

**Memoirs of My Vulva: An Exploration of Female Genitalia
as Figures in Autobiographical Graphic Narratives.**

Meichen Lu

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirement of the University of The Arts London for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2025

(word count: 76,883)

ABSTRACT

This doctoral research embarks on a multidisciplinary inquiry into the representation of female genitalia within the realms of feminist visual arts and autobiographical graphic narratives. Anchored in Simone de *Beauvoir's Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)* and drawing upon the phenomenological perspectives of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the study investigates the dynamics of women's lived experiences. By critiquing traditional psychoanalytic views of Sigmund Freud and engaging with feminist theorists, the research transcends phallocentric limitations to encourage a diversity of women's subjectivity.

Within an autobiographical methodology, my practice actively engages in feminist discourse, offering a critique of gender inequalities and a reinterpretation of feminine symbols through a feminist lens. The work challenges patriarchal narratives by exploring the vulva not as an object of eroticisation or stigma but as a subject with autonomy and agency. Through personal and reflective theoretical approaches, the research crafts a narrative that bridges individual experiences with collective feminist issues, employing visual symbolism, feminist theories, and phenomenology to navigate and articulate the complexities of feminine identity.

This research also re-evaluates the role of comics (graphic narratives) and employs them as tools for social critique; it advocates for their acceptance within the art establishment and their potential to challenge societal norms and enrich feminist discourse within gallery settings.

The performative drawing act, described as an evolving research component, serves as a dynamic interface for audience interaction, facilitating a dialogue that challenges

female objectification and engages with feminist themes. This aspect of the study exemplifies the fluid and responsive nature of performative art, inviting continuous conversation and exploration of identity, objectivity, and subjectivity.

In conclusion, this doctoral thesis interrogates the representation of female genitalia in art and culture while seeking to redefine it, advocating for a transformative dialogue that challenges existing taboos and patriarchal norms.

CONTENT

Title

Abstract i

Contents page iii

Acknowledgements vi

List of Exhibitions and Outputs viii

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

1.1 Main Research Focus 4

1.2 Overview of the PhD documents 8

1.3 Practice-Led Methodologies and Theoretical Concerns 11

1.4 Research Contributions 16

1.5 The Clarification of Female Group in This Research 18

Chapter 2 Understanding Feminism through Phenomenology 20

2.1 The Interpretation of *Le Deuxième Sexe* 23

2.1.1 The Ambiguous Chinese Translation of *The Second Sex* 26

2.1.2 A Phenomenological Investigation of *L'expérience vécue* 40

2.2 The Ambiguity of The Female Body 57

Chapter 3: Representation of gender through symbolic form 70

3.1 Understanding Visual Language: Taxonomy, Typology, and Symbols	72
3.1.1 Symbol Matrices	79
3.2 Applying Symbols Through Practice	90
3.2.1 The Method of Creating Genitalia-based Figures	91
3.2.2 Reflective practice: <i>Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality</i> , 2020 & <i>Horror of The Little Dickhead</i> , 2020	100
3.2.3 The Background Decoration	103
3.2.4 The Border Decoration	109
3.3 Employing Alchemical Symbols in <i>Opus Magnum for a Girl</i>, 2020	114
3.3.1 Understanding Practice: Symbols, Cultures, and the Self	117
 Chapter 4: Archival Research: Feminist Autobiographical Visual Narratives	 141
4.1 Archival Research in Autobiographical Feminist Comics	143
4.1.1 Underground Feminist Autobiographical Comics	144
4.1.2 Graphic Characters and Sexual Objectification	151
4.1.3 Comics Aesthetics and the Application of Symbols	157
4.2 The Gutter: The Relationship Between Texts and Images	166
4.3 Case Study and Diary Practices	180
4.3.1 Julie Doucet's <i>365 Days</i>	180
4.3.2 Diary Practice Review: <i>8/9</i> , 2021	196
4.3.3 Autobiographical or The Bioautographical	229
 Chapter 5: Representing Lived Experience through Materiality	 238
5.1 Exhibition Overview, <i>Secret Heim</i>, 2022	241
5.2 <i>Enclosed Heim</i>, 2022: A Collaborative Project	244
5.2.1 Home and Femininity	251

5.2.2 The Flower	254
5.3 <i>Familias Fantasy</i>, 2022-2023	267
Chapter 6: Drawing on the Wall and the Performative Drawing Act	286
6.1 <i>Menstruation Envy</i>, 2022	289
6.1.1 <i>Menstruation Envy</i> , an Approach to Domination Phallocentrism	290
and Its Symbolic Representation	298
6.2 Comics as Art: Drawing Directly on the Wall in a Gallery Context	301
6.3 The Performative Drawing Act	325
6.3.1 <i>The Scroll</i> , 2021-2023	335
Chapter 7. Conclusion	343
7.1 Further Research Areas	347
Bibliography	349
Appendix 1: Symbol Matrices	368

Acknowledgement

Reflecting on the completion of my doctoral research fills me with a profound sense of accomplishment and gratitude. The vivid memory of my initial meeting with my supervisory team on October 1st, 2019, at the London College of Communication remains etched in my mind, a stark reminder of how swiftly the past four years have flown by.

It is challenging to articulate my deep appreciation for my supervisor, Dr. Ian Horton, who possesses a remarkable ability to decipher unspoken thoughts, consistently capturing the core essence of my practice and visual language. I am immensely grateful to Dr. Ian Horton for his unwavering guidance, support, and insightful feedback. His patience and constructive criticism have been invaluable throughout my Ph.D. studies. My gratitude also extends to Dr. Jess Baines and Dr. Charley Peters, my co-supervisors, for their encouragement and creative input, significantly enhancing my critical thinking and innovative practice. I acknowledge their efforts in guiding me through my doctoral research at the University of the Arts London.

My deepest thanks go to my parents, Mr. Xiaonan Lu and Mrs. Xinhong Liu, for their endless encouragement and support. Their hands-on participation in my art practice, notably in coordinating the transportation of art materials across considerable distances, is a declaration of their profound love and dedication. Their belief in me, especially during my self-doubt, has been a constant source of energy.

I owe particular gratitude to my cats, Gogo and Momo, whose companionship was invaluable during my most challenging moments.

I extend my thanks to the male subjects who featured in my research on feminist autobiographical art, for they played a crucial role in deepening my understanding of the concept of "becoming" a woman.

In conclusion, this research has benefited from the contributions of many individuals, both directly and indirectly. I regret any omissions in this acknowledgement and extend my apologies to those not mentioned by name.

Parts of this thesis have been published in revised form as:

Lu, M. (2024). "Comics as Art Practice: Directly Drawing on the Wall in a Museological Context" In K. B. Fägersten, A. Nordenstam & M. W. Victorin (Eds.), ***Comics, Activism, Feminisms*** (pp. 114–126). Routledge Studies in Gender, Sexuality, and Comics. London: Routledge.

*In loving memory of my father, Mr. Xiaonan Lu (25 July 1961 – 1 April 2024),
whose love continues to guide my path.*

List of Exhibitions and Outputs

Over the span of my doctoral research, I have had the opportunity to present my work through various exhibitions and to contribute to scholarly discourse through publications. This has allowed me to test and refine my research in practical settings, garnering recognition and engagement from the academic and art communities. I have created an extensive body of visual works during my PhD progress. In parallel, I developed a personal website, a digital archive documenting traces of my practice from 2017 to 2023. Access via: www.mmeichenlu.com/homepage.

In May 2022, *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020) received notable recognition when it was shortlisted for the Batsford Prize 2022 in the fine art category, a significant acknowledgement from the art community (more information available at: <https://www.batsfordbooks.com/news-or-event/the-batsford-prize-2022-shortlist-peoples-choice-vote/>). A month later, in June 2022, *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020) gained further acclaim by being shortlisted for the prestigious World Illustration Awards 2022, demonstrating the piece's impactful presence in the illustration field (<https://theaoi.com/wia/meichen-lu-opus-magnum-for-a-girl/>). The accolades continued into the following year when, in January 2023, I was honoured to be selected as a finalist for the esteemed 99 Future Blue Chip Artists competition, organised by Artsted, a leading agency in contemporary art collection and investment.

My paper titled *Comics as Arts: Directly Drawing on The Wall in The Museological Context* was accepted by the Comics, Activism, Feminism (CAF) conference at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. In the earlier stages of my PhD, I contributed an article titled *Unfolding the Female Body* to the UAL Post-Grad Community in February 2020, which can be found at <https://www.arts.ac.uk/study-at-ual/postgraduate-study/postgraduate-community/stories/unfolding-the-female-body>. And I officially commenced my role as a PhD researcher at the Comic Research

Hub, <http://comicsresearch.arts.ac.uk/people/members/meichen-lu/>. My engagement with the broader comic community began in September 2019 when I attended Comic Forum at Leeds University, marking the beginning of a series of professional and academic exchanges.

In terms of exhibitions and practical applications of my research, I participated in *Unfolding Narratives 3*, the first PhD WIP exhibition of the University of the Arts London in March 2020, which set a precedent for my active participation in the academic community. Furthermore, in January 2020, I had the privilege of delivering a lecture to MA students at the School of Communication, University of Brighton, sharing insights from my research and practice.

I also participated in *Unfolding Narratives 3*, the PhD Work-in-Progress (WIP) exhibition of the University of the Arts London, held at Well Gallery, London College of Communication in April 2023. This was a culmination of a series of active engagements, which included organising and participating in the inter-college PhD duo exhibition *Secret Heim* alongside my colleague Lihong Liu in February 2022. This exhibition was curated by Mengwei Li, a theory-based PhD candidate, and hosted at the Triangle space, Chelsea College of Arts.

Additionally, I exhibited in the group exhibition *All Sorts of Ephemera* at Hive Holborn in August 2021 and participated in *The Anchor* at Arthill Gallery in April 2021, both of which offered platforms to further disseminate my research findings and receive critical feedback.

This timeline of exhibitions and academic contributions encapsulates the evolution of my research, reflecting an ongoing commitment to exploring and understanding the role of feminist autobiographical graphic narratives in the visual arts.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Originating from China and identifying as a woman, the act of vocalising the term "vagina" was once alien to me until my move to London. There, in the midst of feminist art and phenomenological study, I began to articulate discourses that had remained unvoiced. As a Chinese woman, I seek to bear witness to the complex interplay of cultural taboos, the perception of the female body, and the concept of embodiment. The taboo nature of the word 阴道, vagina, in my homeland resonated with the obscured understanding I had of my own sexual anatomy. Yet, it was through Eve Ensler's poignant play, *The Vagina Monologues* (1998), that I discovered a narrative familiar not just to me, but to many women contending with a similar lack of understanding about their bodies.

Feminist discourse, ever entwined with power and identity, has tirelessly questioned the patriarchal narrative that has shaped understanding of the female body. This can be traced back to Aristotle's views of female genitalia as belonging to lower classes, and this historical narrative has been one of passivity and denial of pleasure, a narrative that Simone de Beauvoir (1949) critically examined. My response to these historical misconceptions was to join feminist artists and scholars in the movement to reclaim the body, and especially the genitalia, from patriarchal narratives. The feminist body art of the 1970s became a beacon for my research; during my master's studies, I investigated Carolee Schneemann's work, culminating in my dissertation *Carolee Schneemann: An Investigation into How the Female Body is Both Source and Site Simultaneously* (2018). It was here that Schneemann's concept of "vulvic space" resonated with me, challenging the societal refutation of the inherent pleasure within female genitalia. Concurrently, I began melding graphic narratives with feminist issues, focusing on the vulva as not just an anatomical feature but as a character in its own right. This led to the creation of *Intercourse with My Vulva*

(2018), a series where I delved into the vulva's various conceptualisations, giving life to a graphic character that encapsulated this exploration.

In this exploration, my research intersects with the realm of autobiographical graphic narratives, an arena offering a unique space for women to articulate their lived experiences. The emergence of this genre in the mid-1960s in America marked a paradigm shift in storytelling, encapsulating the multifaceted essence of women's lives through graphic narratives (Chute, 2010). Aline Kominsky-Crumb's autobiographical comic *Goldie: A Neurotic Woman* (1972) is an example of this genre, which represents her own experiences of sexuality and acted as my initial conduit into feminist graphic narratives. As a practitioner and researcher engaging with these intersections of artistic expression — visual art, graphic narratives, and illustration — I seek to navigate and articulate my understanding of feminist discourse and the portrayal of female genitalia. During the PhD illustration has come to represent the technology and media used in my practice which provides an aesthetic foundation for my work, but my practice is more clearly positioned within the fields of visual arts and autobiographical graphic narratives.

To provide further clarity about my interdisciplinary practice background, it is important to mention my upbringing. My grandmother was a tailor who could create beautiful clothes and crafts. Having lived with her since my childhood, I became acutely aware of her influence, which ignited my aspiration to become a woman who is the maker of meaning and not the bearer of meaning (Mulvey, 1973). Also, my deep admiration for art, aesthetics, and beauty from a young age led me to begin teaching myself pencil sketching and Chinese painting at twelve. By fifteen, I had embarked on systematic painting training under a mentor. During my undergraduate and master's studies, respectively, I majored in Graphic Communication and Illustration and Visual Media. These academic journeys and my personal affections for different aspects of art laid the foundation for my doctoral studies, which are predominantly interdisciplinary in nature. The range of techniques and media I have employed, including watercolour, papercut, oil, illustration, book design, textile, and

performative art, reflects the evolution of my research journey. This body of works summarises and mirrors my past experiences, offering insight into my personal and professional development. I deeply appreciate my supervisor Dr Ian Horton's assessment of my practice, as expressed in the catalogue of the *Secret Heim* (2022) exhibition, where he describes it as "interdisciplinary, or perhaps even intradisciplinary, in terms of both the range of media employed and the disciplinary concerns of the resulting practice" (2022, p.5).

1.1 Main Research Focus

I recognise the importance of making explicit why certain examples of practice, theory, and methodology have been singled out in this research. My selection is guided by a commitment to foregrounding historical feminist theories and artistic practices that have been foundational yet, in many cases, overlooked or simplified in contemporary feminist discourse. I return to foundational texts such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, as well as to the phenomenological frameworks of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, because these theories provide essential tools for understanding embodiment, subjectivity, and lived experience—key concerns in my research.

The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir is often underestimated in many contexts as merely a descriptive account of women's lives and experiences. In China, the book has even been sensationalised due to the inclusion of the word "sex" in the title, with publishers exploiting this by using sexualised images of the female body as a marketing tool on its cover. However, Beauvoir's accounts of women's experiences are not simple narratives but are intended to guide readers towards a phenomenological understanding of female existence. Her central concern is the embodied experience of women, asserting that individuality is always in dialectical tension with the constraints imposed by societal norms.

