Abject Adaptations

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ABJECT ADAPTATIONS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Annamarie Williams
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Accepted by:
Professor Kathleen Thum, Committee Chair
Professor Todd McDonald
Dr. Andrea Feeser
ABSTRACT

_Abject Adaptations_ is a body of work that contemplates harmful, external forces surrounding women’s bodies and how these bodies adapt in order to possess agency. The work examines these external forces, adaptations and agencies using a variety of conflicting visual cues that border on the grotesque, as well as the beauty and playfulness of highly rendered illustration. Processes include the application of mixed media techniques that layer watercolor, watercolor pencil, colored pencil, graphite pencil and acrylic paint. These techniques provide a colorful and playful dichotomy to the abject forms being rendered. The cartoonish way the forms are rendered make them appear anthropomorphic. Despite their grotesque appearance, their liveliness could invite the viewer to interact with said form. Through this body of work, I contemplate the struggles of an abject body, as well as point out the collective ingenuities and adaptations that display the strength and endurance of the abject body.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of artwork and the writing to my husband Jonathan Buchanan, without whose unending love and constant support, neither would be possible.

I also dedicate this work to the matriarchy that raised me: my mother Trena Williams, my grandmother Betty Jean Harding and my grandmother Judi Williams. Thank you for being my greatest teachers.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my father Eric Williams for his kindness and constant encouragement. I also thank my step-father Robert Wuepper and my friend Caley Maday whose courage and patient love allowed me to realize that not all family is by blood. In addition, I thank the entire faculty in the Department of Art for affording me the amazing opportunity to receive a higher education and to become the first person in my family to earn a Masters degree. I especially want to acknowledge my committee members, my advisor and committee chair Kathleen Thum, Todd McDonald and Andrea Feeser whose pedagogical instruction made me have a deeper appreciation for the visual arts and its history. Your mentorship and guidance is sincerely appreciated.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

I truly believe that if every person who has ever been molested, raped, or abused, stopped where they stood and screamed as loud as they could, this earth would surely shatter. During my adolescence, I had experienced molestation and rape and I carried this burden with me for a long time. Through therapy and hard work, I realized that what happened to me was not my fault and that there were many other women out there like me that had similar experiences. My therapeutic actions synced in tandem with the ‘me too’ Movement and it was not long until the wake of the ‘me too’ Movement turned into a tsunami that shook the world. People were being called out for their violent acts and this strengthened the hearts and minds of victim/survivors, giving us the courage to come forward and stand together against the hatred of our attackers and the disbelief, dishonesty and lack of acknowledgement from a patriarchal society. The evolution of the ‘me too’ Movement was and is an important part of history. In some ways the ‘me too’ Movement opened up people’s eyes to see toxic masculinity and point out that such behavior harms both women and men alike. The evolution of human behavior has come so far and yet we still have such a long way to go. As a queer person in a female body, I continue to spot daily injustices that plague women and continue to have unjust experiences myself. I hope that what I have mentioned here, will not be considered a confessional because the topic is abject in nature, rather my hope is that you consider my experience as just one of the experiences that influences my work.
These experiences have led me to contemplate the abject body and how the abject body has adapted to harsh, marginalizing environments in a xenophobic society. The philosophy of the abject has been coined and developed by philosopher Julia Kristeva and refers to bodies that are viewed as other, or rather, bodies that are viewed as disgusting by societal norms. Utilizing a queer, ecofeminist lens, the work presented investigates the philosophy of the abject to understand three key concepts: the parallels of the domination of the abject body and the domination of nature, the abject body in relation to the space that it exists in, and adaptations of the abject body that give the body agency. A handful of these adaptations are depicted in the work using the act of swarming, color, and humor. Much of the work within my thesis show possesses these three traits. Thoughts, ideas and forms are regenerated and recycled into new forms. Because of this, I will choose one to two works to discuss each of the adaptations that I have described and at times I will be referencing the body of work as a whole.
CHAPTER TWO

THE ABJECT BODY, THE MONSTRUOUS FEMININE BODY

Before I discuss swarming, color and humor, I first want to discuss the abject body so one can understand how I am defining that term and how I am thinking about the abject body. Kristeva describes the philosophy of the abject as a place that is both without and beyond border,

These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit …cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything…. How can I be without border? (Kristeva 1982)

Kristeva defines the abject as, “…that which disturbs identity, system, [and] order. What does not respect border, positions, [and] rules,” and relates this concept back to the feminine body by noting “behavioral prohibitions that are supposed to offer protection from [the] defilement of women and particularly the mother (Kristeva 1982).” Kristeva notes that women fall into the category of the abject body by societal standards, backing up her position using examples such as the fear of menstrual blood and mother’s milk.

