largely the fact that it does not take itself too seriously, and this has been my attitude towards my own art. I have never really considered myself a 'good artist', yet that is almost unimportant, for the driving force is not expertise, skill nor perfectionism but rather catharsis, community and the radicality of celebrating the imperfect and odd.



Figure 33: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Optimistic Nihilism*. Watercolour and ink on paper. From my sketchbook.

Thus, as my sketchbooks form the core of my artistic practice, it may be useful to use sketchbook examples as illustrations to expand upon the prominent themes in my body of work and how they link to the theoretical elements discussed thus far.

A significant theme in my art is that of radically soft boundaries and the abject. This phenomenon of abjection can be linked back to a Rabelaisian grotesqueness, and is outlined by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* as being caused not by a “lack of cleanliness or health” but rather that “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982:4). Following this delineation, perhaps the abject can be read as inherently radical and disruptive by nature. If so, perhaps the abject may then have possibility for feminist power. Further, the abject complicates binaries of inside/outside or self/other, indeed:

The body's inside, in that case, shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the ~ integrity of one's "own and clean self" but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents. Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its "own and clean self." (Kristeva, 1982:53).

With the ever-presence of representations of bodily fluids and the distortion of bodies in my art, the boundaries thereof also become radically soft, allowing for seepage and overflowing. This also mirrors the cathartic coming together of my internal and external worlds.

Inescapable Agony (Figure 34) is an example of how I play with such bodily boundaries and the abject. In this image, blood drips and worms writhe. The body is uncontained yet restrained through Shibari,² and in this the erotic is presented as a unifying force. Further, the double-headed figure presented here is an example of a recurring motif in my work. This duality links to ideas of abjection and binary disruption as well as the multiplicity of becomings, how one grows not linearly but

² The Japanese art of rope bondage.

in fragments and off-shoots. The two heads speak to feelings of contradiction that link to the notion of radical softness as well as the dichotomy of private and public or the turmoil of inner emotionality compared to outer appearances.

A radically soft inclusion of emotionality, however, is also included to further complicate the sensual and perhaps prod for a multi-layered reading. The sad faces burrowed in the exposed guts expressing feelings of internal agony that 'eat you up'. Creating images such as these allows me great catharsis, as the visualization of otherwise indescribable feelings aids in the processing thereof.

The abject may also tie into another prominent theme; weirdness and oddity. Embracing the concept of the 'weird woman' may indeed be a feminist endeavour, as society often others women for being their authentic selves, painting them strange or monstrous and condemning them accordingly. In my art, I thus attempt to use weirdness as an expression of acceptance through exaggeration of the strange facets of human existence.



Figure 34: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Inescapable Agony*. Acrylic on paper. From my sketchbook.

Vag-pit (Figure 35) can be read as an example of such strangeness through displacement and exaggeration. In this image, a woman lies in bed, serene, arms outstretched to reveal armpits that have been replaced with hairy, glistening vaginas. Here she proudly shows off her 'oddity' without shame, and rather this oddity is met with a sense of romance (seen in scattered rose petals) as well as a sense of playfulness behind profanity.



Figure 35: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Vag-pit*. Acrylic and alcohol markers on paper. From my sketchbook.

Figures 36-38 further showcase elements of the abject and grotesque, sporting blood, cum, spit and tears, as well as the merging of bodily spaces. What may be worth considering however, is if the element of cuteness disrupts the reading of an image as abject. Perhaps it is not only the boundaries of the body that are softened but also the boundaries of abjection itself. On one hand, the cute aesthetic may make the abject more digestible, yet on the other hand the images may become more abject in their combination of these contrastive elements.



Figure 36: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. Untitled. 2020. Acrylic and alcohol markers on paper. From my sketchbook.