Further, I specifically focus on art from second wave feminism¹, including works such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979) and Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975), because I consider that women artists working within that specific socio-political context were particularly positioned to articulate and reflect the

¹ Second wave feminism is a term given to the period of western feminism between the late 1960s and 1980s. I recognise the concept of 'waves' in feminism is contested (e.g. Laughlin & Castledine, 2011) but that it continues to be a useful pointer to a related cluster of activities and politics, including that which informed the artists mentioned.

reality and struggles that defined the emergence of feminist art. Their works, shaped by lived experience of the gendered dynamics of their time, offer a powerful immediacy and authenticity in addressing feminist concerns. By foregrounding these examples, my research seeks to highlight how art produced within a lived environment of feminist awakening can provide deeper insights into both the development and ongoing resonance of feminist artistic practice.

Similarly, in my practice-led research, I focus on symbolic materials and motifs—such as Chinese cultural symbols of fertility and gender—that have long histories of patriarchal appropriation. I deliberately revisit these rather than prioritising newer feminist art forms, because I aim to critically reframe entrenched narratives from within their own symbolic systems, rather than circumvent them through purely contemporary gestures. This approach allows me to highlight what is often missed in current feminist discussions: the enduring power of historical imagery and ideology that continues to shape women's lived experiences today.

Although I touch on the work of some contemporary feminist artists I have chosen not to engage in depth with digital or post-internet feminist art practices, not because they lack value, but because my research is focused on materiality, embodiment, and the visceral dimensions of gendered subjectivity. By clarifying these boundaries, I position my work within a discourse that insists on the importance of historical continuity, embodied experience, and the reactivation of overlooked or marginalised feminist perspectives.

Building on this intertwining of theoretical considerations and artistic practice, my research embarks on an experiment that centres on the depiction and representation of the female genitalia—a pivotal focal point that encapsulates my thematic exploration. By harnessing the symbolic potency of the vulva, I seek to re-evaluate and reconfigure narratives and visual depictions that have historically enshrouded female sexuality in obscurity and stigma. Through a combination of graphic

storytelling and visual arts—including installations, sculptures, paintings, book arts, and performance—I aim to provide a visual narrative that repositions female genitalia, promoting a discourse of empowerment and autobiographical assertion. My creative practice challenges dominant portrayals of the female form while critically engaging with the cultural and social frameworks that shape these representations. My central research question is:

How does the integration of feminist autobiographical graphic narratives into gallery milieux, informed by phenomenological inquiry, challenge and transform the representation and perception of female genitalia within the context of the visual arts?

The overall aims of this research are:

To investigate the symbolic representation of female genitalia in graphic narratives and feminist art examining its impact on the deconstruction of erotic and taboo stereotypes in visual art.

To develop an autobiographical graphic narrative practice that centralises female genitalia as figures exploring the shared and individual aspects of women's lived experiences.

To utilise the portrayal of female genitalia within a gallery setting as a means to disrupt conventional gendered power dynamics, emphasising bodily experiences as pivotal points of societal and phenomenological analysis.

The specific objectives of this research are:

To explore phenomenological theories of embodiment and subjectivity (drawing particularly on Beauvoir, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty) as a framework for understanding women's lived experiences

To critically analyse historical and contemporary representations of female genitalia in feminist graphic narratives and visual art, identifying recurring symbols, themes, and the persistence of taboo and eroticised imagery.

To develop a symbol matrix that compiles international representations of femininity, integrating these symbols with vulva imagery to assert agency and reinforce embodied female subjectivity.

To create a series of autobiographical graphic narratives that centre on vulva figures, articulating personal dimensions of women's lived experiences to further reflect collective dimensions.

To experiment with a range of materials and media—such as sculpture, installation, book arts, and performance—to explore how materiality enhances the phenomenological resonance of the work.

To examine how autobiographical feminist graphic narratives, when presented within gallery contexts, use comic strategies to challenge and disrupt traditional gendered power dynamics.

The research embarks on the undertaking to infuse symbolic representations of female genitalia into the graphic narrative characters based on the authentically anatomical genitalia structure. Hence, this research primarily focuses on the development of a visual platform that recontextualises female genitalia, transitioning from historically subordinate representations to those that are autobiographically assertive.

1.2 Overview of the PhD documents

This research is structured into two primary components: a written thesis, with accompanying illustrations, and a website² that documents all of my artistic works created during the PhD period. The thesis provides a contextual and critical examination of the theoretical and practical concerns underpinning my artistic research, while the website serves as a complementary resource, offering audiences the opportunity to review each work in its entirety and within its exhibition context.

Excluding the introduction and conclusion, the thesis is divided into five distinct chapters. Rather than presenting the development of the artworks in a strictly chronological order, the thesis organises their discussion thematically, following each chapter's conceptual focus. This allows for a deeper exploration of specific issues such as phenomenology, symbolism, archival research, materiality, and performativity, and reflects the integrated and evolving nature of my practice.

Throughout the thesis, I draw on a range of historical and contemporary artists whose practices inform my critical and creative approach. These include Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneemann, Julie Doucet, Hannah Höch, Helen Chadwick, Sarah Lucas, Louise Bourgeois, Tracey Emin, Sophie Calle, among others. Their work is examined in relation to themes of female embodiment, feminist resistance, and the reconfiguration of the female form within visual culture.

The chapters are structured as follows:

² <https://www.mmeichenlu.com/>

Chapter 2 investigates key phenomenological concepts, particularly as developed by Edmund Husserl in *Ideas II* (1958), further developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), and extended through Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism in *The Second Sex* (1949), and their relevance to understanding female embodiment and subjectivity. It discusses the interpretation of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, challenges in the language translation, and explores how phenomenology informs my reading of lived experience and bodily ambiguity.

Chapter 3 focuses on the visual language of symbols. This chapter introduces my methodology of creating symbol matrices and explains how these symbols are applied within my practice to develop genitalia-based figures. It reflects on specific works—such as *Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality* (2020), *Horror of The Little Dickhead* (2020), and *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020)—and the integration of alchemical and decorative motifs from Chinese and Western cultures to interrogate femininity and cultural identity.

Chapter 4 examines my archival research into underground feminist autobiographical comics, considering their aesthetics, symbolic use, and subversion of sexual objectification. It includes case studies, reflections on my diary practices *8/9* (2021), and a close analysis of Julie Doucet's *365 Days* (2000).

Chapter 5 discusses the role of materiality in expressing lived experience, examining my exhibition *Secret Heim* (2022) and works like *Enclosed Heim* (2022), *Familias Fantasy* (2022-2023). It explores how my choices of material and form, understood through a phenomenological lens and informed by Luce Irigaray's theories of love, sexual difference, and embodied subjectivity, contribute to articulating themes of home, femininity, and bodily experiences.

Chapter 6 focuses on the performative aspect of my practice, examining wall drawings and works such as *Menstruation Envy* (2022) and *The Scroll* (2020-2023). It analyses how comics aesthetics and phallogentric symbolism are reimagined through large-scale, site-specific, and performative interventions within gallery contexts, with particular attention to how the performative drawing act, informed by Sartre's theory of the gaze, interrogates the vulnerability of the self under observation.

The structure of the chapter reflects an iterative and reflective research process, integrating theoretical frameworks and creative experiments that together seek to advance feminist visual culture through a phenomenological and autobiographical lens. Additionally, Appendix 1: Symbol Matrices provides a comprehensive visual and textual record of the symbolic systems I developed and applied throughout my practice, offering further context for the ways in which cultural and gendered symbols inform the creation of vulva figures and related works.

1.3 Practice-Led Methodologies and Theoretical Concerns

During the initial phases of my doctoral journey, spanning the initial year of my PhD study, I formulated my methodology as a practitioner step by step. This iterative process was designed to facilitate an interplay between theoretical constructs and practical execution, where the enrichment of theory by practice and vice versa stands as the guiding principle. Rooted in the realm of female representation, my methodological framework has been carefully calibrated to embody qualitative and reflective dimensions that align with the intricate nature of my research pursuit.

Fundamentally, utilising a foundation grounded in phenomenology, my methodology seeks to illuminate the intricate relationship between individual experiences, perception, and the portrayal of female genitalia within the broader context of feminist art and autobiographical narratives. This approach is informed by the belief that lived experiences serve as a significant lens through which one's artistic expressions are shaped, resulting in a nuanced understanding of the interplay between the personal and the cultural. As such, my methodology operates at the nexus of phenomenology, feminist art, autobiographical narratives, and the exploration of the vulva as an empowered entity.

Lived experience, an initial approach for phenomenological research, delves into the perception and comprehension of human experiences, the choices they entail, and how they influence individual understanding of knowledge (Limberg, 2008). Adams and Manen (2008, p. 616) analyse lived experience as a research method, noting that it “could be argued that human experience is the main epistemological basis for many other qualitative research traditions, but the concept of lived experience possesses special methodological significance for phenomenology”. Robin Boylorn (2008, p.490) highlights pioneers like Carolyn Ellis who have demonstrated the efficacy of lived experience through techniques such as autoethnography, memoir,

narrative writing, and performance. My research on lived experience, follows the frameworks of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Simone de Beauvoir to examine women's existence, focussing on the multifaceted variations of human experiences with respect to the representation of female genitalia. In general, the lived experiences method allows for the myriad perspectives shaped by personal identities, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity. As an intersectional approach, it should be viewed in conjunction with the next section where I elucidate the women's group for my research. This method aligns with my objective to explore the importance of recognising the diverse and complex nature of female identity and embodiment. Through this approach, the research intends to illuminate the varied experiences and narratives that constitute the female experience, underscoring the significance of intersectionality in capturing the full spectrum of women's lives. It is to assert that all personal experiences of women ought to be articulated boldly and candidly, affirming women's bodies and stories are not just heard but are also seen and valued.

This existential inquiry, specifically influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's feminism and phenomenological resonance, endeavours to challenge conventional narratives surrounding the representation of female genitalia by asserting the vulva as an active figure. This shift not only disrupts the conventional passivity attributed to female genitalia but also scrutinises the potential of abstraction to capture the vulva's agency within artistic expressions. This ongoing exploration fosters a dynamic discourse between personal experiences and the intimate facets of our bodies, significantly contributing to my maturation as a feminist artist. Within this methodological framework, my research process is inextricably intertwined with self-reflection and introspection, whereby the act of creation is deeply influenced by my autobiographical experiences.

My methodology incorporates a blend of mixed methods, the specific research methods I have employed include the taxonomy of symbols, archival research, case studies, and reflective practice.

The taxonomy of symbols serves as a vital instrument in dissecting and deciphering the multifarious symbolic representations associated with female genitalia. This analytical tool enables the identification, categorisation, and systematic study of feminine symbols from an international aspect, thereby affording a nuanced understanding of the manifold layers of meaning embedded within visual compositions. The taxonomy of symbols was applied to the visual representation of female genitalia, this approach gained prominence through the creation of the vulva figure. Emerging within the domain of anatomical genitalia structures facilitated by an observation-based self-examination approach, vulva figures encapsulate a methodological position that involves the conception and development of a realistic, personalised, and autobiographical vulva.

The development of vulva figures has been a central theme throughout my research and practice. This conceptualisation emerged during my master's studies, primarily through observing the morphological anatomy of my own vulva. As my doctoral research commenced, these vulva figures retained their previous visual element, manifesting in a manner that was both subjective and graphical, as evident in my works prior to 2020.

Following the confirmation event in my second year of doctoral studies, I received suggestions from an internal advisor. These suggestions focused on the development of symbols that transcended abstraction, advocating for a move towards more specific, individualised, or even autobiographical representations. This advice was pivotal in shifting my visual exploration of vulva figures from mere flat representations to more nuanced, three-dimensional, and personalised forms. This shift is initially evident in my diary work *8/9* (2021), where the materiality of oil pastels served as the medium for creating more volumetric representations of vulvar forms. Subsequently, in collaboration with Liu on the project *Enclosed Heim* (2021-2022), the vulva figure was presented in the linear form of three-dimensional sculptures.

These sculptures, intertwined with the symbolism of flowers, are examined in detail in Chapter 5.

By confronting the anatomical nuances of the vulva's appearance, the creation of vulva figures builds a transformative expression that serves to expose and challenge the intricate interplay of erotic and taboo-laden stereotypes that have historically shrouded female genitalia. The employment of mixed methods to create encounters between individuals, especially women, and representations of female genitalia, highlights intimate aspects of the anatomical figure, thereby fostering an environment devoid of shame or inhibition. Importantly, this innovative approach disrupts the historical, symbolic, and sociological representations of female genitalia prevalent within graphic imagery. By boldly visualising the vulva figure, it aspires to engenders a profound awakening of female self-acceptance and consciousness, transcending conventional constraints and fostering a direct and unfiltered engagement with this aspect of feminine embodiment.

Archival research provides a rigorous approach for the retrieval of historical data, primary sources, and distinctive insights otherwise inaccessible through alternative research strategies. My archival research involves an examination of The Les Coleman Collection at the UAL Archives and Special Collections (LCO), along with the LCC zine collection. I focused particularly on the 1970s underground feminist comic genre, a critical era marked by the burgeoning of feminist discourse and ground-breaking aesthetic innovation. My investigation within this archival research aims to elucidate the historical context of underground feminist comix and the contributions of selected artists, providing a substantive basis for understanding their impact on contemporary feminist dialogues and visual storytelling.

Case studies include Julie Doucet's *365 Days* and Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, which are crucial to my research methodology, enabling detailed analysis of female genitalia representation in previous artworks. These studies allow me to critically

evaluate the varied tactics, narratives, and contextual significances present, illuminating the complex relationship between aesthetics, symbolism, and socio-cultural factors.

The methodological approach to materiality in my practice is grounded in phenomenology, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied perception and Luce Irigaray's (1974-1984) exploration of sexual difference and corporeality. Rather than treating material selection as a purely aesthetic or formal concern, I understand materials as extensions of my embodied experience—each choice emerging intuitively through what Merleau-Ponty describes as “habitual body” engagement with the world. This means that media such as clay, textiles, wire, and organic matter are not arbitrarily chosen but arise from their tactile resonance with my lived reality and the specific themes I explore, including femininity, vulnerability, and resilience.

Irigaray's notion of fluidity and multiplicity further informs my handling of materiality, particularly in the ways my works challenge rigid, phallogentric representations of the female body. The materials I use—whether pliable or resistant—become part of an active dialogue between body and matter, foregrounding the sensorial and changeable nature of female subjectivity. This stance positions materiality as not merely supportive but as constitutive of meaning: the works do not just depict embodied experience; they are embodied experience. In doing so, my practice offers an immersive exploration of women's subjectivity.

1.4 Research Contributions

1/ This research offers a novel application of phenomenological theory—particularly Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, through the lens of lived female experience. It repositions phenomenology from a philosophical model into a materially grounded, practice-led feminist methodology.

2/ By using culturally embedded symbols developed by the symbol matrix, this practice challenges reductive or essentialist representations of femininity. The project reclaims symbolic space for the female body by fusing traditional iconographies with embodied feminist subjectivity.

3/ This research contributes to a rethinking of materiality in art practice—not as a neutral medium or representational tool, but as a mode of phenomenological self-expression. Rather than selecting materials or symbols for their fixed symbolic meanings, I use them as embodied responses to lived experience. It challenges the conventional symbolic frameworks of meaning-making and instead positions material engagement as a site of autobiographical and feminist articulation.