The series of drawings Beyond Border, is my first attempt at thinking about the abject body, but I am uncertain of the space that lies beyond the metaphorical border of the abject that Kristeva speaks of. I know that this border separates what society deems as the clean and proper body from those things that society deems as disturbing. The abject
often exposes something that one is not supposed to expose; however, the abject space itself seems unidentifiable. Thus, the resulting images in Beyond Border possess characteristics of a void. Space is suggested by shadows of the floating characters, thus making this void feel as though it has dimension and is inhabited. The figures appear as rendered sexualized objects, resembling breasts, butts, organs and tumors. Their gooey pinkness gives them a simultaneous yummy, sexual and grotesque quality. Their smooth and vein-like appearance could make them seem a bit less flawed, but upon further inspection one might begin to notice the boils, pustules and pimples on the surface of the organisms. The braided hair coming from the forms is often tied with a ribbon; this indicates an innocence. This innocence juxtaposed with the sexual bodily imagery could make the form seem off-putting, sinister and inappropriate. This gives them a grotesque, abject quality; they are monstrous.

Feminist philosopher, Barbara Creed, also references Kristeva in her book, *The Monstrous Feminine*. Using philosophies of the abject, Creed challenges patriarchal views by arguing that the framework of the monster (in all its definitions) is the female reproductive body (Creed 1993). Through critical analysis of films such as *Alien*, *The Exorcist*, *Psycho* and *The Birds*, Creed analyzes the seven common archetypes of the monstrous—and menstruous—feminine found within film. The archetypes are as follows: the monstrous womb, the archaic mother, the witch, the vampire, the monstrous mother, the possessed body, and the castrator (Creed 1993). Clearly there is a link between the monster and the feminine, and this monstrosity crosses the border of the abject by disturbing identity, system and order. The concept of the monstrous feminine is used
throughout the *Beyond Border* series and in many of the other characters that you see within this body of work. This work uses visual cues of dermal and fatty tissue, bodily intrusion and extrusion, and visual cues of performative femininity in order to depict feminine monstrosity.

In *Beyond Border*, the characters rendered resemble aspects of internal bodily tissues. Their glistening flesh is reminiscent of freshly harvested organs often depicted in horror movies and the worst of hospital cases. It is unknown if these organisms are animated imperfections of the skin themselves: either boils, pimples, pustules, cysts or tumors. There is a significant amount of pink within the pictures. In fact, all of the hues appear to be analogous colors of pink making the piece feel almost monochromatic. Pink can reference the body while simultaneously suggesting femininity (Nemitz 2006). The bright contrast of the forms makes them eye catching yet reinforces the idea of internal flesh. Are these organisms all bodily protrusions awaiting to attach themselves to the viewer?

Despite their grotesque appearance, the forms from *Beyond Border* might lend themselves to a bit of remorse. It can appear as though these gooey creatures are being cinched at the waist, stretched, pulled and even experience hair loss. These can be daily acts that the body experiences, thus a sort of interaction or reaction might occur between art and viewer.

Despite possessing abject, monstrous, feminine qualities, there is a dichotomy in the way the forms are rendered. The characters are rendered in a cartoony, illustrative way that, not only contradicts the subject matter, but makes them feel as though they could fall and bounce back up like a spring. Their bubblegum pink vibrancy, and the sweetness
that is often tied to illustration is juxtaposed with the form’s dark subject matter. These forms are anything but sweet. These drawings could suggest a critique of the conventional desired traits of a woman, by taking what society deems as beautiful—such as pink, long hair and large breasts—and turning those traits into a grotesque organism. The placement of the figures could offer up a narrative; they are placed in a horizontal line. This placement and sequence could suggest beginning, middle and end. This narrative might allow the organisms to appear as if they are moving—or morphing—over a period of time.

My research of *The Greenheads Series* by Laylah Ali resonates with *Beyond Border* by utilizing ominously unsettling characters in an empty space that dilutes them of context. Her series of paintings depict strange beings with green heads. These beings ignore the social constructs with which we read identity, yet her images are derived from the corruption of the brown body as the body politic. Their stories are played out against light blue and white backgrounds thus robbing them of context (Rothschild 2012). Ali writes, “At some point in *Greenheads* I wanted to put them in their own environment, but I wanted the environment to be ludicrously rudimentary…just a stage, really, a rectangle that removed them from our world (Rothschild 2012).” Her figures are funny but also unsettling. Made in a time of political aggression, violent attacks and scandal, Ali’s images viewed over time reinforce the cyclical loop and repetition of the intersection of violence and power. Some of the repeating images used in *Greenheads* are dismembered limbs sprouting from fleshy mounds with hints of regenerating bodies. Some of the mounds operate both as a pile of innards as well as an external womb, there lies
uncertainty if the mounds are collecting or birthing fourth body parts. On the subject, Ali states,

After a few years around 2003, I started to make *Greenheads* who were no longer intact—so the heads often did not appear anymore, just remnants of the figure. They are almost apocalyptic landscapes, but lacking the usual fire and smoke. They might be the bleakest of the series, though they also can be the most colorful. I think of them as wombs or tidy mass graves or some combination of both. Depending on the painting, depending on the exact limb, some of them are lifeless and planted there by the victors, and others are regenerating like salamander tails (Rothschild 2012).