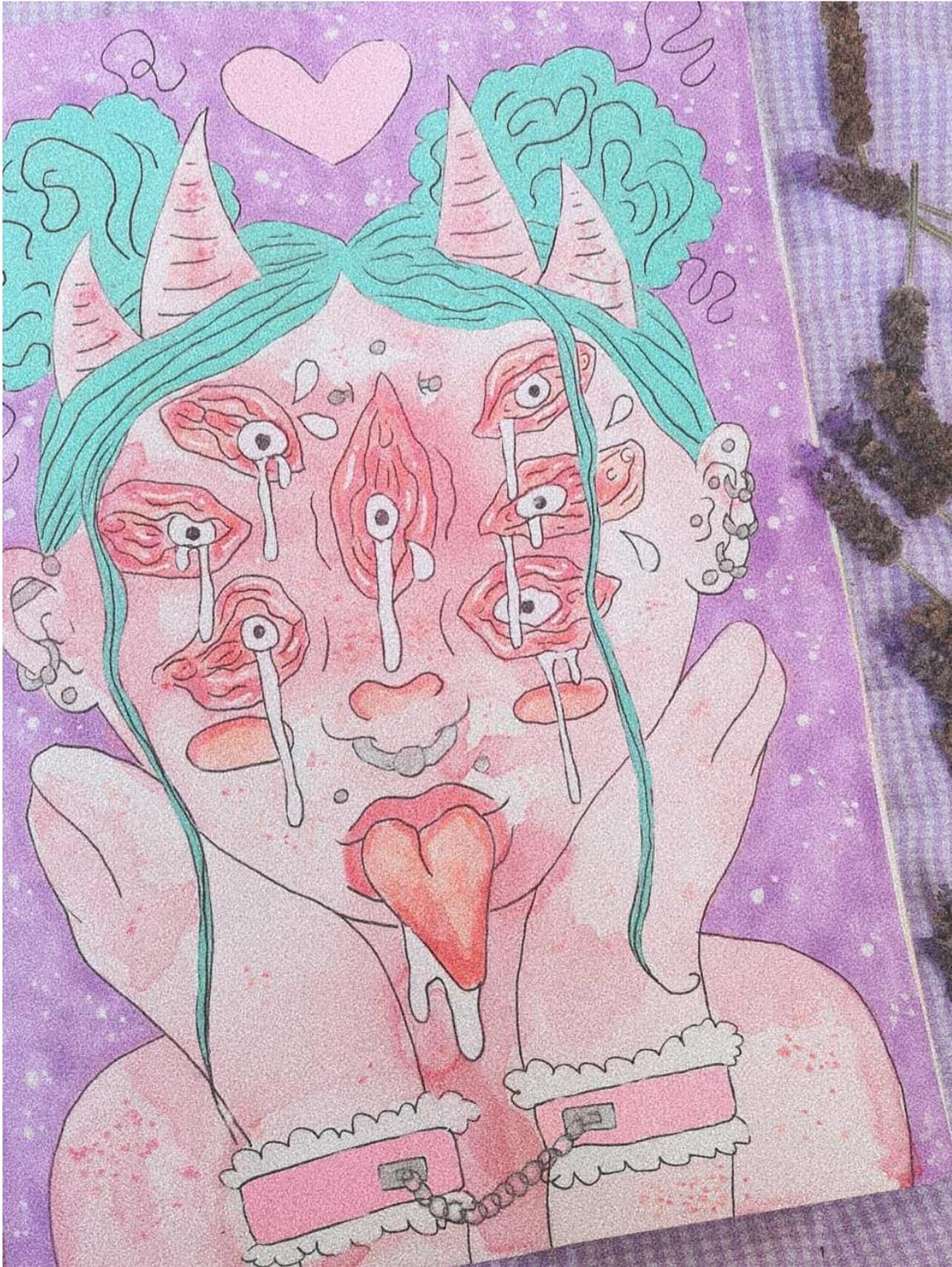


Figure 37: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Gift of the Vag-eye*. Watercolour and acrylic on paper. From my sketchbook.



Figure 38: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Noodle necking*. Acrylic and alcohol markers on paper. From my sketchbook.

What perhaps arises in this intersection is thus the “creepy cute”, an element that (much like radical softness) exists in somewhat of an oxymoron. Regarding the aesthetic of cuteness, Sianne Ngai highlights a stylistic simplification, “as if cuteness were a sort of primitivism in its own right” and that “Realist verisimilitude and

precision are excluded in the making of cute objects, which have simple contours and little or no ornamentation or detail" (Ngai, 2005:815). The stylistic choices I make could possibly be linked to this, as I mostly make use of flat colour and simple linework that culminates in somewhat of a cartoonish look. The vast majority of the characters I draw also have pink, rosy cheeks. These are representations of blushing's connotations of cuteness and innocence, but also the erotic flush of the face. The pastel, pink-heavy colour palette I use also speaks to cuteness, yet I attempt to use this hyper femininity performatively in attempt to subvert gendered expectations.