4/ The project examines the formal and curatorial potential of comics as art practices. It reframes the comic gutter as an affective and performative site, rather than a mere narrative gap, contributing to critical discourse in metacomics and sequential aesthetics.

5/ By treating gallery space as both narrative field and conceptual frame, the research develops a curatorial methodology that merges installation, comics, and

feminist autobiography. This contributes a new hybrid form of spatialised storytelling to contemporary visual art.

6/ The project engages directly with overlooked feminist comic histories—especially from underground traditions—by conducting archival research and recontextualising them through personal practice. This research contributes to offer a contemporary feminist mode of self-representation that resists censorship and challenges the invisibility of women’s lived experiences.

1.5 The Clarification of Female Group in This Research

The core of my investigation constitutes a comprehensive study on female identity and experiences, approached through feminist phenomenology. This research focuses on the lived experiences of women, adopting a feminist phenomenological lens to scrutinise how female genitalia are represented and discussed in autobiographical graphic narratives.

In delineating the gender focus within the female group for my study, initially, it is crucial to specify that the investigation primarily concentrates on cisgender women. This focus is a direct reflection of my own identity as a cisgender woman and is heavily influenced by my autobiographical experiences. Nevertheless, it is imperative to state that my research adopts an inclusive stance, welcoming individuals of varied gender identities who have female genitalia to find resonance and representation within the scope of female experiences, especially in relation to their genitalia.

The foundation of my work lies in feminist phenomenology and existentialist philosophies, emphasising the importance of subjective experiences of individuals in their interaction with the world. Although the initial focus of my research is on the narratives and perceptions of cisgender women, stemming from its autobiographical nature, I extend a cordial invitation to transgender, non-binary, and intersex individuals. This is aimed at those who, despite having differing gender identities, share anatomical similarities and might find aspects of their own experiences mirrored in my research and practice. This inclusive stance is designed to expand collective understandings of how female genitalia are perceived, experienced, and depicted across a spectrum of gender identities within the realm of autobiographical graphic narratives.

In my research, the concept of the female group is not viewed as a homogenous entity, but rather as a composite of individual experiences and narratives. This approach aims to illuminate the diverse and complex nature of female identity and embodiment. My aspiration is for all women to discover aspects within this research that resonate with them personally and profoundly. The motivation behind this endeavour extends beyond merely asserting that discussions and expressions concerning the vulva should not be regarded as shameful. Instead, it seeks to create a space where the representation of female genitalia is approached with respect, openness, and a recognition of its intrinsic value in our understanding of human experience. Through this research, I hope to contribute to a broader dialogue that fosters acceptance, dismantles taboos, and acknowledges the richness of women's lived experiences.

Chapter 2. Understanding Feminism through Phenomenology

Understanding and applying phenomenology is central to both the theoretical and practical dimensions of this PhD research. Phenomenology, particularly as articulated by Husserl and later developed by scholars such as Beauvoir, offers a rigorous framework for exploring lived experience and embodiment. Its focus on how meaning arises through perception, affectivity, and intersubjectivity provides crucial tools for interrogating gendered experiences, especially those rooted in corporeality and social structures. By grounding my artistic practice in phenomenological inquiry, I aim to reveal the complex ways in which women's subjectivities are shaped through their bodily experiences and interactions within patriarchal systems. This methodology enables my work to engage with feminist theory, abstract symbol systems, and the tangible, felt realities of feminine existence.

My positionality as a Chinese woman plays a pivotal role in shaping both my research perspective and creative output. Coming from a socio-cultural context where Confucian patriarchal norms continue to exert significant influence, I have firsthand experience of how deeply entrenched gendered expectations and biases can be. As I will discuss later, for example, in the Chinese translation of *The Second Sex*, the male translator Tiezhu Tao not only failed to engage with the complexity of women's bodily experiences but also rendered the word "female" as *cíxìng* (雌性), a term typically used for animals in Chinese, which starkly reveals a lack of sensitivity to women's humanity. Similarly, the Chinese symbols and motifs I incorporate into my artworks are not elements I had to research consciously—they are part of my lived reality, embedded in the everyday culture I grew up with. For instance, in my piece *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020), I reflect on my confusion as a child at the celebration of my first menstruation. I could not understand why my parents and relatives considered it a momentous and joyful occasion. While I experienced physical discomfort and pain, they rejoiced because menstruation signified fertility; I

was now viewed as someone who could, in the future, bear children. By using the double happiness (囍) symbol in this work, I represent the external gaze and societal attitude towards my body—they were happy not for me as a person, but for my potential reproductive capacity. Their happiness was never about my own perspective or well-being. Why should I be happy? All I felt was a sense of being framed, confined, and defined by others.

These experiences inform my practice-led research, allowing me to critically examine the intersections of tradition, modernity, and gender politics. The importance of a phenomenological methodology in my research lies in its deep alignment with how I conceive of my art practice. For me, my works are never simply about doing something or executing a task—they are me: my past, my experiences, and my embodied reflections on those experiences. When I engage in creating, I am not selecting media, materials, or symbols objectively or instrumentally; rather, these choices emerge naturally and almost inevitably from my habitual being. As Merleau-Ponty describes, our bodily habits and perceptual engagements are not separate from who we are—they constitute our subjectivity. In this sense, my creative process itself is an extension of my living body, and the meanings embedded in my works arise directly from this embodied, pre-reflective dimension of existence.

In the following, I review and analyse feminist theory from a phenomenological perspective. It focuses on the lived experiences of two sexes, drawing upon existentialist perspectives informed by the philosophies of Husserl, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty. Examining the specific French term "*éprouve*" compared with its Chinese interpretation in *Le Deuxième Sexe* offers insights into how Beauvoir's ideas are received and reinterpreted within a different cultural and social context. The term "*éprouve*", translated into English as to feel or to experience, captures a crucial aspect of phenomenological emphasis on the subjective experience of being. I examine the concept of ambiguity by engaging with the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray to reveal the intricate duality of human life, which is characterised

by the interaction of transcendence and immanence. Employing phenomenological and existential lenses, Beauvoir elucidated the gendered manifestation of ambiguity, notably how societal conventions often relegate women to a state of immanence. My examination of ambiguity aligns with Beauvoir's, which investigates the intrinsic constraints and freedoms characterising the human predicament and specifically scrutinises the varied experiences of different genders.

2.1 The interpretation of *Le Deuxième Sexe*

Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) was published in 1949 and is widely read as revealing the continued subordination of women from multiple aspects in an era that saw some shifts towards full equality and freedom. This book is "perceived as a rebuttal of biological determinism and as an exploration of the socialised production of gender" (Secomb, 2007, p.42). From my vantage point as a researcher with a Chinese background, I posit that the philosophical depth and feminist nuances of texts in *The Second Sex* often lose their intrinsic meanings in Chinese translations. My analysis aims to scrutinise Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* by juxtaposing two Chinese translations (from 1998 and 2014) with their English counterparts and the original French text. In conducting this comparative study, I hope to unravel the constraints inherent in translating Western feminist philosophy into Chinese, which inadvertently illuminates women's quotidian rhythms and domestic continuity as socially meaningful constructs. These constructs often supplant the phenomenological existence that Beauvoir proposed as an essential property of being. Thus, I primarily discuss the sociocultural dimensions and the complexities of translating feminist philosophical works across distinct linguistic and cultural landscapes.

Sara Heinämaa has reinterpreted Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in her publication *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (2003). Heinämaa suggests Beauvoir produced a phenomenological investigation of the lived experience of women and men from an existentialist perspective based on her philosophical study of Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty (p. 2-4). For Heinämaa, interpreting the female body "based on existence" (Beauvoir, 1989, p.61) instead of analysing its biological, social and psychological aspects, was central to Beauvoir's thinking. Beauvoir incorporates Merleau-Ponty's perspective on the body as a medium for experiencing the world and consolidates this viewpoint. Drawing

from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach, Beauvoir highlights the body's adaptability and expressivity and its cultivation of habits that give rise to gendered identities and expressions. In line with Beauvoir's perspective, the body assimilates meanings and embodies experiences, supporting Husserl's emphasis on individuality constituted through affective factors and lived experiences. It demonstrates Beauvoir's understanding of the ambiguous female body as the progress of becoming a woman, "a conception of her as an open-ended process of transformation, interrelation and becoming" (Secomb, 2007, p.42) rather than the idea of woman as a "fixed or completed reality" (Beauvoir, 1989, p.61).

Finally, my exploration of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical writings will not be confined solely to an analysis of *The Second Sex*. A thorough analysis necessitates an engagement with other critical feminist theorists and psychoanalysts such as Luce Irigaray and Sigmund Freud, particularly Freud's concept of penis envy. This concept, emblematic of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, posits that women experience feelings of inferiority and displacement due to their "lack" of a penis. This notion has been perpetuated throughout the dominant male-oriented scientific and philosophical traditions, consequently contributing to the marginalisation of women and affirming their immanence. Although this theory has been widely critiqued, it remains a significant and influential discourse in both psychoanalytic and broader cultural contexts. I intend to critique and challenge this phallogentric view, demonstrating its failure to account for the complexity and diversity of women's experiences and identities. Both Beauvoir and Irigaray provide valuable insights that refute the assumption of women's "lack", instead emphasising the unique lived experiences of women and the societal constructs that influence these experiences.

As a woman, I am not a passive recipient of these theories. Instead, I actively participate in this discourse, utilising my lived experiences as a qualitative research method in my scholarly inquiry. This autobiographical approach allows me to navigate the terrain of feminist theory from an intimately informed standpoint, enriching my understanding and critique of these philosophical perspectives. As

such, the engagement with Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Freud in my research underscores the importance of understanding gender inequalities within a broader philosophical, cultural, and psychoanalytic context.

2.1.1 The Ambiguous Chinese Translation of *The Second Sex*

The first time I heard about 第二性 (*The Second Sex*) (1998) was when I completed my bachelor's degree in China in 2015. It is the first full Chinese translation to include both volumes of *The Second Sex* (1949), and is based on the 1953 English version, it was edited and translated by Tiezhu Tao and published by the Chinese Academy of Press and Publication in 1998 (Tao, 1998, p.2). However, the Chinese version of this book does not provide me with an understanding of feminism, philosophy, and women's lived experience. For me, the most memorable part of this book was its paratext; precisely, the book cover (fig. 2-1) which displays the upper part of a female body cut off below the eyes, highlighting her lips and breasts and objectifying the female body while catering to the male gaze. When the digital version of this book appears on my computer screen, it suggests an erotic meaning that makes me too ashamed to read it. The Chinese translator Haiping Liu similarly criticised the publishing industry's use of an image of a sexualised Western woman on the book cover to attract readers, merely enhancing the visual effect to attract readers, "this book is simply not accepted as a feminist text in a Chinese context, with the inappropriate definition of its selling point as sex, (The Paper News, 2021)". In 2017, I went to London to continue my postgraduate study, and in the library, I saw the English Translation of *The Second Sex* (1953). I was surprised by its simple text cover and size, like a heavy encyclopaedia, distinct from the Chinese presentation that emphasised the sexual and erotic.

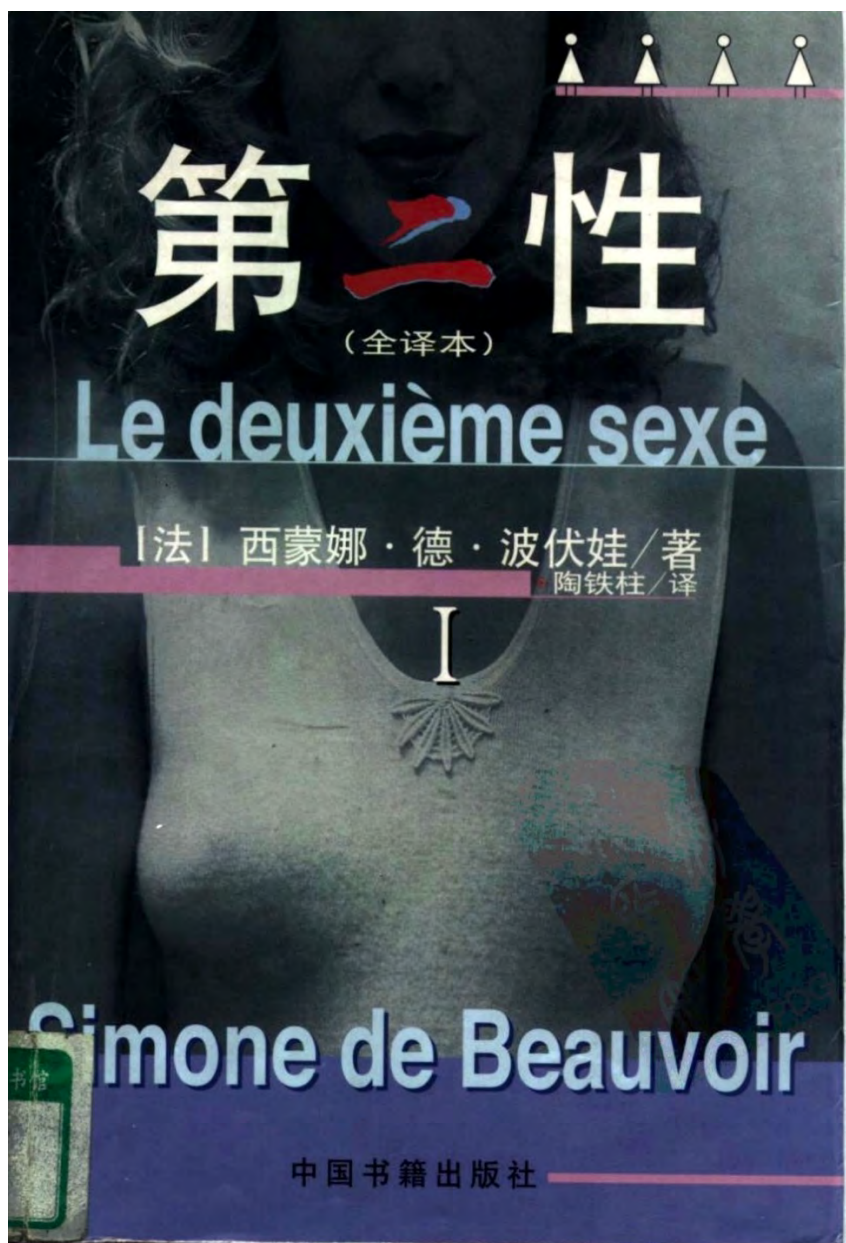


Figure 2-1

Cover of “第二性 (全译本), 1988”, translated by Tiezhu Tao

Resource: Shandong Provincial Library

In my research on feminist theory and an in-depth study of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), I gradually began to understand Beauvoir’s discussion of the treatment of women in society and her initial concern for existentialist feminist concepts of freedom, interpersonal relationships, and the experience of living as a female body which is never shown in its Chinese translation. In this section, I will study two specific Chinese mainland translations of *The Second Sex*, respectively 第二性 (全

译本) edited and translated by Tiezhu Tao, published by Chinese Academy of Press and Publication in 1998 and 第二性 (合卷本) translated by Kelu Zheng, edited by Lingchao Miu and Ran Zhou published by Digital Lab, Shanghai Translation Publishing House in 2014. I first question why the Chinese translators not only failed to recognise Simone de Beauvoir's significant contributions to philosophy and phenomenology but was also plagued by numerous misunderstandings about her academic status, which further denies Beauvoir the rightful recognition as an independent existentialist philosopher. Subsequently, by providing illustrative instances of linguistic nuances, it becomes apparent that there are limitations to interpreting Simone de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy and existentialist concepts within a Chinese contextual framework.