Similar to Ali, my interest in examining how gender is visually negotiated is tethered to my own experience; however, as Ali says, “…I am not unique in this way. Historically, most people….in a society where white people are in the majority have had to consider the visual interface of their physical presence (Rothschild 2012).”
I would like to propose that the act of swarming, or rather bodies in multitude, can give people and creatures an agency because the use of a swarm helps organisms create space within a space. The artwork can also be seen as creating space within a space, using the swarm as a vehicle to do so. Here I would like to insert an example of creating a space within a space using a swarm with the example of a coven. The coven is typically viewed in terms of the philosophy of the monstrous feminine that Creed describes and the archetype of the feminine as a witch. Coven’s are groups of witches—usually women but not always—that come together for celebration of sabbats and ritual. One such ritual is the casting of a circle. Priestess Phyllis Curott explains, “The circle is a symbol of the feminine, the womb, and infinity. The moment you enter a circle with a group of people it’s no longer a symbol, at that moment it’s an act of invocation. The moment a group of people enter a circle they have invoked the divine feminine…together (Curott 2019).” She goes on to explain that when one casts a circle, they are intentionally creating a space to harbor the energy that they wish to bring to that space; groups of women are creating a space within a space and sending a spell up and out into the world thus invoking a sort of energetic and intentional swarm, while simultaneously being a part of a physical swarm. One could interpret the artwork as creating a space within a space using the swarm as a vehicle to do so. By creating a space within a space, the work and the characters in it are given an agency, and the topics expressed within that space are also given an agency.
Many of the works offer up some sort of visual swarm; this can be seen in *Abject Adaptations, Spread, Next, and Lift*.

Marian Stroud draws connections between the abject and the swarm in the book *Swarm*. Stroud notes that the swarm and can be “both seductive and frightening, ordered and formless, divinely purposeful and willfully arcane (Miller 2005).” One cannot help but note the similar characteristics found in the swarm and the concept of the abject or the monstrous feminine. Upon referencing a painting by Jean Dubuffet, Stroud also notes that as the swarm approaches a person there is a fear and a risk of being submerged within the swarm; essentially a fear of becoming other. Surely there is some link between the abject and the swarm; this idea of being fearful of the other, but also fearful of becoming the other.

The act of spreading out and claiming space for the body is not a new topic. Migration is something that has been active in the media for quite some time. When I refer to migrating abject bodies, and when I discuss the migrating body, I am still using Kristeva’s definition of an abject body as bodies that are othered by society. I think that it’s worth noting that migrating bodies are othered by society. So with that, when I am discussing migrating bodies and referring to them in the context of abject bodies, my intent is not to make this seem like a metanarrative and I do want to acknowledge that there are differences between the migrating-abject-body, the female-abject-body and even the migrating-female-abject-body. Abject bodies are often forced into migration whether it be from the violence and the corruption of others, or the effects of climate change. Throughout the work, one can take note of the grounded and ungrounded characters.
There is a certain privilege to being grounded: being able to have a home, being able to have a place that is yours, and being able to trace your roots. Abject bodies have been treated as monsters and many ancestral roots and origin stories have been stolen from these bodies throughout history. Some of the characters look as if they are about to take off in flight and uproot themselves, as can be seen in *Next, Lift*, and *Abject Adaptations*. Imagery of characters possessing root systems is used in these three works. Just as marginalized bodies do and have done for centuries, these character bodies are forced to uproot themselves in search of a place to call home.

Migration is caused by so many factors; climate change is one driving force of forced migration within the 21st century. William Lacy Swing, director general of the United Nations International Organization for Migration states, “We live in an era of one of the most forced migration since the second world war. We are going to need to support those ravaged by climate change so they can migrate with dignity (Swing 2018).”

Karen Warren’s book, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why it Matters* explains how climate change affects women specifically. She writes,

Ecological feminists claim that there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature…First, among white people, people of color, poor people, children, the elderly, colonized peoples, so-called Third World people, and other human groups harmed by environmental destructions, it is often women who suffer disproportionately higher risks and harms than men (Warren 2000).

Throughout the artwork, there is a subtle undertone of being a part of the earth. The characters often resemble bodily organs or plant matter. Some are spreading their seed (as
seen in *Spread*) and others possess an entanglement that could represent a sort of ponytail-like root system (as shown in *Lift*). The work utilizes an ecofeminist lens that acknowledges the otheredness of the environment. The biomorphic quality of the characters can function as a parallel between the dominion of women’s bodies and the dominion of the environment.