Perhaps another factor that comes into play in this creepy cute combination, however, is that of humour. The bodily focus on gore and excretions could be linked to the carnivalesque's folk humour, and accordingly, the use of humour could be linked to the feminist reclamation of the funny too.

Falling Apart, Falling Together (Figure 39) may possibly exemplify this blurring of the boundaries between abject and adorable. The latter can be read in the use of pastel colours and excess of pink, as well as elements such as strawberry underwear and the heart-shaped holes in the character's faces. These holes act as abject portals that allow a glimpse into the underneath- the bloody and uncontained, as well as representation of the removal of the face one puts on for society in order to veil one's true self. What is embraced is the rawness of the reality of self.



Figure 39: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Falling Apart, Falling Together*. Acrylic and alcohol markers on paper. From my sketchbook.

Slimy Seduction (Figure 40) sets a scene of intimacy between two snail-woman hybrids, slime and spit juxtaposing the overall cute nature of the image. This contrast attempts to play with the conception of queerness as an element of oddity, perhaps acting both to embrace and contest this. Further, snails can be understood as creatures that carry around their home, their safety; and in the departure from this space (or the coming out of one's shell) perhaps a radical queer movement also occurs.



Figure 40: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Slimy Seduction*. Acrylic and alcohol markers on paper. From my sketchbook.

Although the aforementioned figures highlight the intersection of abjection and cuteness, they also link to the prominent themes of grrrlcrush and fantasy in the art I

create. My sketchbooks drip fantasy, filled with images seemingly plucked from some other strange realm, and perhaps this is because queerness for me was for a long time just that – fantasy. My sketchbook was the only way I felt comfortable expressing my sexuality, and it offered me a safe manner to explore this other possible world.



Figure 41: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Daydream Baby*. Acrylic on paper. From my sketchbook.

Daydream Baby (Figure 41) can be read as an exemplification of such ideas of fantasy. In this image the character's headspace comprises a scene of a naked woman sprawled across a bed, and as her mind space is on show, the process of the internal world becoming external is highlighted. Further, as she daydreams her nose bleeds. This links to the phenomenon of nosebleed in Japanese manga and anime, in which arousal is represented by a gushing nose. This is echoed in *Nymph's Tea Party* (Figure 42)



Figure 42: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Nymph's Tea Party*. Acrylic and alcohol markers on paper. From my sketchbook.

Figures 43 and 44 arguably enact the same disruption in their radically soft depiction of eroticism. Perhaps to link these drawings to the grrrlcrush proposed in Chapter 2, feminist opportunity arises in the collision of identification and desire. The loving gaze encapsulated in these images may also speak to the emotionality of radical

softness, and what may accordingly be envisioned is how erotic or intimate imagery can perform outside of a heteropatriarchal gaze.



Figure 43: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. Heart-headed. Acrylic and watercolour on paper. From my sketchbook.



Figure 44: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Hot Mess*. Acrylic and watercolour on paper. From my sketchbook.

Another manner in which the heteropatriarchal gaze is contested is through a radical softness in my depictions of bodies. I am inspired by the beauty of belly rolls and body hair, and the bodily is a large focus of my work. The overwhelming erotic theme of many of my drawings also speaks to a stance of sex and body positivity. As the freedom of expression of both body and sexuality for women is all too often

infringed upon, my art attempts to reflect a fantasy of absolute autonomy and a celebration of the 'taboo'.

The Chemicals in the Water are Turning the Shrooms Gay (Figure 45) makes use of Shibari to highlight bodily bulges and possibly speak to women's bodies resisting confinement. Further, the fantastical fungi-morphing of these bodies may act as visual reference to the breaking down of dying material in order to bring new life. This can be linked to how the deconstruction of women's representation allows for radical new possibilities.



Figure 45: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2021. *The Chemicals in the Water are Turning the Shrooms Gay*. Acrylic and alcohol markers on paper. From my sketchbook.

Gift-wrapped (Figure 46) also attempts to embrace body-positivity by showcasing that not all women have vaginas. This image speaks to how art can be used to normalize bodies in their varying, beautiful forms.