Take, for example, the second volume of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), originally titled in French as *L'expérience vécue* (the lived experience), which was translated into English as *Woman's Life Today*. The English translation by Parshley from 1953 fails to emphasise Beauvoir's phenomenological contribution to understanding the woman's body as an existing entity, a subject of experience, and an individual in the world. This limitation is further evident in the 1998 Chinese translation of *The Second Sex*, where the second volume was translated as 当代女性 (Contemporary Women). The Chinese title oversimplifies Beauvoir's complex arguments while reflecting the propaganda-driven contextualisation of women's roles in Chinese society, reminiscent of the concept of the “New Woman” in the Weimar Republic.

In the translator's foreword (1998, p.4), Tiezhu Tao concludes that Beauvoir's second volume the trajectory of women's lives, its evident that Tao's remarks fail to address the existential and philosophical terminologies that Beauvoir employed to explain her practical interpretations of gender and women's lived experiences. In this translation *L'expérience vécue* was simplified and transformed into a novel that narrates the social history of women, along with a brief introduction to the social and

biological situations faced by various women in society. However, Beauvoir discussed women's lived experiences from several angles and positions, including girls from childhood to motherhood, the situation of lesbians, prostitutes, and hetairas, women in love, in myth, and how women could be liberated. For instance, regarding marriage, Beauvoir pointed out that "the young girl's freedom of choice has always been much restricted; and celibacy - apart from the rare cases in which it bears a sacred character - reduced her to the rank of parasite and pariah; marriage is her only means of support and the sole justification of her existence" (1953, p.416). In contrast, men are socially independent, primarily as producers whose existence is assessed by the work they do for the group (Beauvoir, 1953). The original texts explore how men and women experience the world differently, prioritising an investigation into this phenomenon rather than presenting a general depiction of women's lives and situations. Beauvoir elucidates how women's bodies experience the world using phenomenological considerations, but the translation fails to capture these nuances, presenting a simplified version disregarding Beauvoir's original philosophical contribution to feminist thinking.

Tao's translation not only overlooks Beauvoir's invaluable contributions to philosophy and phenomenology but is also riddled with misinterpretations about her academic standing. In the preface, Tao introduces Beauvoir as merely a woman who served as Jean-Paul Sartre's lifelong companion, while he is seen as a co-founder of existential phenomenology. Regrettably, there is no acknowledgement of her significant academic accomplishments in existential phenomenology. Instead, she is portrayed as the "other" - the secondary figure to Sartre - even though her most renowned feminist work stands on its merit. In contrast to Tao's comments the preface edited by journalist and feminist activist Benoîte Groult in the renewed French edition of *Le Deuxième Sexe I, Les faits et les mythes* (1990) offers a fair and reasoned analysis of Beauvoir's academic and philosophical contributions, including her groundbreaking work in existential philosophy. Groult also examines the dynamic between Beauvoir and Sartre, but from a more equitable perspective that acknowledges Beauvoir's contributions. She (1990, p. 1-8) reported that in June of 1949, Beauvoir

embarked on a mission to rewrite women's history by incorporating biology and sociology, which involved challenging long-held stereotypes and dogmatic assertions made by the most esteemed intellectuals throughout history. Beauvoir's ultimate goal was nothing short of dismantling the barriers of prejudice and taboo that had trapped women in a predetermined role and instead exploring the most obscure avenues towards their liberation. While in the same week of June 1949 and Jean-Paul Sartre delivered his renowned lecture, "Is Existentialism a Humanism?", as a result, "*Sartre et Beauvoir entraient vivants dans la légende de l'existentialisme qui allait bientôt gagner l'étranger* (Sartre and Beauvoir entered the realm of existentialism as living legends, whose impact soon extended beyond the borders of France) (Groult, 1990, p. 1)". Tao's egregiously inadequate depiction of Simone de Beauvoir, as he fails to recognise her substantial philosophical background and denies her rightful place as an autonomous existentialist philosopher, writer, social theorist, and feminist activist.

Towards the end of his preface, Tao asserts that "this book solely represents Beauvoir's perspective from the Western world, and as such, may hold limited significance for Chinese feminist theory and the study of Chinese women's groups". This assertion is designed to create a false impression among Chinese readers that the portrayal of women in *The Second Sex* is exclusively relevant to the Western world and bears no relation to Chinese women. However, Beauvoir considers the two sexes comprehensively and universally: "Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary, a female- this word is sufficient to define her." (Simone de Beauvoir, 1953, p.33)

When analysing the Data of Biology, Beauvoir notes the perception of women as solely reproductive beings, with their identity reduced to their biological function of bearing children. The use of the term "female" to define a woman is presented as a reductionist and dehumanising practice, which fails to acknowledge the complex and diverse experiences of women. While the passage suggests that men are not subjected to the same type of reductionism and objectification, the term "male" is presented as a source of pride and privilege. The word "female" is derogatory, not

due to its emphasis on the animalistic qualities of women, nor because it is specific to Western women, but instead because it restricts women to their sex. This statement encapsulates Beauvoir's comprehensive examination of women's groups within the framework of patriarchy. For Groult the *Le Deuxième Sexe* was an enlightening idea, "*Elle a en tout cas contribué plus que tout autre à l'émergence d'une conscience féminine capable de surmonter la fatalité de sa condition, ce qui est le sens même de l'existentialisme* (In any case, she contributed more than any other to the emergence of a female consciousness capable of overcoming the fatality of her condition, which is the very meaning of existentialism) (1990, p.8)". Tao's preface implies that the Chinese feminist theory and the study of Chinese women's groups cannot benefit from reading and analysing Beauvoir's work. This reductionist view fails to recognise the interconnectedness of feminist movements and the significance of transnational dialogue and exchange of ideas. Beauvoir's contributions to existentialism and feminist theory have transcended national borders, and her work has been instrumental in the emergence of a female consciousness capable of overcoming the fatality of women's condition, which is the essence of existentialism.

Both Chinese translators of Beauvoir's work, Tiezhu Tao and Kelu Zheng, made ambiguous translations of her expressions and depictions that involved women's experiences. For example, in the opening paragraph of chapter 3, taking a psychoanalytical point of view, Beauvoir (1953, p.65) pointed to the immense progress psychoanalysis has made over psychophysiology, considering that no factor intervenes in psychic life without having taken on a human meaning,

The tremendous advance accomplished by psychoanalysis over psychophysiology lies in the view that no factor becomes involved in the psychic life without having taken on human significance; it is not the body-object described by biologists that actually exists, but the body as lived in by the subject... There are biologically essential features that are not a part of her real, experienced situation; thus, the structure of the egg is not reflected in

it. But on the contrary, an organ of no great biological importance, like the clitoris, plays a part in it of the first rank. It is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life". (Simone de Beauvoir, *ibid*, p.65)

Beauvoir references the ovum and the clitoris to prove that female physiological characteristics do not essentially correlate with women's lived experiences through the psychoanalytical aspect. Beauvoir believed woman is not defined by nature and biologically essential data. Instead, a woman defines herself by considering nature in her *affectivité*. Beauvoir makes a significant conclusion: "*La femme est une femelle, dans la mesure où elles' éprouve comme telle*" (1949, p.51), directly translating to English as, "the woman is a female, insofar as she experiences herself as such", which H.M.Parshley, the original translator of Beauvoir's work into English, translates as "woman is a female to the extent that she feels herself as such" (1953, p.65).

It is arguable that translating the French word "*éprouvé*" as the verb, feel, is correct. The "*éprouvé*" is an adjective with two typical definitions. It first represents a person who has suffered a lot and describes a tried and tested process (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Its verbal form is "*éprouver*", which could be translated to feel, suffer, experience, test, try and encounter. According to English dictionaries, feel and experience have similar meanings; however, the former indicates an abstract emotion or sensation, such as happiness, sadness, and a sense of excitement. At the same time, the latter emphasises encountering or undergoing specific events or occurrences (Oxford Languages, 2023). Applying the English word feel to represent *éprouvé* generally highlights a woman's emotional aspects rather than including her concrete experiences through the living body.

As noted earlier, the 1972 Chinese version of *The Second Sex* was translated from Parshley's English version to Chinese, where Tiezhu Tao translated Beauvoir's works based on Parshley's understanding. Specifically in relation to the sentence discussed above Tao's translated it as: "女人是雌性, 在某种程度上连她自己也是这样

认为”, which in English means, “a woman is female, in some way, she also considers herself as such.” As analysed in the previous section, Beauvoir explicitly asserted that the use of “female” by a man in reference to a woman can be viewed as a potentially insulting or derogatory language choice. Tao specifically applied the Chinese biological term “雌性[cíxìng]” referring to the female, a term discussing an animals' biological sex, which could be interpreted as reinforcing gender stereotypes or emphasising a perceived power differential between two sexes. This offers an entirely different interpretation from the original meaning intended by Beauvoir, “*ce n’est pas le corps-objet décrit par les savants qui existe concrètement, mais le corps vécu par le sujet* (1949, p.51)”, which emphasises how women recognise themselves as female due to the body experienced by the subject. Thus, Tao’s application of the term “雌性[cíxìng]” to describe women can be seen as an objectifying or dehumanising translation, reducing women to their reproductive capacities and ignoring their complex identities and experiences. Therefore, the translation oversimplifies and essentialises the concept of gender, ignores the diverse experiences and perspectives of women, and reinforces harmful gender stereotypes to Chinese readers.

In the 2014 Chinese translation of *The Second Sex*, Kelu Zheng presents a different perspective from Tiezhu Tao, although his translation shares some similarities with Parley. Since Zheng provides a direct rendering of the sentence from the original French text, as “女性这样感受自我, 因此女性是一个女人”, which in English means “as a woman feels herself in this way, therefore female is a woman.” Zheng applies the term 感受自我 [gǎn shòu] referring to the “éprouver”, which is an ambiguous Chinese phrase consisting of two words “感受 [gǎn shòu]” and “自我 [zì wǒ]” that means “feel self” or “sense self”. It is noteworthy that the Chinese expression “感受自我 [gǎn shòu zì wǒ]” appears to integrate both “感觉 [gǎn jué]” and “体验 [tǐ yàn]”. The former, is associated with emotional sensations which relate to the brain's responses to things that directly act on the sensory organs and the perceptual state of the sensory system (Hong 2010; Peng 2015). The latter primarily pertains more to

the subjective experience acquired through personal interaction with the world (Chinese dictionary, 2018). In the case of Beauvoir's original French phrase, the term "éprouve" carries a complex meaning that can be understood as "feels", "experiences", and "undergoes", describing the approach in which a woman experiences herself as a female. It implies a bodily experience beyond mere cognitive awareness, highlighting a subjective, emotional, and lived experience of femininity rather than a purely objective or biological response. Consequently, the Chinese translation "女性这样感受自我" appears to capture the bodily and subjective nature of "éprouve".

Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that the expression "感受自我 [gǎn shòu zì wǒ]" in Chinese may elicit varying interpretations in different contexts and may not always convey the same nuance as "éprouve" in French. Arguably, in Chinese literature, "感受[gǎn shòu]" is widely considered as "感觉[gǎn jué]"³ since they share the same character "感[gǎn]", which emphasises the subjective aspect of self-awareness and self-perception. In other words, the phrase does not always encompass the full range of meanings associated with the concept of "体验[tǐ yàn]". Thus, "感受自我 [gǎn shòu zì wǒ]" may not convey the same depth of personal connection to lived experience as "éprouve", as lacks the historical and cultural specificity of Beauvoir's original argument.

One possible way to improve the Chinese translation would be to use a more context-specific term that better captures the bodily and emotional nuances of "éprouve" in the context of *The Second Sex*. For example, applying the phrase "身体 (body) 体验[tǐ yàn]" to replace the ambiguous "感受[gǎn shòu]", which would emphasise explicitly the bodily experience and personal interaction with the world

³ In Chinese, "ganjue" (感觉) integrates "gǎn", referring to a mental state, with "jué" which relates to physical perception. The term collectively refers to the concept of feeling, aligning with the sensory aspects of human experience, such as sound, smell, taste, and touch (Peng 2015, p. 170-178).

implied by "*éprouve*". Additionally, to further enhance readers' understanding of the text and its cultural and historical context, it would be advisable to include footnotes or annotations that explain the complex meanings of specific terms or concepts that may not have an exact equivalent in Chinese.

The process of translating *The Second Sex* into Chinese by Tiezhu Tao and Kelu Zheng indeed involves significant challenges, as many of the philosophical concepts and feminist nuances embedded in Beauvoir's work are difficult to capture in Chinese due to linguistic and cultural differences. This translation can lead to a loss of intrinsic meaning and, thus, a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the original text's intentions. When reading the English translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012)⁴, by Donald A Landes, they specifically noted the nuanced applications of the "*éprouve*". For example, when Merleau-Ponty discusses individuality, "I experience [*éprouve*] the unity of the world just as I recognise a style. Moreover, the style of a person or a town does not remain constant for me (2012, p.342)". While translating Merleau-Ponty's notion of the sensation, Landes clarifies, "When I see an object, I always feel [*éprouve*] that there is still some being beyond what I currently see... and not merely more sensible being, but moreover a depth of the object that no sensory withdrawal will ever fully exhaust (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p.224)".

The variable uses of *éprouve* in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) highlights the rich, layered meanings the term carries in its original French context. This complexity presents a significant challenge in translating the work into other languages, including Chinese, as it is difficult to find an equivalent term that encompasses all the nuances of *éprouve*. In the context of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which will be

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* was originally published in French in 1945 by Éditions Gallimard. The first English translation by Colin Smith appeared in 1962 (reprinted in 2005 by Routledge), and a more recent translation by Donald A. Landes was published in 2012, also by Routledge. This research engages with both English versions (2005 and 2012) to better interpret key phenomenological terms in their original conceptual context, particularly where subtle shifts in translation reveal different emphases in Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment.

analysed in the next section, *éprouve* is used to describe a range of embodied experiences, including the perception of one's own body, the perception of other bodies, and the interaction between oneself and the world. It represents a deep, personal, and intimate experience that is sensory, cognitive, and emotional. This meaning is reflected in Landes' translation, where he alternates between "experience" and "feel" to convey the different dimensions of *éprouve*.