Within activist movements, there exists a stigmergy; when one person adjusts their strategy, others respond and build upon that change. This stigmergy exists between movements as well, both historically and in contemporary culture. Such contemporary movements include the LGBTQIA+ movement, the Black Lives Matter movement and the MeToo movement. Movements inspire other movements and often build upon one another. Movements such as the Vagina Monologues, Take Back the Night, the MeToo movement, ecofeminist movements, Slut Walk and the Women’s March on Washington are only a handful of examples of women-led movements. These demonstrations have caused an uproar because not only are the bodies partaking in these movements considered other, but the things that they wish to bring to attention are considered abject and other: the nipple, the vagina, sexual harassment, owning the term slut, etc. The swarm claims space and often creates space within a space. Whether or not the initial space will be oppressive, depends on external forces.

The piece *Abject Adaptations* engages in a visual act of a swarm. There are two kinds of swarms operating in the picture: there are fleshy, bodily entities that take up space within the piece because of their multitude, but there is also the multitude of the pink gases that come from organisms. The size of the piece, coupled with the act of
swarming, envelopes the viewer thus taking part in the effect of embodiment. My research into the purple martin migration, allowed me to investigate my hypothesis that the act of swarming could be considered abject. There is often discomfort or even fear when we see a swarm. To use Kristeva’s words, I do not think that the swarm respects border, and could be seen as other. Some viewers may feel embodied within the space of the character, but they may not feel welcomed in it. They might not feel like they are a part of the swarm, but rather an intruder within the space that the swarm creates. It is almost as if this cast of characters take up space in such a way that pushes the viewer out and says you are not welcomed here, while at the same time enveloping the viewer. Abject bodies do not always feel welcomed in the space that they are placed in either. Regardless, the swarm of the figures themselves and the swarm of their gases allows them to take up space and thus possess an agency within that space. Simultaneously, they make their own agency with their presence and their gasses and assert their dominance enough to create a space within a space.

Some of the swarms presented may not feel as powerful. This is the case with Beneath the Earth, the Adapting Diptych, Lift and Next. For this example, I will be discussing the Adapting Diptych. This work has a bit of a dark mood to it. The swarm is evident, however, there is a tone of violence. In the first panel, the viewer can see these spindly creatures trying to make their way across a landscape. Smaller creatures protrude from the ground and echo a wormy sort of animal that disrupts the movement of the spindly, hairy hobo sacks. Some of the hobo sacks have fallen on their journey as they trip over the worms. The fate of those that are left on the ground is decided by the worms.
Panel two tells a different story, the hobo sacks have adapted with stronger, thicker, hairier legs that impale the worms on impact, similar to a hotdog skewer. The worms flee from the panel on the right side. Both of these works display two different swarms. There is a feeling of intrusion in both and even confusion. Is this a war? Whose side am I on? Who is the good guy and who is the bad guy? Who is intruding on whom? Both works possess elements of bodily invasion. The worms’ placement in panel one is often between the legs of the hobo sacks. The invasion in panel two is the impaling of the worms by the hobo sacks, the roles have reversed. There is a power shift here. Similar to the work of Layla Ali, I am interested in that power shift and not giving the viewer an answer as to who holds that power within the work. Layla Ali and I also share similar interests in that our work is influenced by news outlets and body politics. When creating this work specifically, I was responding to the Epstein trials and the news that surrounded that. It is not necessary that the viewer know that, I only say it to relate it back to my point regarding the similarities between myself and Layla Ali. I do want to acknowledge that because within each work I create, I am often responding to news events and body politics; because of this, the work becomes a residue. It is a residue of my quick thought processes as I, being in an abject body, try to understand and navigate the space that I am in and how my body and other bodies like mine are treated within that space. The work is a residue of me trying to understand the world around me. That is a point I will come back to in a moment. Due to the nature of what I am responding to, the work is not always going to feel happy: it might confuse the viewer when thinking of power relationships and have a darker tone to it. Regardless, of the tone, the viewer can find
some sort of swarm in almost every single one of the works in this show, again this
swarm allows the character or being to take up space and possess an agency. Sometimes I
will show the adaptation via narrative, because it takes time to adapt. So, the role of the
narrative, not just in this diptych, but throughout the show, is that a narrative can offer up
the passage of time and it takes time to adapt. Through the narrative, these beings
gradually transform from possessing strictly feminine qualities, to a combination of
masculine and feminine qualities, and even alien-like qualities.
CHAPTER 4
THE PINK BODY