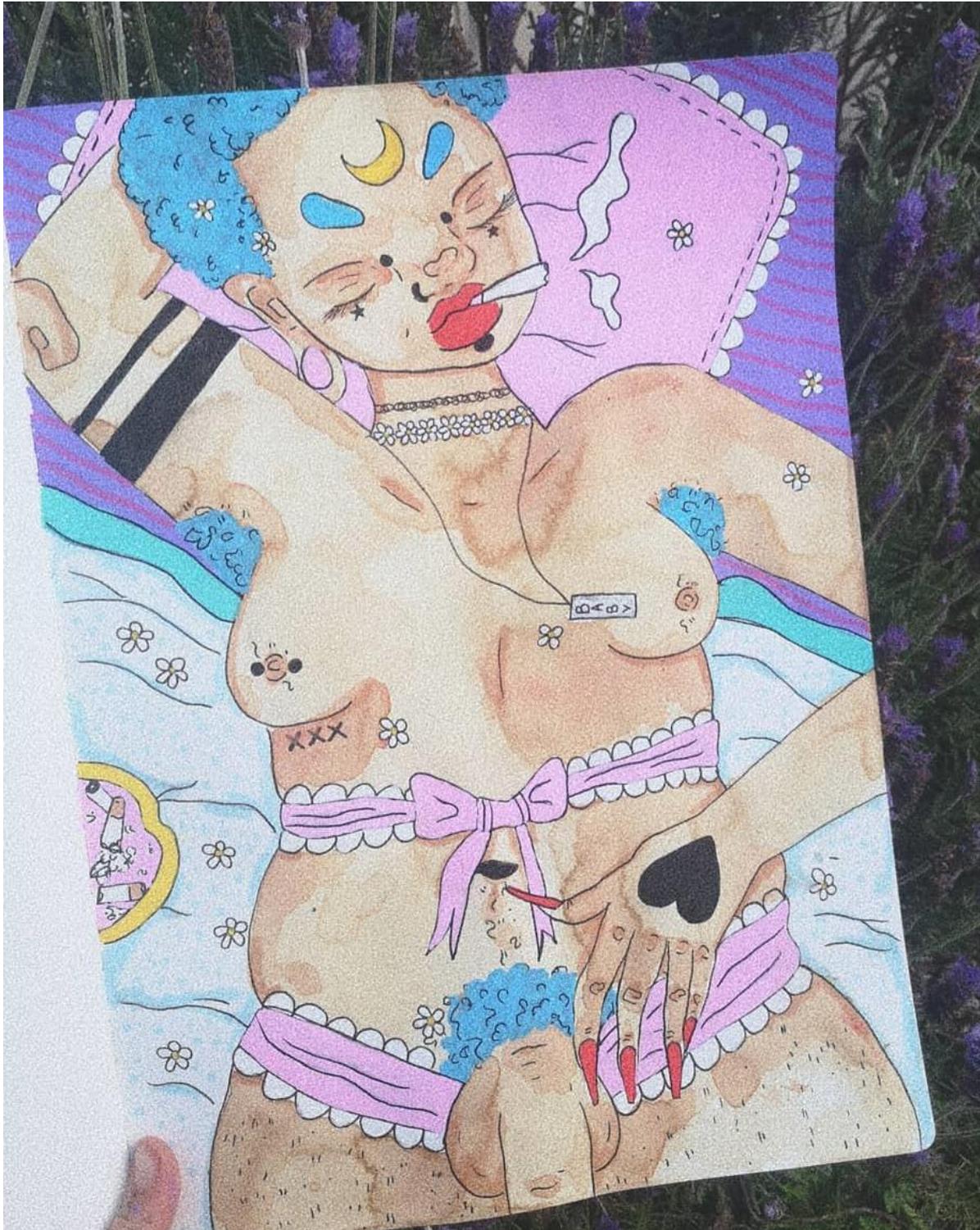


Figure 46: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Gift-wrapped*. Acrylic and watercolour on paper. From my sketchbook.

While the sketchbook pieces can be read as visualizations of my inner world as well as the catharsis achieved through compulsive creation, they also lead to works on canvas in a visual pathway of progression. In this, the sketchbook has arguably been effective as therapist, as it allowed the confidence for the queer movement from a more private medium to one that is not so easily concealed.

Further, this confidence may be mirrored in the flouting of the highbrow or of fine art painting norms and the expectations of the canvas itself. The idea of 'serious', art is challenged through these experimentations that embrace the radicality of non-conformist art. While these examples may be simplistic in form and flat in colour, they are layered in meaning and still encompass the prominent themes discussed thus far, such as radical softness, autonomy and fantasy.