Thus, translating into *éprouve* Chinese poses an even more significant challenge due to cultural and philosophical differences, terms like "感受自我 [*gǎn shòu zì wǒ*]" or "感觉 [*gǎn jué*]" may be used to approximate the meaning of *éprouve*. However, these terms may not fully capture the depth of personal connection, embodiment, and lived experience implied by the French "*éprouve*", which Beauvoir originally intended to address. Through the lens of my own personal and cultural experiences, I attempt to negotiate the complex territory between Beauvoir's feminist theories and their interpretation and application concerning my Chinese cultural background. In my year four practice, I create the *Familias Fantasy* series (2022-2023) (fig.2-2), which presented the development of my painting and sculpting which reflected on dating and then living with my current boyfriend who, as a typical Chinese man, has many household expectations and fantasies concerning women. I investigated the nuances of intimate relationships from both my perspective and that of my partner. The depictions in the installation resonate with Beauvoir's insights about women's multifaceted and evolving experiences.



Figure 2-2

Meichen Lu, *The Familias Fantasy*, (2022-2023)
Installation, Multiple mediums
Size variable
Exhibition "*Unfolding Narratives 3*"
London College of Communication



Figure 2-3

Meichen Lu, *Ambiguous Process*, 2023
 (Parts of the installation of "*The Familias Fantasy*, (2022-2023)")
 Medium: clay, spray paint, Chinese watercolour, acrylic
 Size: 28x76.5cm

By incorporating autobiographical experiences, I align my works with Beauvoir's phenomenological approach, demonstrating how complex interactions with others and broader societal structures continuously shape women's self-perceptions and identities. For example, the *Ambiguous Process* (2023) (fig.

2-3), as part of the *Familias Fantasy* series, focuses on discussions of erotic intercourse and female generative ability, exploring perspectives from both my boyfriend and me. It

reflects me as a living body, which aligns with Beauvoir's description of how women relate to their bodies and their lovers' bodies during intimate encounters while acknowledging the generative process's uncertainty and complexity (1953, pp. 301-355). However, from a male perspective, arguably, intercourse is often seen as an inevitable task to fulfil the traditional expectations for offspring within Chinese patriarchal societal norms. The longstanding issue of sex-based discrimination is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, mainly influenced by the traditional preference for male offspring within Chinese Confucian patriarchal norms (Murphy, R., Ran, T., &

Xi, L.,2011). Meanwhile, the long way motif that runs throughout the entire composition, as the representation of phallic worship, symbolising male dominance within intimate relationships under patriarchy, serves as a critique of male dominance within intimate relationships while reflecting Beauvoir's views on gender imbalances in the patriarchal society.

A more detailed analysis of the *Familias Fantasy* will be presented in Chapter 5. However, it is important to note here that this analytical approach—merging autobiographical experiences with critical feminist theory—is embedded throughout my entire artistic practice. Across different pieces, I consistently draw on personal experiences to interrogate and challenge gendered power structures. By engaging directly with my lived reality and the socio-cultural contexts that shape it, my works aim to offer a nuanced exploration of femininity, corporeality, and relational dynamics. Each project forms part of a broader, cohesive inquiry into how women's identities are constructed and negotiated within patriarchal frameworks, ensuring that the phenomenological lens and critical perspectives remain central to my artistic methodology.

Consequently, the process of exploring, reading, and interpreting Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is heavily influenced by my specific cultural context. As a Chinese-born and educated individual, I apply my intimate understanding of Chinese language and culture to unpack Beauvoir's text in an approach that may not always be accessible to a Western audience. In navigating Chinese societal norms and the ensuing expectations placed upon women, I find my personal experiences profoundly resonate with Beauvoir's exploration of womanhood. In this context, my artwork serves as a personal exploration of these themes and a critique of the patriarchal norms ingrained in Chinese society. From my standpoint, examining Chinese translations of *The Second Sex* provides a compelling opportunity to explore the inherent complexities of translating philosophical, phenomenological, and feminist ideas across distinct linguistic and cultural boundaries. The critique of Chinese translations of Beauvoir's work provides valuable insights into the difficulties of

complex translation situations and intends to challenge dominant norms and expectations about womanhood in Chinese patriarchal contexts.

My art practice and research are deeply intertwined with my engagement with Beauvoir's feminist theories, her phenomenological approach, and my contexts. My works reflect the complex negotiation between Western feminist thought, Chinese cultural traditions, and personal experiences, offering unique insights into the multifaceted realities of women's lived experiences. Through my practice and research, I intend to explore a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of feminism, transcending the boundaries of language, culture, and personal experience.

2.1.2 The phenomenological investigation of Beauvoir's *L'expérience vécue*

The primary objective of phenomenology involves addressing a set of issues initially outlined by Edmund Husserl in his unfinished manuscript, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (1970). These issues encompass various problems, including the dilemmas of birth and death, the enigma of the unconscious mind, the quandaries of historicity and social life, and most importantly, the intricacies of gender (Heinämaa, 2003). According to Heinämaa (2003, p.21), phenomenologists explore the ontic meanings of these phenomena through different types of realities and objectivities. For instance, when examining death, the phenomenological question becomes "How do we experience death as an occurrence [*Vorkommnis*]?" (Heinämaa, 2003, p.21) instead of simply analysing the concept of death and its mechanisms. Thus, phenomenology involves considering questions through their constitution as entities,

occurrences, processes, events, and facts, among others, and how these phenomena are experienced.

Beauvoir's second volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) is titled *L'expérience vécue* or *The Lived Experience*, which explicitly emphasises her phenomenological analysis rooted in Husserl's reflections while clarifying her objective to "develop a philosophical description of women's experiences and the world as experienced by women" (Heinämaa, 2003, p.1). For Beauvoir and this thesis, it is critical and significant to trace the lived experience of women from their origins to comprehend how it relates specifically to sexuality and gender.

This analysis starts by examining Husserl's notion of the living body, as presented in his work *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (Second Book: Studies in Phenomenology of the Constitution)* (1989)⁵. In this book the initial segment titled, *The Constitution of Material Nature*, expounds on how the experience of physical nature, spatial entities, and material bodies is constituted. The subsequent section discusses the constitution of animal nature. I intend to study the first two sections of this book primarily based on Heinämaa's analysis and their conclusions on Husserlian theory. In the third section, *The Constitution of the Spiritual World*, Husserl focuses on the personalistic approach towards the living body. I will investigate the English translation and parts of the original German version to comprehend specific terminology and compare these with experience of the living body from a personal perspective. I combine Heinämaa's conclusive consideration of the living body and the application of Husserlian phenomenology to feminist theory. Additionally, I examine and interpret Merleau-

⁵ The English translations of *Ideas I* and *Ideas II* used in this study are drawn from the *Collected Works of Edmund Husserl* (Kluwer Academic Publishers), prepared under the auspices of the *Husserl Archives at Leuven*. In this series, *Ideas I* appears as *Volume II* (1982) and *Ideas II* as *Volume III* (1989), corresponding to the original German editions published as *Husserliana volumes III* (1913) and *IV* (1952) respectively.

Ponty's notion of the habitual body, which specifically relates to my autobiographical body of works.

In Section Three of "The Constitution of the Spiritual World" this book, Husserl (1989, p. 184-185) was dedicated to distinguishing the opposition between the naturalistic and personalistic worlds of the living body. Nature is understood as a natural scientific attitude towards the living body that "includes all material or spatiotemporal things" (Heinämaa, 2003, p.27). In other words, initially, natural sciences could be roughly divided into life science and physical science, that is, alternatively known as biology, physics, astronomy, etc. The subject of study and structured knowledge based on empirical evidence from observation and experimentation, specific to the living body, asks what its mechanism is in terms of its biological, physical, and anatomical aspects, as distinct from Husserl's constitutive phenomenological investigation of the living body. In addition to mere material bodies or physical things, Heinämaa (2003, p.28) argues that natural sciences consist of the spiritual or psychic nature founded on the physical world while also the object of psychological sciences explaining animal behaviour "as the natural science of the psychic being of Animalia (humans and animals) which thus fits within anthropology and so within general zoology as natural sciences (Husserl, 1989, p.184)". Heinämaa also concludes that there are three crucial features between the living body and other material things based on her reflection and review of Husserl's work: the living body serves as the bearer of sensations, a source of spontaneous movement, and a fixed reference point for spatial perception. (2003, p. 29-30)

Husserl intended to investigate the living body from both psychic and physical natures of sensations, motility, and spatial orientation "with the soul (*seele*) as presupposition even for the naturalistic attitude (1989, p.184)"; however, "...the *seele*, for natural science, it is nothing per se; it is merely a stratum of real occurrences in the body (1989, p.184)". In the third section, Husserl begins with the *seele* as the presupposition of understanding the personalistic attitude to the living body. Husserl illuminated the personalistic attitude relationship between the *seele*

and the living body is “not a spatial or quasi-spatial relation but essentially similar to the relation between the expression and the expressed (Heinämaa, 2003, p.33)”, however:

“The soul (*seele*) is not there as extended over the Body in the manner of being "localized" in the proper sense... the psychic is, in experience, one that is, *realiter* one-with the Body; to that extent it is something at the body or in it, lacking only distinguishable separate location". (Edmund Husserl 1969, p. 185-186)

That means, although the *seele* appears as nothing per se, it indeed exists in and intertwines with the living body from the personalistic attitude in Husserl's phenomenology, emphasising the *seele* as a *realiter* belonging to the body. Husserl applied the term introjection (Introjektion) to describe the soul-body union to illuminate further his main idea that the living body presents itself originally as an expression of the *seele* which is considered as psychic life or mental activities (1969, p. 175-195). He states, “all lived experience, is founded Bodily, and hence, in addition, so is the total content of that which, in the persons, intentionally constitutes the world and all its properties” (Husserl, 1969, p. 193). Moreover, in Husserl's discussion, through his soul-body union, he never specified the sexes as a presupposition while the *seele* is the mere presupposed condition. That implies all human activities are psychic (psychological, mental), without feminine and masculine distinctions, no distinguishing between hunting and housekeeping, cooking and babysitting, smoking and nursing, and all equally happening on our bodies in relation to the *seele*. In the Husserlian sense of the personalistic mode, “all occupations and modes of living are, in the personalistic attitude, psychic: even our erotic and sexual practices express our souls” (Heinämaa, 2003, p. 34).

Husserl's consideration of individuality is interesting from a feminist viewpoint; he argues that an individual's "individuality" is not merely a superficial aspect but encompasses the total style and habitus of the subject. This individuality permeates

and unifies all modes of behaviour, activities, and personal passivity. It is a concordant unity that integrates the various aspects of the person's being. Thus, in Husserl's concept, the feminine and masculine would not be distinguished by any substance, material and immaterial or in any functions or part of their bodies but are indeed characterised by the "psychic basis of habitus (Husserl, 1969, p. 290)", and "the difference of style (Heinämaa, 2003, p. 34)". As the American feminist Iris Marion Young (1990, p. 141-159) argues, the differences between women and men are not simply physical. Still, they are stylistic, consisting of differing characteristic habitual styles of comportment and expression.

Along the lines of Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty further developed the living body as the habitus as an expression in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), "Habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments. It thus elucidates the nature of the body image... it consists of a mosaic of 'extensive sensations'. It is a system that is open to the world and correlative with it..." (Maurice Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 166)

Accordingly, habit reveals our capacity to extend our presence in the world and modify our lived experience by acquiring and incorporating new tools, techniques, and cultural practices. Habit allows us to adapt and engage with the world differently, enabling us to navigate our surroundings and interact with our environment more effectively. In this sense, habit is not merely a mechanical repetition of actions but a dynamic process that involves the integration of fresh instruments into our bodily existence where the living body expresses a "manner" relating to the world or an "attitude" toward the world. Merleau-Ponty also argues that the body is not simply an object situated in space but an integral aspect of our existence, "our body, rather, is the origin of all the others, it is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it that they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes (2012. p.147)". He emphasises the significance of the body as the origin and source of expression while arguing against the notion that the body is merely one expressive space among

others. According to Merleau-Ponty, the corporeal dimension of human existence is characterised by its active and dynamic nature. It transcends a mere passive entity subjected to observation or manipulation, instead constituting the very foundation for our engagements with the surrounding world. The body's capacity for expressive movement plays a fundamental role in shaping our perceptual encounters with the existence of objects.

For Merleau-Ponty, “my body is that meaningful core which behaves like a general function, and which nevertheless exists (2005, p.170)”; it further supports his perspective on instrumentality that “bodies are not simply like tools, but rather tools and other material objects have the ability to enhance and expand the expressive capacities of bodies” (Heinämaa, 2003, p.63); he argues that it is just one aspect of the living body and not the primary one. As Heinämaa (2003, p.61-64) notes, Heidegger and Sartre both recognize the significance of the body in relation to the world, particularly in terms of work and instrumentality. According to Heidegger, the body is implicitly given in work and production as the wearer and user of things (Heinämaa, 2003). Sartre further develops this idea by asserting that one's own body is a proto-instrument, a fundamental tool presupposed by the instrumentality of the world; according to Heinämaa's discussion on Sartre, “for him, one's own body is a proto-instrument presupposed by the instrumentality of the world...They appear as tools that can be used in the making and managing of other tools. They are, "in a word, tool-machines" (2003, p.62)”.

However, Merleau-Ponty argues the body is not primarily a practical tool; instead, it is first given to us in its caressing and fumbling movements, expressing a more intimate and embodied interaction with the world. For example, a house is not merely a means of sheltering or resting; it expresses a way of living. Similarly, a blind person's cane is not solely for orientation in space; it also expresses their affections and moods (Heinämaa, 2003). Also, explorations of the female body in my autobiographical works, particularly in the creation progress of vulva figures, present a parallel to Merleau-Ponty's conception of the living body. These vulva figures are

not merely artistic representations but serve as an expressive extension of my own body, reflecting personal experiences, emotional states, and perceptions of the world. They become tools that enhance and expand my expressive capacities, similar to how Merleau-Ponty perceives the role of tools in relation to the body.

According to Husserl, our bodies situate us in a spatial context relating to other objects and bodies, "...if the Body moves and occupies ever new places, the soul, too, as it were, co-moves. The soul is indeed ever one with the body" (1989, p. 175-176). Husserl asserts that the movements and placements of our bodies shape our psychic life, and our souls are intimately connected with our bodily experiences. Merleau-Ponty's perspective builds upon Husserl's ideas by emphasising the central role of the body in individuals' engagement with the world. He further illuminates that our primary relation to the world is affective; instead of perceiving things as merely functional or suitable, they appear to us as attractive or repulsive, evoking emotional responses.

... The body is our general medium for having a world... At all levels, it performs the same function which is to endow the instantaneous expressions of spontaneity with 'a little renewable action and independent existence'.
(Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 169)

Accordingly, at times, the body's actions are primarily directed towards basic life-sustaining activities, resulting in the perception of a biological world that is focused on survival. In these instances, the body's movements are restricted to essential functions related to self-preservation. However, the body's actions can also transcend their literal functions and take on figurative meanings, for example, by discussing motor habits, such as dancing, where bodily movements acquire additional layers of significance beyond their practical purposes (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). Through these actions, the body manifests a core of new meanings and symbolism, contributing to the formation of a more nuanced and complex experience

of the world. In certain cases, the body's natural means may not be sufficient to achieve the desired meaning or intention. In such situations, the body can construct instruments or tools, extending its capabilities and projecting a cultural world around itself. By doing so, the body expands its expressive possibilities and engages with the broader cultural context in which it exists. Across these different levels, the body fulfils a common function, as Paul Valéry emphasised, to endow the spontaneous expressions of the self with "a little renewable action and independent existence (1895, p.177)". As Merleau-Ponty clarifies, "...habit is merely a form of this fundamental power. We say that the body has understood, and habit has been cultivated when it has absorbed a new meaning and assimilated a fresh core of significance" (2005, p. 169).