From cat calling, rape and molestation, to the glass ceiling, workplace harassment and title nine dismissals, from being labeled as bossy and having to be the boss, to breast feeding controversies; women’s bodies have been forced to adapt in a society that was molded for the male body. These adaptations span a wide range and it is through visual cues that only a handful are referenced in the work. Pink being one of them. Pink is a unique color; it is a color that is often associated with femininity and many women often find themselves faced with pink products when purchasing items that are constituted under the Pink Tax. Pink can also infer a double-edged sword that so many women feel. In her book *Pink*, Barabara Nemitz states, “We can…assume that paradise and eroticism, youth and femininity and even virginity and innocence often appear in connection with…the color pink (Nemitz 2006)” Pink is a color that has been forced onto women’s bodies and yet, women have taken pink and turned it into a color of influence—for example, the pink pussy hats worn by so many women during the women’s march on Washington in 2017. In an effort to explore pink’s controversy, the work uses it in excess, in both natural, fleshy tones as well as tones of artifice. Chapter three from David Batchelor’s *Chromophobia*, discusses the term “cosmetic color (Batchelor 2000).” He describes color as a sort of blindness, loss of focus, identity and self. Cosmetic colors are used to hide something, to cover up something and conceal the surface alone. Batchelor explains, “The cosmetic is essentially visible, essentially superficial and thinner than the
skin to which it is applied. Cosmetics adorn, embellish, supplement (Batchelor 2000).” It is here that Batchelor notes the link between color and femininity.

There is an ambiguity in make-up; cosmetics can often confuse, cast doubt, mask or manipulate; they can produce illusions or deceptions—and this makes them sound more than a little like drugs. Drugs that are applied to the body: drugs of the skin. If color is a cosmetic, it is also—and again—coded as feminine. Color is a supplement, but it is also, potentially, a seduction. Cosmetics make flesh more appealing, flesh may be tired or old, or flesh may be diseased, disfigured, decayed or even dead…The association of color, cosmetics and femininity goes back further than the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries…there is perhaps no-one for whom make-up is more important than the drag queen. The figure of the drag-queen is marked…something entirely artificial and uncertain. In this sense, it is much like cosmetic color: its aim is to confuse and seduce, to fake and cover up…Color is often close to the body and never far from sexuality, be it heterosexual or homosexual. When sex comes into the story, color tends to come with it, and when color occurs, sex is often not too far away…‘Normality’ is clothed in black and white (Batchelor 2000).

Batchelor goes on to say that color is often equated to otherness. In the work, One Size Fits All, you can see the combination of internal bodily colors versus those that offer tones of artifice. Pink does have various tints and shades, and I think about that a lot in terms of artificial color. When you go to any department store, color is not offered to men in the same way that it is offered to women and I would argue that color is not offered to women the same way it is offered to juniors. When you look at clothing in a department store, Junior women (which are defined as ages 14-21) have a significant amount of artificial and vibrant colors offered to them. This can be noted, especially in comparison to the subdued shades in the women’s sections and compared to the often black, white, gray and navy of the men’s section (which does not even offer a junior men’s category). This observation interested me and came out in One Size Fits All. In this instance, the artificial comes in the form of cover ups as Batchelor describes; in this case it is a bra and
apparel. *One Size Fits All* and *Abject Adaptations* start conversing with one another in a continuous narrative. It is as if these characters have taken these material goods that display artificial color and have adapted to pass gas that is in that same artificial color. It is almost a form of protest towards societal norms. You want us women to harbor the color pink so much? Well fine, here it is! The characters do that in one of the most blatant, abject ways: through the act of farting. Their gases, as I mentioned, help the figures take up space, but the color is so eye catching that the artificial colors themselves also allow the body to have a sort of agency. Artificial color arrests the viewers gaze, allowing these figures to command the attention of the viewer.

Many of the images in this body of work use artificial and cosmetic colors, particularly cosmetic pink hues. In *Abject Adaptations*, the viewer is encompassed in the space of the charter or characters. These characters seem to propel themselves into a pink, atmospheric space. In this work, there exists a multitude of pink, fleshy characters; some feel bodily, and biomorphic, but the anthropomorphic lies in each one. Every character is different in shape and pattern, yet similar in color and texture. These similarities in color and texture, coupled with the diagonal movement of the swarm, creates unity within the large work. The image could feel like a flock of characters and yet individual characters. The weight of the character rests in the hair-like sack that also appears as if it could be some sort of rudder to help them steer themselves through the air. Their distributed weight allows the form to possess movement, the viewer might be able to picture these forms taking flight and making an effort to steer themselves in the right direction. Their destination is unknown, and the various direction of their sails gives the impression that
there is a lack of control and yet, there is a psychic line created by the diagonal sweeping motions of the blobs; this enhances the feeling that the forms are rising upward and with an intentional direction. Despite the lack of control, the piece could feel happy; the color aids in this. Just as Batchelor describes, the color of the piece offers seduction. It arrests the viewer’s eyes and pulls them in; however, the colors are very bright which might make the piece feel celebratory. Pink is used in excess throughout the work and pink, as discussed, is often associated with femininity. Despite this, the whole piece might not feel feminine; some of the forms themselves possess traditional masculine qualities such as hairy flesh. The push and pull between the entities’ masculine and feminine qualities creates a tension and dichotomy within the work. The masculinity of the hairy blobs contrast with the feminine qualities of the floral sails and treatment of the pink cloudy farts of the organisms. The feminine pink and the aggressive farts are another contradiction. There also exists a dichotomy in the gentle toots of the forms that lend themselves to a more organic nature compared to the pink, puffy, bubbly toots that lend themselves to the artificial. This artificiality is backed by Batchelor’s theories on cosmetic color. These forms are taking up space because of their multitude and vibrant color and thus they begin to possess a sort of agency, as if they have created a space within a space.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE HUMOROUS BODY