Radically Soft and Full of Magic (Figure 47) showcases the feminine body as a platform of resistance; elements of body-modifications, stomach rolls and unruly pubic hair speaking to autonomy and choice separate from dominant beauty ideals. Here cuteness is tied with rebellion, freedom and empowerment. The smiley face present on the character's underwear speaking to the aforementioned semiotics of the smiley face, complicating a sensual area with an element of playfulness. The presence of plant-life may anchor this as a form of growth, while also bringing connotations of nurturing to the feminine and accordingly disrupting the Madonna/whore complex imposed upon women.



Figure 47: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Radically Soft and Full of Magic*. Acrylic on canvas.

Pussyquest (Figure 48) also links to concepts of body-positivity as a form of radical softness, while correspondingly representing the woman subject on an autonomous quest of sexuality. The theme of the erotic animal also arises here as an aid on this journey, highlighting the possible propelling-power of the unbridled feminine. She is in active charge of her own desires, yet this is shown through whimsy, fantasy and an element of humour. Further, while a scene of cuteness is set, the woman is presented as warrior in order to express the power of radical softness.



Figure 48: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Pussyquest*. Acrylic on canvas.

Such themes are also echoed in *Tentacular Trippin'* (Figure 49), an image that links back to Hokusai's *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* in its representation of the erotic woman-octopus pairing. This image also expresses the body uncontained through

the presence of drool and meticulously drawn leg-hairs. Much like bodily boundaries are blurred, so are the distinctions between private and public. The woman in the painting is nude par a pair of white socks that may nod to elements of comfort, privacy and purity, yet this is contrasted with a certain exhibitionism of legs spread without shame and the presence of the octopus' 14-eye gaze. In this, women's sexuality is posed as something not to be abashed by but rather celebrated.



Figure 49: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Tentacular Trippin'*. Acrylic on canvas.

Post-apocalyptic Babe, Ready to Smash Your Face (Figure 50) may be considered a less 'soft' rendition, as she is covered in blood that is not her own. Here, however, what may be highlighted is the non-mutually exclusive categories of cuteness, sexuality and power. The character is presented as a warrior of sorts, yet she is bulging out of a corset. In this she represents dualism and non-conformity.