Contextually, the compatibility between Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's arguments lies in their shared emphasis on the body's pivotal role in shaping our experiences and understanding of the world. Both philosophers recognise that the body is not simply a physically fixed entity but a complex medium through which we perceive, act, and assign meanings. Merleau-Ponty further illuminates that the body's actions, even habitual ones, ranging from fundamental biological functions to complex cultural expressions, contribute to the formation of our lived experiences and the meanings we attribute to them. This implies that through its movements and habits, the body gives permanence and substance to the fleeting and ephemeral moments of spontaneous expression. In this point, habit, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a form of this fundamental power of the body.

When Heinämaa's considers Merleau-Ponty's point regarding "the body is not an addition to a manner of being; it is this manner itself (2003, p.40)". she confirms Merleau-Ponty's argument that we recognise and apprehend these stylistic wholes not only in individuals and works of art but also in various aspects of our lived experience, including materials, utensils, places, and ultimately, the world itself (Heinämaa, 2003). Merleau-Ponty's perspective further develops and supports Husserl's discussion on individuality, in which individuals' distinctions are not

predetermined by biological or essentialist factors but are constituted through the “psychic basis of habitus”. Thus, the differentiation between femininity and masculinity is understood as a result of social, cultural, and historical processes that shape individuals' habits and embodied dispositions, thereby giving rise to gendered identities and expressions.

In this view, the body is not seen as a fixed entity but as an adaptive and expressive medium that assimilates and embodies meanings through cultivation of habit. Through this process of habituation and the absorption of new meanings, the body comes to understand and express different aspects of human experiences. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty's development of the living body supports that the differentiation between the feminine and masculine does not rely on inherent physical traits or functions but rather on the psychic and cultural dimensions that are ingrained within individuals through their habitual dispositions and the meanings they assimilate.

The progress of my performative drawing acts, like the habitual body actions discussed by Merleau-Ponty, offers a tangible example of how the body mediates my experiences and understanding of the world through its actions and habits. As I interact with my audience through drawing, writing, and recording, my body movements become a conduit for conveying my thoughts, experiences, and responses to the audience's reactions. These embodied actions, which have become habitual in my performance, transcend their literal functions, acquiring layers of symbolic significance beyond their practical purpose. The performative drawing act, similar to a habit, has become a fundamental power through which my body understands and responds to the world around my living body. By capturing the reactions of the audience in my drawings, I create a dynamic feedback loop that continuously informs my understanding and articulation of experiences. This act of drawing becomes a habit that absorbs new meaning and assimilates fresh cores of significance, aligning with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the habitual body.

Bringing both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty modal concepts back to Beauvoir's phenomenological consideration of the female body: "...the body is not a thing, it is a situation as viewed in the perspective I am adopting - that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty: it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects" (1953, p.61). For Beauvoir, a woman should not be questioned merely based on her physical and biological attributes such as womb, menstruation and breasts but would be perceived in terms of her lived experiences with her *see/e* as presupposition as the subject of being in the world while "her temporal and spatial and relational modes of becoming" (Secomb, 2007, p. 43). Also, Merleau-Ponty's framework of style, manner and perception of the living body allowed Beauvoir to pose the question of being-a-woman in a new approach by questioning "how she is". Beauvoir explicitly affirms the notion of instrumentality based on Merleau-Ponty, which rejects the body merely or primarily as an instrument. However, she further posits the instrumentalist notion is inadequate in describing feminine experiences because "the world as revealed through the feminine body is not a practical world as ready to hand" (Heinämaa, 2003, p.70).

In part 4 of *The Second Sex*, "The Formative Years" (pp.273-413), Beauvoir extensively explores the multifaceted nature of childhood between the sexes; the young boy is described as having an open and expansive future ahead of him, while the girl's future is depicted as predetermined and limited. She is expected to follow in her mother's footsteps, maintaining the same domestic duties and caring for her children as she received care in her childhood. As Linnell Secomb analysed Beauvoir's suggestion, "that too often women become trapped in the role of object and in the situation of immanence, undermining her ability to participate in transcendence" (2007, p.49).

According to Merleau-Ponty (2012, p.173), the term "transcendence" describes the process through which existence actively engages with and transforms its given

circumstances; it refers to the dynamic movement by which existence embraces and incorporates the factual situation it encounters. Accordingly, it is an essential aspect of existence, as without it, existence would lose its defining tension. It is not a process of definitively abandoning or leaving things behind but rather involves the continual integration and transformation of what it encounters. In its transcendent nature, existence does not consider anything external or accidental to itself. It internalises and incorporates all aspects of experience, including sexuality and the body. These elements are not mere incidental contents of our experiences but integral components that contribute to the formation and expression of existence. Existence does not entertain the notion of pure facts since it is precisely the movement through which facts are taken up and given meaning.

Therefore, from the very beginning, the ambitious young boy is preparing to encounter his freedom, rich and full of possibilities in the future, emphasising the individual's active role in shaping his existence. His transcendence represents the active engagement of existence with its circumstances, the ongoing process of incorporating and transforming the given, and the rejection of viewing any aspects of experience as mere external or accidental content. However, the young girl, born different from the boy, "in no domain whatever did she create; she maintained the life of the tribe by giving it children and bread, nothing more" (Beauvoir, 1953, p.99); she is "an inessential creature is incapable of sensing the absolute at the heart of her subjectivity; a being doomed to immanence cannot find self-realization in acts" (ibid, p.609). Beauvoir provides a perspective to reveal the woman as a relative being to the man since her feminine experience could be solely understood within the framework of a practical masculine world where a woman is doomed to immanence. Beauvoir argues that the unique embodiment of femininity holds significance not only due to its distinct experiential qualities compared to masculinity but also because its distinctiveness has been overlooked within the dominant male-oriented scientific and philosophical tradition.

For instance, Beauvoir (1953, p.66) exemplifies that the sexologist Marañón had described the libido as a specific virile (masculine) character. His perspective implies that the sexual fulfilment of women is somehow incomplete or insufficient compared to men, as he states that women are only halfway along the road (Beauvoir, 1953). From Marañón's concept of sexuality, "only the lesbian could have as rich a libido as that of the male, and she would therefore represent a 'superior' feminine type" (ibid, p. 396), since sexuality is a unitary quality that exclusively belongs to men. At the same time, "women who attain orgasm are 'viriloid' women" (ibid, 66). This notion suggests a hierarchical understanding of sexuality, with male sexuality considered as the norm or standard to which female sexuality is compared and judged.

Further, Beauvoir elaborates Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's reading on feminine experience, " 'To be a woman', says Kierkegaard in *Stages on the Road of Life*, 'is something so strange, so confused, so complicated, that no one predicate comes near expressing it and that the multiple predicates that one would like to use are so contradictory that only a woman could put up with it' " (1953, p.163). On that basis, Kierkegaard describes being a woman as ambiguous, defying simple categorisation through singular predicates. He argues that the multiple predicates one may use to describe women are contradictory, making it a uniquely challenging experience that only women themselves can truly understand and endure.

However, Beauvoir explores Kierkegaard's argument by emphasising that women are often defined negatively as the "other" in relation to men; she argues that,

...This comes from not regarding woman positively, such as she seems to herself to be, but negatively, such as she appears to man. For if woman is not the only Other, it remains none the less true that she is always defined as the Other. And her ambiguity is just that of the concept of the Other: it is that of the human situation in so far as it is defined in its relation with the Other". (Simone de Beauvoir, 1953, p.163)

While women are not the only other, they are consistently positioned as the other in relation to men. Beauvoir's argument establishes a connection between the ambiguity of women's existence and the concept of the Other⁶, which serves as a lens through which to understand the broader human condition defined in relation to others. The Other is characterised as possessing both negative and positive qualities, being simultaneously perceived as evil and necessary for attaining the good. It functions as a gateway to the infinite and serves as a measure of one's finite nature.

By framing women's existence within the context of the Other, Beauvoir argues that women do not embody a stable or fixed concept of identity. Instead, they continuously navigate many experiences and emotions, traversing a spectrum encompassing hope and frustration, hate and love, and good and evil. This perpetual movement and oscillation in their experiences can be attributed to their relationship with the Other. According to Beauvoir, it provides a framework for understanding how women's experiences and perceptions are shaped by their interactions with men and the societal expectations imposed upon them. It reinforces the idea that women's identity is contingent upon their engagement with the Other, particularly within the context of patriarchal social structures.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir advocates for a society where love, poetry, adventure, happiness, and dreams can thrive, but only when built upon a foundation of truth and genuine recognition of women's humanity. Eva Gothlin (2006, p.132), in her scholarly analysis, affirms Simone de Beauvoir's assertion of love and sexual relationship that men must abstain from attempting to dominate women and renounce the violence that Jean-Paul Sartre perceived as intertwined with desire. However, the male predominance over females represents more than a unilateral manifestation; rather,

⁶ I capitalise "Other" here to reflect Beauvoir's own usage in *The Second Sex*, where she consistently capitalises the term when referring to women as the Other. I follow this convention throughout my analysis when discussing Beauvoir's framework to maintain consistency with her terminology.

it embodies an inequitable treatment of the woman as the Other within the broader context of the entire species. Beauvoir applies phenomenological approaches to comprehensively investigate and analyse women's lived experiences by emphasising their subjective perspectives, examining the social and cultural factors that shape their experiences, and uncovering the meaning and significance of their existence. She reveals male theorists and the traditional notion that women should be treated as inferior or secondary to men.

The central thesis expounded by Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* posits that “to recognize in woman a human being is not to impoverish man's experience: this would lose none of its diversity, its richness, or its intensity if it were to occur between two subjectivities... It is simply to ask that behaviour, sentiment, passion be founded upon the truth” (Beauvoir 1953, p. 267-268). This argument aligns with the concept of “womb envy” introduced by Karen Horney, the objectification theory proposed by Martha Nussbaum, and Julia Kristeva's examination of abjection, which will be further explored in subsequent chapters. Together, these theoretical frameworks serve to reveal the omnipresent patriarchal norms that recurrently marginalise women's perspectives, relegating them to predefined societal roles and imposing rigid expectations upon them. Nevertheless, Beauvoir's argument challenges the prevailing phenomenological accounts of her time, particularly those put forth by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Levinas (Heinämaa, 2003). She critiques by noting that those men “have taken their own experiences as exemplary and have described the feminine, not as a variation, but as a deviation” (Heinämaa, 2003, p.73), arguing that this perspective does not hold true for objects encountered in the “feminine universe” (Beauvoir, 1953). Besides, Beauvoir's argument is not about homogenising experiences between men and women. Instead, she acknowledges that men and women have distinct subjectivities shaped by their individual experiences. Still, these differences should not be used to justify unequal treatment or devalue women's existence.

The significance of *The Second Sex* to this research lies in its consistent assertion that "woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming" (Beauvoir, p.61). In my autobiographical practice-led research, I reflect on Beauvoir's assertion by demonstrating that her understanding of womanhood and femininity is not a fixed concept but a continuous process of evolution, reflection, and transformation. This is evident in the way I examine my experiences in relationships, societal norms, and personal development and channel them into my art practices. As I mentioned before, the creation of vulva figures and application of the specific methodology in my body of works are not static representations but dynamic symbols that reflect my evolving experiences, thoughts, and feelings as a woman. Like Beauvoir, I initially recognised the importance of understanding women's lived experiences in addressing gender inequalities. By exploring my personal experiences of femininity within various social and cultural contexts, I provide an intimate glimpse into the complex realities of women's lives. The autobiographical nature of my art intends to convey a sense of authenticity and personal testimony, emphasising the importance of women's perspectives in challenging and reshaping societal norms and expectations. In addition, Beauvoir's emphasis on the phenomenological approach significantly inspired my artistic methodology.

For instance, she provides multiple examples in part 4, chapter 1, "Childhood" of *The Second Sex* (pp.273-326), where she describes the experiences of young girls encountering menstruation, which inspired my art creation from 2020 to 2023. Beauvoir exemplifies how girls often rely on self-taught knowledge from books and may feel frightened or unsure during their first menstruation. Beauvoir (1953, p. 304-314) cites Dr Liepmann's research document that mentions young girls consulting encyclopaedias and medical books, receiving only theoretical information expressed in unfamiliar, complex terms. For example, "I was greatly frightened when, at my first menstruation, I saw that the flow did not stop after a few minutes. Yet I said nothing to anybody. I was just fifteen; moreover, I suffered very little pain from it. Only once I had such pains that I fainted and lay on the floor in my room for three hours. Still, I said nothing about it". (Beauvoir, 1953, p.314)

Beauvoir also shares a typical case described by Janet in *Les Ohsessions et la psychasthénie*, which portrays a girl named Nadia who feels shame and experiences anxiety about her body due to the onset of menstruation "...The appearance of menstruation drove her half mad and believing that she was the only one in the world having the monstrosity of pubic hair... she tried all kinds of prayers and conjurations to prevent normal growth..." (1953, p.309). These case studies reveal the profound impact that societal expectations and internalised shame can have on a young girl's perception of her body during puberty. It highlights the pressures and anxieties girls may face as they often compare themselves to societal ideals and struggle to reconcile their changing bodies with the societal expectations placed upon them.

In contrast, boys often experience a positive affirmation of their emerging masculinity,

... their sex organ is more than ever an object of comparison and challenge. Becoming adult is an intimidating meta-morphosis: many adolescent boys are worried at the thought of the exigent liberty to come; but they joyfully assume the dignity of being male (Simone de Beauvoir, 1953, p.315)

Hence, Beauvoir undertakes an examination of the pervasive societal norms and expectations that are imposed upon women from a tender age. It exposes the limitations and inequalities women face in various aspects of their lives. Drawing a connection to Beauvoir's insights, my body of work *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020) which will be analysed in detail in chapter 3, both explore the significant role of menstruation. In *Opus Magnum for a Girl*, I engage in a personal narrative, recounting my own first menstrual experience at the age of 12, rooted in a conversation with my aunt that accompanied this transformative milestone. "Hortus Conclusus for A Woman", on the other hand, represents an evolved understanding

of menstruation, influenced by deepening knowledge and comprehension of this natural bodily process as a woman being. Beauvoir's critique serves as an enduring source of inspiration for me as a female researcher and artist, driving my utilization of phenomenological research methods to consider the subjective experiences of women and shed light on the profound impact of societal norms on their lives.

The emphasis on subjective experience has led me to adopt phenomenological research methods, enabling an exploration of how my existence as a woman is perceived and constructed. It is exemplified in Chapter 5, through the analysis such as *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020), *Enclosed Heim* (2022) and *Familias Fantasy* (2022-2023). Through autobiographical storyboarding, personal narrative analysis, and a critical engagement with key aspects of my lived experience—such as sexual encounters, menstruation, and intimate relationships—I seek to expose the complex realities that shape women's lives and highlight the varied ways in which patriarchal structures inform and influence those experiences.