Another visual strategy that the work pursues, is the use of humor, specifically satire. Tension exists in the dichotomy of the work and tension is an element of humor—but also a visual strategy that is used to draw the viewer in much like the use of color. Feminist and comedian Hannah Gadsby explains that humor needs tension. There needs to be tension so that the punch line can relieve the audience thus having a greater impact. Gadsby says,

The only way I can tell my truth and put tension in the room is with anger. I am angry. I’ve got every right to be angry, but what I don’t have the right to do is to spread anger. I don’t. Because anger, much like laughter, can connect a room full of strangers like nothing else. But anger, even if it’s connected to laughter, will not relieve tension because anger is a tension. It is a toxic, infectious tension and it knows no other purpose then to spread tension and I want no part of it because I take my freedom of speech as a responsibility. And just because I can position myself as a victim does not make my anger constructive…laughter is not our medicine. Stories hold our cure. Laughter is just the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine (Gadsby 2017).

Let it be known here that I am, in fact, angry about injustices that plague women. I speak with other women who carry similar experiences to my own and I put forth the narrative of what it is like to exist in a woman’s body in this time and space into the artwork. Some of the work is more foreboding as seen in Beneath the Earth. Beneath the Earth produces a darker tone; the colors are not as playful, and the work exerts a mood that could lend itself to a post-apocalyptic world. Within the work, there appear to be two narratives. The first, displays pink, cloud like balloon characters that are connected to a mushroom looking character that seems to be taking up space by spreading its spores and creating other mushroom characters. The piece is sectioned horizontally, and the viewer
can see that beneath the surface of the procession of the mushroom king, there exists a world of similar pink, cloud-balloon characters that are slightly hairy. These pink clouds could be collecting smaller mushrooms and trudging forward. Abject qualities in the work might make the viewer uncomfortable, however, it should be noted that society should not be comfortable with how bodies are being treated, especially bodies that are made to be pawns within the terrifying political game of body politics. This piece is anything but humorous and was one of my first attempts at expressing my anger for the enslavement of abject bodies. So why did I bring humor into the overall narrative?

Hannah Gadsby has a point. There exists tension in difficult topics, but perhaps if there were a bit of humor to relieve the tension, the viewer might linger long enough to ponder the topic at hand. The work uses humor and or satire in a similar manner that Hannah describes. Satire is defined as the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues (Dictionary.com, 2019). The satirical act at play? Farting.

Farting is not only an act that people find humorous yet abject, but it is a tactic that allows one to take up space, in a way. One of Martin Luther’s favorite ways to banish the devil was by farting. He said, “But I resist the devil, and often it is with a fart that I chase him away (Augsburg 2005).” The feminine body is often discouraged from producing gas of any sort, so it could be considered a contradiction to the eyes to see these pink, abject characters producing a gas, yet in doing so they begin to own the space.
Several characters within the artwork incorporate farting as a method of procuring space for the body. This includes *Abject Adaptations, Poot* and *Spread*.

*Spread* displays one organism expelling a single stream of pink gas, the other organism spreads its mass-produced pink seeds via its pink, wafting gasses. Humor can be an entry point for the viewer; in this case, the fart can be the entry point for the viewer. *Spread* provides a possible dichotomy between the tightly rendered skin of the form on the left compared to the sagging flesh of the form on the right. The strawberry skin on the smaller form could present more of the qualities of perfection than the one on the right: the flesh is tight, luscious, youthful, and even sensual except for the stream of pink gas being expelled. Juxtaposing this youth, is the sagging flesh of the pink, sluggish form on the right. This flesh could allude to aging. The pristine, strawberry like organism is making eye contact with the viewer; the eye-contact of the central, youthful figure captures the viewer’s attention. The elder figure stares at the strawberry form; its seeds float all around and rise and fall with the pink gasses that are being expelled. These seeds have accumulated all around the base of the elder and even take root into the ground producing small heads that are similar in color to the strawberry. The viewers eyes are drawn around the page making a circle, or even a cycle. This is achieved by the pink fart and floating seeds that lead the viewers eye in a counterclockwise motion. This movement signifies a progressive narrative across the page as the viewer’s eyes follow these stages of morphing. The character’s pink gasses start to fill the picture plane giving their bodies an agency and almost a permission to spread and take up space. The action of farting, or expelling gas, allows the viewer to laugh at the form. The color and humor of
the piece makes it approachable and yet there is a further contradiction between the humor of the piece and its discomfort. The gasses and the organic-looking flesh of the forms could possess an abject quality. The seeds embedded in the bodily forms might make the viewer consider their own flesh. The eyes possess an abject quality as well. Are they spider eyes? A cow udder? The work exerts a humor and yet upon further inspection the viewer might feel conflicted between humor and abject, monstrous and femininity.