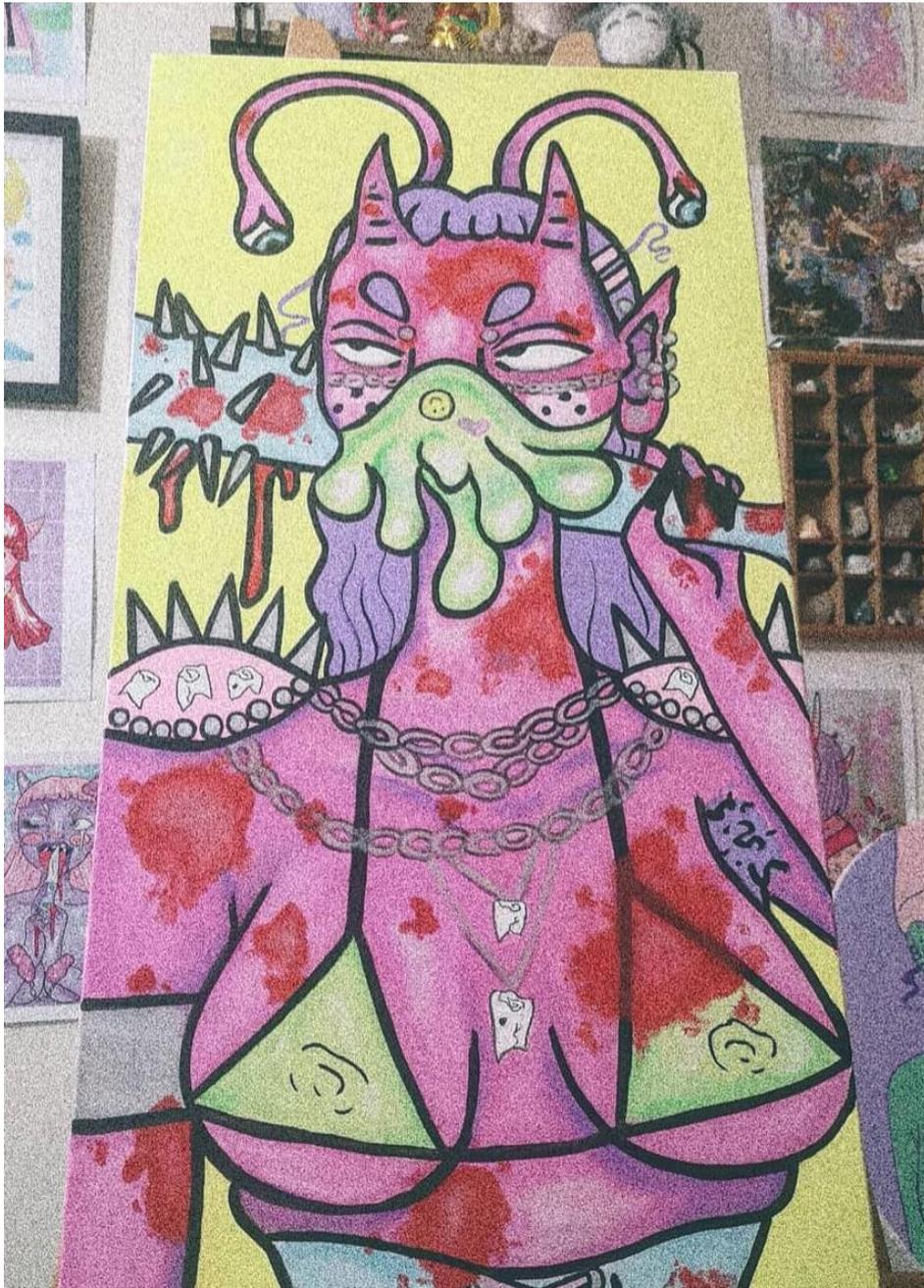


Figure 49: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Post-apocalyptic Babe, Ready to Smash Your Face*. Gelato on canvas.

In addition to the paintings, I created a 7-meter soft sculpture of a centipede as well as a needle-punched rug that both aim to encapsulate ideas of radical softness. These experimentations make use of feminine forms of craft in a manner that emphasizes the silly and the playful. Much like the large-scale paintings, these too represent a step away from my comfort zone into a space of open expression.



Figure 51: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *The Soft Centipede*. Felt and fabric.

By creating *The Soft Centipede* (Figure 51) -a creature that is generally considered 'gross' or frightening- in soft pink fabrics, a disruption of binaries occurs. This may link back to the idea of the grotesque as proposed by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*. It is in this space that my art rests comfortably – in that of the creepy but cute, the feminine yet strange. The large-scale is informed by ideas of exaggeration, absurdity and humour, perhaps making an indirect play on “size matters”. However, what is also highlighted in this sculpture, as well as in the recurring theme of centipedes in my art, is the same erotic animality mentioned regarding women Surrealists- one that represents an unbridled womanly sexuality. It is a representation and denunciation of the heteropatriarchal pairing of women's sexuality and oddity.

Another textile form of art I began experimenting with is needle-punch rug making. My first rug creation, *Rug Muncher* (Figure 52) aims to make use of queer humour through word-play, celebrating and reclaiming a term often used negatively against lesbians. However, the form of the rug itself can be linked to ideas of domesticity and their stereotypical ties to the womanly. A rug is something that is generally used to keep the household clean, and is an object that is literally walked all over. Parallels can be read to certain misogynistic treatments of women. By creating a rug that actively attempts to disrupt stereotypes and stigmas, a certain promotion of women's autonomy occurs. Further, through the process of hand-punching this piece, much time and effort was placed into the realization of the 'silly', which contrasts my sketchbook pieces that are fast and loose in nature. This speaks to ideas of a feminist DIY³, as I am wholly self-taught as an artist, but perhaps this may also echo the idea that even art that does not take itself too seriously still has worth and interpretative possibilities.

³ This links back to the discussion of Riot Girl



Figure 52: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020-2021. *Rug Muncher*. Wool and fabric.

While soft sculpture may speak slightly more literally to a concept of radical softness, I also created 'hard' clay sculptures for the exhibition. These are all created from simple air-dry clay, and as this medium is not generally associated with the fine arts, this also links back to a rather punk, feminist do-it-yourself attitude as well as a certain challenging of institutional expectations. This form, however also speaks

to elements of rawness, naivety and playfulness. Further, in working with this medium, fingering the wet clay into shape, an erotic process also occurs; one that provides a tangible element to fantasy.