Moreover, this approach facilitates a deeper understanding of women's subjectivity. It promotes a paradigm shift from viewing women as passive objects to recognising their active agency in shaping and navigating their lives. It empowers women to reclaim their narratives and challenges the existing power dynamics perpetuating gender inequalities.

Thus, according to Beauvoir's phenomenological thinking, I propose the woman's body is not a thing; it is the instrument we integrate with the world; however, the instrumental body is not merely a tool, expressing the practical attitude of just one possibility of realising one's embodiment. By embracing this point, individuals can move away from reducing the woman's body to an object of observation or manipulation. Instead, it becomes imperative to explore and appreciate the complexities of the woman's embodied existence, acknowledging the practical and expressive dimensions that contribute to the rich tapestry of her lived experiences.

2.2 The Ambiguity of The Female Body

Ambiguity is a critical concept explored by Beauvoir in her *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948); accordingly, ambiguity refers to human existence's inherent duality and complexity. Beauvoir elaborates on the notion of ambiguity to declare that existence is “ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed that it must be constantly won (1948, p.57)”. As Linnell Secomb analyses in her book *Philosophy and Love: From Plato to Popular Culture* (2007), these ideas can be traced back to Debra Bergoffen’s work on disclosure and domination (*The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 1997, p. 77). Secomb explains that this creates “an ambiguity in our attitude to and relation with others and the world” (2007, p. 45), highlighting the inherent ambiguity of the human condition. Fundamentally, the bond between each other, as Beauvoir asserts, “...the me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship (1948, p.31)”. It means the subject-object relationship refers to how the self (me) relates to the external world and objects (other). Beauvoir argues that the relationship between the self and others is not of the exact nature. Instead, she suggests that a deep interconnection and interdependence characterise the relationship between the self (me) and others. Thus, the self is not only a subject that defines oneself but also an object of others' perceptions and judgments. Further, Beauvoir asserts the relationship between individuals and the world,

Regardless of the staggering dimensions of the world about us, the density of our ignorance, the risks of catastrophes to come, and our individual weakness within the immense collectively, the fact remains that we are absolutely free today if we choose to will our existence in its finiteness, a finiteness which is open on the infinite. (Simone de Beauvoir, 1948, p. 71)

It acknowledges the vastness of the external world, the limits of human knowledge, and the potential risks and vulnerabilities individuals face within collective existence.

Despite these factors, Beauvoir emphasizes that an individual who chooses to embrace their existence within its inherent finiteness can still attain absolute freedom, highlighting the existentialist belief in human freedom and the capacity to choose one's existence. Hence, for Beauvoir, the ambiguity argues that humans are free and constrained, capable of transcending their circumstances but also bound by various social, historical, and biological factors. This duality creates ambiguity in individuals' lives, which constantly negotiate between freedom and limitations.

However, ambiguity is less mentioned as a term in *The Second Sex*; instead, ambiguity is related to the female body and desire. Specific to Beauvoir's analysis of women's bodies, ambiguity is evident in the formulation of immanence and transcendence. While all bodies may be experienced as immanence and transcendence, "...women are constrained to a life of immanence through their association with the bodily functions of reproduction and birth and the activities of caring for others" (Secomb, 2007, p. 45).

Yet man is free to transcend their limits of immanence on bodies to engage in the public worlds of work, politics and community, as Beauvoir (1953, p. 1-269) explained and clarified in *The Second Sex* from historically, biologically and psychologically. As analysed in the previous section, this inequality arises from the repeated immanence life of women because they have less choice of transcendence than men, which causes the act of women's subordination. As Heinämaa (2003, p. 103-104) claims, the core of Beauvoir's extensive discussion on the women's subjection issue of sexual difference is that women's subordination has become habituated and normalised through the endless reiteration of the sexual hierarchy during the repeated acts of devaluation and oblivion. Thus, the ambiguity of the female body focuses not only on her changeable dual body mode from both physical and psychic perspectives but also on the ambiguous situation in the hierarchical patriarchal context.

In the following section, I analyse both Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray writing on sexual differentiation to interpret how Freudian psychoanalytic frameworks intentionally affirms women's immanence. It exemplifies the distinct interpretation of male and female perspectives on the female body and women's lived experiences. Then, from the phenomenological consideration, I question how I, as an autobiographical practitioner, apply the lived experience as the qualitative research method to explore ambiguous and alienated women's experiences as a result of experiencing the body as both the significance and the limitation on women engagement with the world.

Simone de Beauvoir, in the second volume of *The Second Sex* (1953), explores the childhood experiences of boys and girls regarding their genital functions, initially focusing on urination. "To boys the urinary function seems like a game, with the charm of all games that offer liberty of action; the penis can be manipulated, it gives opportunity for action, which is one of the deep interests of the child..." (Beauvoir, 1953, p.278). In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), Luce Irigaray builds upon these observations and highlights the competitive dynamics within male groups, where boys engage in games and competitions centred around the performance of their genitals. When young, they are little boys "who pees the farthest" (Irigaray 1985a, p.25) in popular games and competitions to judge the ability of their genitals; when they grow up, "the "strongest" being the one who has the best "hard-on", the longest, the biggest, the stiffest penis" (ibid, p.25). Accordingly, boys find charm in manipulating their penises and see it as an opportunity for exploration, while demonstrating physical attributes related to their genitals becomes a measure of superiority and validation. This portrayal suggests a positive association between male genitalia and agency.

In contrast, Beauvoir presents a different picture for girls, "To urinate, she is required to crouch, uncover herself, and therefore hide: a shameful and inconvenient procedure" (1953, p.278), reflecting a societal expectation for girls to maintain modesty, privacy, and concealment of their bodily functions. It underscores the

gendered construction of societal roles and expectations that govern the behaviours and experiences of individuals based on their assigned gender. The differential treatment of boys and girls regarding their genital functions reflects the broader societal norms and attitudes that associate shame and inconvenience with the natural bodily functions of girls. This contrast reinforces the prevailing notion that the female body is subjected to heightened scrutiny, control, and expectations of modesty. It exemplifies the ways in which societal expectations and gender roles shape individuals' experiences, perpetuating a culture that emphasises the need for girls to hide and regulate their bodily functions.

Consequently, these differing experiences contribute to the ambiguity surrounding women's bodies. The ambiguity of the woman's body lies in the tension between recognizing interdependence and respecting the freedom of others and the gendered treatment and societal expectations imposed on female agency. A woman's body becomes a site where conflicting attitudes, perceptions, and social norms intersect, resulting in a complex and contradictory understanding of women's bodily experiences.

The urinate function also became psychoanalytical vital points to support Sigmund Freud's "penis envy" theory, where he (1962, p.61) suggested that in the female childhood, she would consider herself as biological lack when she sees a boy's genitals that were different from her. According to the Freudian psychoanalytic framework, when a girl becomes aware of the anatomical differences between the two sexes, she may develop a sense of dissatisfaction and envy. Moreover, in both the conceptualisations of Freudian "penis envy" and the symbolic "who pees the farthest" game, it is evident that males occupy an unassailable position. Concepts such as "He," "Penis," "Phallus," "Phallogentric," "Masculine," and "Patriarchy" function as the foundational subjectivity and presuppositions that underpin meaning, identity, and social order. Specific to the "who pees the farthest" game, doubtlessly, boys have biological advantages in controlling their interactive genitalia while girls never inherit one. How could a girl win the farthest pee game if she is always an

relative object to the boy? How could her experiences be passively engaged with in the male-dominated world? Thus, for Freud, girls perceive the penis as a symbol of power, superiority, and completeness, which gives rise to the development of "penis envy", wherein girls desire to possess a penis akin to boys.

Therefore, male exploration of his genitalia via the urinary function, as part of his subjectivity, in his childhood seems extremely accessible, active, interactive, and playful. The Freudian notion of penis envy confirmedly support "the transcendence of the man of action, contains the element of subjectivity" (Beauvoir, 1953, p. 477) while constantly affirming the lack of women to highlight her immanence. Initially, it reinforces the societal construction of gender roles and the idea that male genitalia is a privilege to achieve his transcendence while confirming his existence. It further enforces a hierarchical and binary understanding of gender, where men are seen as complete and women as incomplete. As Beauvoir writes: "...In woman, on the contrary, there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self, her 'being-the other'" (1953, p. 285).

Hence, the male-oriented theoretical framework explores a woman's body within the patriarchal hierarchy context, which establishes a foundation for women's ambiguous conditions. However, in some way, the little girl indeed feels penis envy, as Beauvoir (1953, p. 278) cited Alice Balint's descriptions as "How convenient!". In addition to the convenience aspect of urinary function, the shape and outstanding physical properties of the penis provide male communicative interaction with the world incredibly natural. It is easier for men to establish connections with soil, forest, moss, snow and other natural objects through their urinary stream; every time they manage and control their water stream, they show great defiance of gravity and a small victory over the laws of nature. In any case, as Karen Horney confirms, this is the daily entertainment that girls never experienced, and they envy the possibility of boys inherently exhibiting the power of genitalia, "namely, in the desire to urinate like a man" (1967, p.39). Beauvoir (1953, p.279-281) used the example of the most typical psychiatric case reported in a long study by the psychiatrist Havelock Ellis, which

examined the case of a biologically intelligent, behaviour active, and not homosexual woman, Florrie, who reflects the urinary function played an initial role in her girlhood.

Florrie grew up with her little brothers, and she didn't have her bathroom until she was seven years old, which means during her childhood, there were not many mysteries of the opposite sex since she had been accustomed to seeing her brothers' urinary actions and games (Ellis, 1928). Florrie reflects: "My earliest ideas of the superiority of the male were connected with urination. I felt aggrieved by nature because I lacked a useful and ornamental organ. It required no one to instil into me the theory of male predominance and superiority. The constant proof was before me". (Havelock Ellis 1928, p.128-129)

Numerous case studies conclude that male sex organs seem to be attractive to many girls, which also could be a support of the "penis envy" theory. Thus, girls indeed envy the penis, but not as the Freudian "biological lack"; it is her psychic considerations on "the symbol of privileges enjoyed by boys, the place the father holds in the family, the universal predominance of males, her education - everything confirms her in her belief in masculine superiority" (Beauvoir, 1953, p.69). She is questioning the inequality under the permeant biological differences as a being doomed due to immanence and patriarchy. The little girls envy boys having the right to touch their penis and can make use of it as a plaything; she indeed feels inferiority since she is challenged to access transcendence because "their organs are taboo" (ibid, 1953, p.279).

Within the patriarchal context, Freudian psychoanalysis predominantly focuses on the experiences and destinies of men, thereby neglecting the nuanced lived experiences of women (Beauvoir, 1953). The analysis of women's bodies within Freudian theory is frequently oversimplified and adjusted, reflecting a biased perspective rooted in the world of masculinity. This bias contributes to an inherent ignorance of the diverse realities of women, thereby perpetuating their state of

immanence. Thus, the theory of penis envy, a significant concept in Freudian psychoanalysis, serves as a striking example of how women's embodied existence is initially dismissed and marginalised.

The concept of ambiguity, as delineated by Beauvoir, captures the complex relationship between the self and the other, as well as the evolving interaction between the self and the world. The childhood experiences of little girls, specifically in relation to the urinary differentiation of little boys, fundamentally position women as the perpetual "other" subjected to a lifelong state of subordination. However, Beauvoir contends, "each one depends upon others" (1948, p.35), emphasising that the presence of the other does not hinder one's freedom but serves as a condition for its realisation. This notion is supported by Eva Gothlin⁷, who maintains that authentic interhuman relationships entail perceiving others as autonomous and creative individuals rather than as mere objects or possessions (2006, p.133). Consequently, men are not the absolute subjects, while women possess the agency to challenge and transcend their role as perpetually "relative beings".

The concept of ambiguity, which holds significant importance in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, reflects her underlying phenomenological intentions and her incorporation of Husserlian soul-body union as a presupposition and Merleau-Ponty's development of individuality as habitual dispositions. Beauvoir's exploration of ambiguity highlights the need for a comprehensive recognition of the experiences of both male and female, as well as the diverse manifestations of femininity and masculinity. "In girls as in boys", Beauvoir advocates, "the body is initially an expression of subjectivity, the instrument that enables the understanding of the world" (1953, p.173). This assertion emphasises the inherent role of the body in shaping one's subjective experience. It highlights the interplay between bodily existence and the individual's perception and understanding of the surrounding reality. Through embracing ambiguity, Beauvoir challenges binary constructs and

⁷ In the book, "The philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical essays, (2006)", edited by Margaret A. Simons.

encourages a more nuanced understanding of the affective foundations of human existence.

In *The Second Sex*, the concept of female ambiguity elaborates on the unique connection women's body have with the species. This is supported by both Eva Gothlin (2006, p.134) and Sara Heinämaa (2003, p. 70-71) whose analyses, derive from women's embodied experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation. Beauvoir argues that women do not merely perceive these physiological processes as instrumental for their pursuits, nor are they viewed as mere obstacles. Instead, her relationship with it is ambiguous, presenting women as alienated (Gothlin, 2006). In the section "The Data of Biology", Beauvoir (1953, p. 56-57) exemplifies that women in menstruating will "feels her body most painfully as an obscure, alien thing" because more than 85 per cent of women display distressing symptoms during the period, such as swelling of the liver, retention of urea, frequent headache, and psychic disturbance. Delving further, when fertilization occurs and the embryonic division initiates within the uterus, "woman experiences a more profound alienation" (ibid, p.57). That means for women, nurturing and developing another life within oneself elicits an intense form of otherness, intensifying the duality of self and other within the female body. The womb, transformed into a vessel for another being, underscores the alien yet intimate nature of this experience, where the woman's body becomes both a part of herself and a home for another developing being.

Thus, based on Merleau-Ponty's definition of the body, Beauvoir asserts, "Woman, like man, is her body; but her body is something other than herself" (1953, p.57). When examined within the framework of Merleau-Ponty's definition of the body, it presents an interesting debate between the self and the body. "I am my body", for Merleau-Ponty (2005, p. 231), "at least wholly to the extent that I possess experience, and yet at the same time my body is as it were a 'natural' subject, a provisional sketch of my total being". Merleau-Ponty argues that while we inhabit our bodies and our experiences are grounded in them, and our bodies also exist as entities separate from our cognitive selves. From a phenomenological viewpoint, as

discussed in the preceding section, our consciousness is intrinsically linked with our physical form. This suggests that our direct bodily experiences play a crucial role in shaping our perception, understanding, and engagement with the world. This idea aligns with Beauvoir's exploration of the female lived experience, particularly in the context of menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth, which can make the woman's body feel like an "alien thing". She points out that our bodies never wholly coincide with any self, personal or anonymous. Instead, they are given to us as internally divided into strata or phases that express personal and anonymous but also alien intentions.