In an interview with artist Andrea Fraser, Fraser explains the art historical context of satire and its artistic strategies. These strategies seen are very much in Berlin Dada. Fraser goes on to point out that during one particular performance piece, her use of humor became a strategy. She says,

> So comedy—being funny—was a very self-conscious, strategic way of securing the attention of the audience. It was a strategy to keep people listening to me for twenty minutes...What seems particular to comedy, however, is the degree to which it can function, not only as a vehicle for critical content...the pleasure manifest in laughter came directly from...the release of latent hostility towards authority (Batalion 2012).

Fraser notes an important component of humor that my own work engages in: it is a tactic to hold people’s attention. By securing the attention of the audience, this gives the characters within the works presented—and the topic of woman as the body politic—a time and a space to be discussed. Abject-othered-bodies have had to adapt, but perhaps the way in which we have done so, offers us agency.
CHAPTER SIX

THE CHARACTER BODY

Another element of the work that can offer up humor is the function of the character. Throughout the work, the character is used as a vehicle for humor and play that functions as an entry point for viewers into often abject and unacknowledged topics. In this particular body of work, the character functions as a substitute for the human figure. In addition to humor, the use of a character could potentially make the abject quality of the work more tolerable. The character aids in the figures anthropomorphism making abject qualities easy to mentally digest, and perhaps even relatable. The characters also function as caricatures of sorts; caricatures of performative femininity (Melbourne 2018). There are certain stereotypes or visual cues that society says makes a woman, a woman. Long hair, large eyes, large breasts, small waists, elegance, poise, grace, compliance and voluptuousness are just some of the traits that are expected of women and just some of the traits that the characters take on, or critique.

_Beyond Border_ displays these traits well. The figures presented, are a conglomeration of performative, feminine characteristics that have been meshed together to create a grotesque organism that critiques social standards of beauty while simultaneously showing the nitty-grittiness of the body. The character also functions as a sort of superhero. They adapt and overcome obstacles so that they can keep journeying on and going to who knows where, like in _Abject Adaptations_. When the characters are faced with opposing forces (whether that is physical obstacles or other beings) I am
referencing some of the social/political dynamics from body politics that I read about, hear about and see on the news. I often respond to events on the news, as many artists do, and I notice that bodies like mine are facing similar challenges that I face. For example, *Beneath the Earth* is the residue of me trying to process the court case between Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and Brett Kavanaugh; though it is not necessary that the viewer know this, hierarchies and power structures are still evident with the work. The way I work is similar to the way that artist Laylah Ali works. Ali says, “Well on a very basic level, I first derived them [the characters] from my own body type…the Greenheads were born as superheros. I wanted them to have the potential of possessing superpowers, even if they weren’t used very much—though I think I knew these figures would not have unlimited freedom (Rothschild 2012).” The superhero characters within my own work act as a way to give my queer, female body agency. In 2018, I discovered that my body possessed a mutated gene that made my body susceptible to certain cancers, that of which is ovarian and breast cancer. This spiraled into receiving monthly medical examinations to look for any signs of cancerous masts and cysts within the body. Through these medical examinations I got to know my body better, but know the fleshy, pink, inside, abject parts that are often frightening. Similar to Ali and Hancock, I modeled the characters after my own body and some of the benign cysts that were being discovered. Through the narrative, these beings gradually transform from possessing strictly feminine qualities, to a combination of masculine and feminine qualities, and even alien-like qualities. It is through the overall narrative of the body of work beginning with *Next, Lift,* and *Beneath the Earth* and ending with the more unapologetically abject and humorous
works such as the *Beyond Border* series, *Poot, Spread* and *Abject Adaptations* that the viewer might consider how the characters are adapting throughout the series.

In my head, these characters are very much lost in the liminal. Always in a time and space between what was and what will be. The characters acknowledge that there cannot be a utopia, nor do they want there to be, but rather they look for the next place where they can be accepted (at lease for a little while) before an obstacle is put in their way, and they need to journey forward again as they have done for centuries. My characters function for me in a similar manner that Trenton Doyle Hancock’s characters function for him. In one interview Hancock discusses his superhero, character, and self-proclaimed alter ego Torpedo Boy. Hancock states, “Torpedo boy…gave me agency to do all these things and [I] made change through that fantasy (Hancock 2007).” I am also striving to make change through my own fantasy. When I begin a drawing, it is usually out of anger. I make work because I am trying to process these news events, these power structures, this lineage, this space. Sometimes I find it really hard to process the violence in this world, and violence is often abject. That’s when the character/figure comes into play. The character allows me to position abject thoughts outside of myself, but not beyond the border of the abject so as to disregard abject ideas entirely; the function of the character is that it makes these grotesque ideas easier to comprehend not only for others, but for myself. The characters exist in a realm between the body and the border of the abject so that the concepts are not simply disregarded and cast aside, just as Kristeva explains that the abject is what she casts aside in order to live (Kristeva 1982). I do love making quick gestural marks and although most of my drawings begin as gesture, it is not
so much a quick reaction. I find that when I make big, quick gestural strokes, it only amplifies my anger, through the movement, the energy and the excitement of the motion. It is only when I begin to render that I find solace; as I begin to slowly process situations and news events. Through this process, I am translating and embedding content into the surface of the character. I am constantly looking at news events (acts of dominance, body politics and the grotesque) and I am embedding that content into the surface of the form in order to critique such things. I want my characters not necessarily to equal these notions but be thought provoking enough that they could make one think about the body, body politics, dominance, power structures and the operation of the grotesque. Through the slow process of rendering, I am forced to be thoughtful by slowly translating one type of content into another so that I can understand the concepts I described, more intimately and effectively. However, I am not simply rendering. Through the creation of a work and a character, I am using thoughtful light logic, line, texture, shape and value combined with outside information from news broadcasts and images. In my head, I am collaging these news images together and playing them over and over. As I do this, I start to see the layers and the parallels between the bodies in these stories. When I draw, I ask myself,