The 'punk' nature of DIY emerges in *Strawbaby* (Figure 53) through a contrast between the cute strawberry-encased head and the spiked black choker. Again, the constructed dichotomy of cuteness or softness and power is contested. Eroticism, however, is also present in this piece. The plump, glossy lips mirroring the sensuality of the fruit, further complicating conceptions surrounding cuteness in a radically soft manner.



Figure 53: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *Strawbaby*. Air-dry clay.

A myriad of breasts and eyes comprise *My Eyes are up Here* (Figure 54), creating a hyper-fixation on the bodily. Here, a sensual woman is presented, yet she is not constructed under norms of conventional attractiveness. Whereas breasts are usually sexualised, the multiplication thereof places them in a liminal space that is neither wholly erotic nor disturbing but rather in some form of middle-ground. However, the excessiveness of this piece may also speak to the commodification of women through an excess of inauthentic nude representations. Further, the presence of so many eyes provide a counterpoint to the breasts, perhaps to say; “my eyes are up here, and here, and here...”, as well as to highlight a possibility for multi-layered reading.



Figure 54: Bronwyn-Leigh Knox. 2020. *My Eyes are up Here*. Air-dry clay.

While all of these experimentations encompass the general themes of my art, perhaps what is notable is the eroticism of exploration itself. The process of working with new mediums in a feminist DIY manner could be linked to the way in which I use artistic expression as a tool of sexual exploration. Taking steps into the unknown highlights my inexperience as well as curiosity and may also support the cathartic power of the sketchbook that has allowed me to move from a more 'safe' or private medium to more exhibitionist ones.

Thus, the culmination of this study in a gallery exhibition aims to create a fun, fantastical and cathartic space that explores radical softness and forms of feminine sexuality distinct from heteronormative ideals and depictions. The space intends to play on feelings of self-confident identification, desire, and expression. By moving from the private realm of the sketchbook, or the virtual one of Instagram, this exhibition aims to highlight the subversiveness of publicising that which may normally lay hidden.

Concluding Thoughts

Perhaps the main point to be taken from this thesis is the boundless form of radical softness as resistance as that which bashes down binaries and boundaries to make room for the in-between.

This manifests through varying forms of reclamation and the positioning of that usually weaponised against the feminine as a feminist weapon itself. The embracing of emotionality contests the rational/emotional dichotomy, highlighting that radical feeling encompasses not a lack of rationality but rather the presence of alternative forms of power. Such alternative, feminist power can also be found in a radical celebration of women's sexuality that reclaims the nude and contests either misogynistic non-attribution of sexual autonomy or the converse inauthentic objectification and hyper sexualization of women. In this, perhaps feminist erotic art allows for a denial of humanist ideals, creating non-binary, authentic representations of women's bodies and sensuality. The radical use of humor acts similarly, allowing for feminist messages to be disseminated softly and thus have the possibility to affect a larger audience. The use of cuteness may mirror this, enacting radical softness through a performance of femininity through hyperbole.

Further, with Instagram censorship used as an example, the importance of defiance and non-conformity in art creation is highlighted. This is also highlighted through the use of lowbrow forms that emphasise a space of becoming, a space separate from perfection in which value lies rather in imagination and representation. Therefore, it is not only conceptions of 'good' or 'bad' women nor 'good' or 'bad' sex that are contested, but also those that surround what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' art. This is achieved through the positioning of my sketchbooks as idiosyncratic creative artefacts that allow for playfulness, irony and parody as political statements. Further, my sketchbook is a place in which theory and practice integrate in a carnivalesque, radical juxtaposition of the 'official' and 'unofficial', the misunderstood nature of the medium metaphorically linking to the misunderstood nature of women's sexuality. As a whole then, this study acts to facilitate radical

thinking and the broadening of the way in which we see, feel and relate through an envisioning of an authentic, feminist erotica.

Indeed, authentic and subversive forms of representation are important. They softly act to dismantle grand narratives that other, instead allowing for a calming sense that you are not alone in your societally assigned 'strangeness'. The fantastical world created by the artworks discussed in this thesis may allow for comfort and catharsis in identification as well as exploration. The movement from private to public, or from internal to external, may allow for internalised judgements to be recognised and possibly then disrupted externally. In this, possibility for catharsis lies not only in creation but also in consumption. Thus, artworks that act to disrupt a heteropatriarchal cannon of representation are radical, even in their cuteness, or strangeness, or softness; highlighting a possibility for "forms of resistance outside of a performative and extrovertist lens of how we look at what constitutes 'political action'" (Oakley, 2020:26).

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