*What visual elements do these stories have in common? What is the common thread between the external forces that surround the bodies in the stories? What elements can I use, to create an image that is an empathetic response to the images that I am seeing? How can I communicate and even ask for empathy from the viewers? Is that possible?* I want to create objects that go with content and my goal is to embed that content into the object. I am constantly comparing back and forth, between information that I am seeing,
hearing, witnessing and feeling in my own body, and paralleling that with the object that I render. My marks are layered over and over with various mediums and gradually build up a complex and rich surface. This process gradually turns my anger into a state of contemplation. It is through this process that my anger is made constructive as oppose to the act of spreading anger, making work that appears angry and uniting people with anger as Hannah Gadsby describes. It is through the carefully rendered entity that I make changes within myself and I can only hope that the subject matter in conjunction with the work, can ripple to create change with others. My characters and my work is my own adaptation. My own residual thought process that gives my body agency, even as I speak to you here today. I do believe that there is an agency in making a physical mark.

In my mind, the character started to change and possess autonomy. They were not just satirically embracing the look of femininity that society places upon the female body, the characters were morphing with their own ideals and adapting their abjectness into a superpower. They possess the abject, yet the characters do not hit the viewer over the head with shock factor, rather an un-apologetic combination of abject bodily qualities that are a part of bodily functions. The character in conjunction with color, humor and play can allow the viewer to be drawn into the work. Once the viewer begins to consider these elements, that is when one might consider the more unsettling traits of the forms presented.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

One of my favorite poets, feminists and activists, Staceyann Chin says “The most radical thing a girl can do, is to own her body. And we learn so young that these bodies, are not ours (Chin 2012).” The feminine body has been a political battlefield for centuries. These bodies have had to adapt throughout history over and over. The artwork is a product of my own adaptation: a residue. Sisters, mothers, aunts, teachers, healers, doers and believers: they have come before us with cut hair, starved themselves for the sake of justice and have been crucified in their own menses. Daughters will come after us and we will be faced with the question of, did we do enough? Did we do enough? As I mentioned in the introduction, I truly believe that if every person in this world that has ever experienced rape, molestation and assault stopped where they stood and screamed as loud as they could, this earth would surely shatter. I think now more than ever we need to scream so loud that this earth shatters. There is power in speaking our truths, especially when we speak them together. There is power in taking the time to listen to a person’s story and acknowledging their journey as an event and not disregarding it as a confessional because it contains the abject. Change never came from being comfortable and right now a lot of people in this world are uncomfortable, so I have to believe that change is coming. When it arrives, I have to believe that we will only dwell in change for a short while before continuing to push forward once more. As they have told us time and time again, “Nevertheless, she persisted (Wang 2017).” So, let us scream. Let us raise our voices. Let us persist and resist.
Figure 1: *Beneath the Earth*
Watercolor, Graphite, 21” x 22”, 2019
Figure 2: Next
Graphite and Watercolor, 22” x 30”, 2018
Figure 3: *Lift*
Graphite and Watercolor, 20” x 27”, 2018
Figure 4: Beyond Border Series
Watercolor, Marker, Colored Pencil, 12”x9” ea., 2018
Figure 5: *Poot*
Mixed Media on Paper, 8” x 12”, 2019
Figure 6: Spread
Watercolor and Colored Pencil, 21” x 26”, 2019
Figure 7: *Abject Adaptations*
Mixed Media on Paper Adhered to Panel, 60”x144”, 2019

Figure 7a: Close up of characters in *Abject Adaptations*
Figure 8: *One Size Fits All*
Mixed Media, 30”x22”, 2019
Figure 9: *Adapting (Diptych)*
Watercolor and Graphite Pencil, 60” x 22”, 2019

Figure 9a: Close up of characters in *Adapting (Diptych)*
BIBLIOGRAPHY