Beauvoir's philosophical exposition suggests that the nature-governed physiological experiences of women contribute to more ambiguous conditions for their bodies. During menstruation, conception, or childbirth, a woman grapples with her body transforming into a conduit for biological processes that are essential for the continuance of the human species. Specifically, "...each month all things are made ready for a child and then aborted in the crimson flow" (Beauvoir, 1953, p.56). It induces a profound sense of alienation as her body appears to function beyond her conscious volition, carrying out tasks more for the benefit of the species than for her individual self. Eva Gothlin supports Beauvoir's depiction of the female experience, asserting that women, more explicitly than men, embody the ambiguity of the human condition, "being separate as well as interdependent, body as well as consciousness" (2006, p.134). Also, Heinämaa response to Beauvoir's notion of alienation, "The living body is not simply an organ of the will nor is it a natural self; it also discloses a vitality that does not belong to us as individuals or as humans" (2003, p.71). Hence, despite a woman's cognitive and emotional identity being intertwined with her body, these autonomous biological functions can make her feel as if her body has a life of its own, separate from her subjective self. In this way, Beauvoir posits the female body as "something other than herself," a site where natural, societal, and individual elements intersect and often conflict.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that Beauvoir does not view this alienation as inherently harmful as several critics claim, “Beauvoir argues that ultimately women are oppressed, not by men or society, but by biology: being dominated by the cycles of menstruation, pregnancies, and nursing, the female body severely limits the free choice and self-fulfilment of the woman” (Heinämaa, 2003, p.74). Instead, she sees it as part of the existential condition of women, a unique facet of their embodied existence that influences their experiences and perspectives in the world. As supported by Heinämaa’s analysis, women experience ambiguity and alien vitality, “not exclusively, but ‘more intimately’ than men do” (2003, p.71). Beauvoir discusses the sexual initiation that happens in adolescent girls, “... According to Stekel, all young girls are full of ridiculous fears, secretly believing that they may be physically abnormal. One, for example, regarded the navel as the organ of copulation and was unhappy about its being closed. Another thought she was a hermaphrodite”. (Simone de Beauvoir, 1953, p.375)

One of my autobiographical practices I will analyse in detail in chapter 3, the “Horror of The Little Dickhead, (2020)”, which describes the exploration of my cervix based on my first masturbation experience. As I narrate, “I have a big secret. I always believe there is a little dick inside my vagina. I can feel it when I masturbate. Am I disabled? What if my dick starts growing? And finally, grows out of my vagina? Omg! I am so sad! Another question here: where is my womb? Did my penis replace my womb, or is my penis attached to my womb? Oh NO! I do not want a dick like this! What should I do?” (Meichen Lu, 2020).

The *Horror of The Little Dickhead* (2020) is a powerful illustration of the distinctive experiences of the adolescent girl as they navigate the terrain of bodily self-discovery, sexual initiation, and consequent self-doubt and confusion in relation to the living woman's body. This narrative not only highlights the ambiguous conditions of women but also resonates with the concept of alien vitality. The notion of ambiguity manifests in the oscillation between curiosity and fear, excitement and anxiety, self-exploration and self-questioning throughout the narrative. The ambiguity

of being both a conscious entity and a bodily being plays out as I grapple with the "little penis" inside my vagina canal, a part of my body that feels both alien and intimate.

This simultaneous familiarity and foreignness encapsulate the "alien vitality" Beauvoir describes. The strange sensation that my body is harbouring a part of itself unbeknownst to my conscious mind exemplifies the sensation of my body carrying on with its existence independently of my subjective self. However, as discussed, male sexual organs are external and more readily observable, which may lead to a clearer understanding of their anatomy. In contrast, girls' sexual organs are internal, leading to possible confusion and misunderstandings (Beauvoir, 1953). Thus, it is an intimate encounter with the strange and alien aspects of one's body that men may not experience in the same manner, primarily due to their distinct biological and societal experiences.

Moreover, the alien vitality or the ambiguity, "is not specific to women, but belongs to everybody's life (Heinämaa, 2003, p.72)"; instead, women encounter ambiguous and alienated conditions more frequently than men (Beauvoir, 1953). For example, while men might encounter this sense of alienation occasionally, such as during illness or extreme fatigue, women confront this alien vitality regularly due to the cyclical nature of specific biological processes such as menstruation and pregnancy (Heinämaa 2003, p.71-73). These processes create a recurring rhythm of estrangement and reconciliation with the body unique to the female experience, also, as early as girls' sexual initiation, which punctuates their everyday life in a way that is generally not paralleled in male experiences, leading to a fundamentally different temporal structure in their embodied experiences.

Indeed, feminist scholars such as Sara Heinämaa, Linnell Secomb, and Eva Gothlin have adeptly expounded Beauvoir's notions of ambiguity and alienation in relation to the menstruating and pregnant female body. However, such experiences of

otherness and estrangement from the living body are not solely confined to womanhood or these specific biological processes. These alien aspects of women's embodiment can be felt from a young age and in relation to other parts of the body, as illustrated in the work *Horror of The Little Dickhead*, (2020). Precisely, the exploration of the cervix is positioned as an instance of encountering the 'other' within my own body. The cervix, equated with lunar blood and "the swollen woman with child", as per Beauvoir (1953, p.105), transforms into a focal point of alien vitality—acting as a component of the body that appears to operate autonomously from the conscious self. This observation not only underlines the extensive range of female physical experiences but also illustrates how these experiences can foster a feeling of 'otherness' in diverse forms and throughout various phases of life. The practice, therefore, serves as a potent illustration of Beauvoir's theory, demonstrating the intimate yet complex relationship women have with their bodies. This relationship is characterised by a heightened consciousness of the body's alien aspects, which manifests more regularly and intensely in women than men due to their distinct biological and temporal experiences. Consequently, it underscores the nuanced approaches in which embodiment shapes female subjectivity and experience.

In conclusion, the phenomenological perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty underscore the complex relationship between self and body. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology posits that the body is not an inert object separate from the subject but a "natural" subject of perception and a central part of our being-in-the-world. Beauvoir affirms this perspective, acknowledging that "woman, like man, is her body". However, Beauvoir significantly extends this understanding by examining the ways in which the unique biological processes of the female body can create feelings of alienation or otherness. In its capacity to menstruate, conceive, and give birth, the female body embodies aspects of life and growth that feel like it belongs to a domain outside the conscious self. This results in a woman experiencing her body as simultaneously intimate and alien, as both herself and something other than herself. This complex intertwining of self and other within a woman's embodied experience enriches our understanding of women's subjectivity.

It emphasises the multifaceted ways our bodies, particularly female bodies, are sites of both selfhood and otherness, intertwining individual identity with broader biological and existential processes. This nuanced understanding complicates our comprehension of the body-subject relation while challenging patriarchal contexts that often misrepresent or overlook the complexity of female embodiment and lived experience.

Chapter 3: Representation of gender through symbolic form

In this chapter, I outline extensive research from an international notion of sexuality focused on sexual symbols, feminine symbols, and specific representations of genitalia. This research methodology is qualitative, quantitative, and reflective; specific methods used include field research into Chinese traditional patterns and symbols. Thematic conceptual matrices were created to analyse the relevant international notions of symbols, these seven matrices provide detailed information on these symbols to show their key elements, similarities and differences, and how they are applied in my research and practice.

The thematic conceptual matrices are followed by a taxonomy of symbols based on the identification, integration, and organisation of relevant symbols, in relation to my graphical practices and critical thinking. This demonstrates my reflective application of these symbols based on their conventional origins, representation and meaning. I investigate the subject matter from multiple angles by juxtaposing taxonomy and typology. While taxonomy helps me establish broader categories and families within which the symbols can be analysed, typology matrices offer a platform to exemplify the variations and nuances within these overarching groups. The incorporation of self-reflection adds a layer of subjective understanding to the research, enriching the study both academically and personally. This multi-pronged approach ultimately aims to create a comprehensive, in-depth exploration that is substantiated through methodical investigation and personal insight.

Through a review of practice conducted between 2020 and 2022, I critically examine the works *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (2020), *Horror of The Little Dickhead* (2020), and *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2022), focusing on the symbolic elements embedded in the use of symbols within the context of my artistic practice. By incorporating a diverse range of cultural aesthetics, symbolism, and philosophies,

including those drawn from Eastern and Western traditions, this synthesis challenges monolithic approaches to feminist art practices. It aims to broaden the discourse by introducing hybrid methodologies that embrace cross-cultural influences, thereby fostering a more inclusive understanding of feminism in contemporary art. This exploration highlights the potential of symbolic elements to act as a bridge between diverse cultural narratives, offering new perspectives on issues such as identity, agency, and empowerment.

3.1 Understanding Visual Language: Taxonomy, Typology, and Symbols

In *Visual Research: An Introduction to Research Methodologies in Graphic Design* (2005), Ian Noble and Russel Bestley provide a comprehensive understanding of how to construct the research methodology in graphic fields. Specifically, Noble and Bestley (2005, p.10) present an intricate overview of research methods as thematic problem-solving approaches that enable designers and practitioners to develop rational and logical systems for design thinking. Accordingly, these systems are not isolated structures but are deeply rooted in existing conventions and the cultural milieu in which a designer operates. By doing so, designers initiate the “development and application of a personal visual vocabulary” (Noble and Bestley, p.10) which allows them to make more effective use of their perceptions and discoveries. Bestley and Noble (2005, p.83-88) take a case study of Wayne Daly's project "I ❤️❤️" (2003), which is exemplary in explaining the methodological richness of taxonomy within the realms of graphic design, symbolism, and art.

In general, taxonomies aim to understand a set of subject-specific concepts and create a vocabulary for these concepts in order to ultimately organise the “physical things” related to these concepts and make them easier to discover or interact with as symbols. According to Bestley and Noble's analysis, taxonomy refers to the systematic arrangement of types or classes for analytical purposes (2005, p.83). In Daly's case, it has been employed as a mode of information design to dissect the ubiquitous love-heart symbol (fig.3-1), categorizing its manifestations in various domains such as medical organizations, cardiac charities, and even in fields as divergent as politics and pornography (Bestley and Noble 2005, p. 84-86). The taxonomy developed by Daly is a multi-layered analytical tool, initially associated with both quantitative and qualitative approaches. On one level, it serves as a historical record charting the evolution of the love-heart symbol. Daly segregates these developments into categories that represent figurative or metaphorical usage,

offering insights into how the symbol has been manipulated or reinterpreted over time.

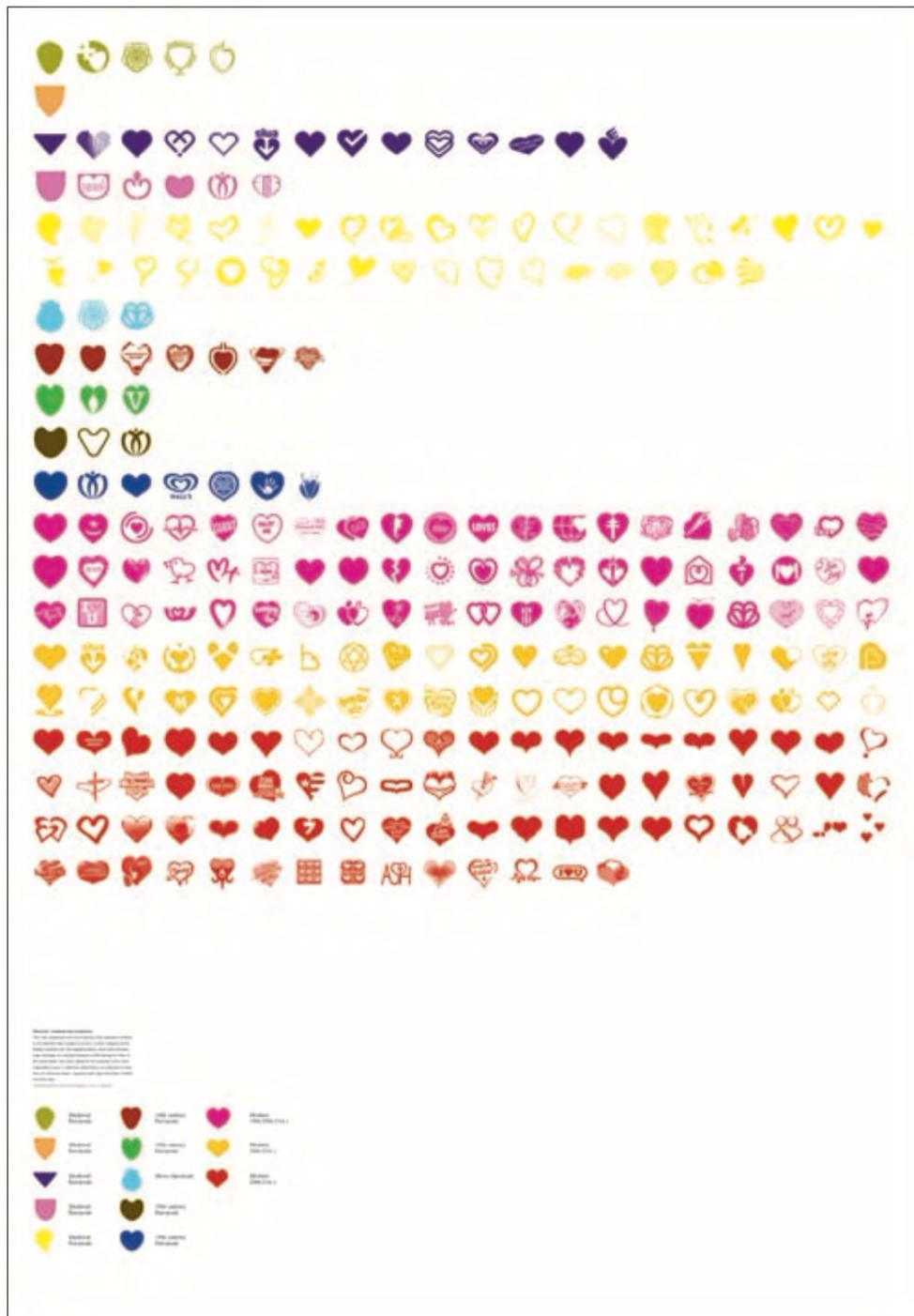


Figure 3-1

Wayne Daly, / ❤️❤️, 2003

Resource: Noble, I. and Bestley, R. (2005). *Visual Research: An Introduction to Research Methodologies in Graphic Design*. Switzerland: AVA Publishing SA, p. 82.

For Bestley and Noble in the discourse of typologies the term “refers to the study and interpretation of types – a person, thing or event that serves as an illustration or is symbolic or characteristic of something” (2005, p.83). In the realm of Wayne Daly’s work on the semiotics and historical context of the love-heart emblem, typological matrices emerge as a pivotal outcome. Bestley and Noble categorise this as "analytical research", a variant of information design that scrutinises quantitative datasets, facilitating a comparative discourse on the various types or attributes inherent to these symbols (2005, p.83). Through systematically cataloguing and dissection of his data, Daly establishes a robust foundation for exploring and comprehending the multifaceted connotations and utilisations of the love-heart symbol. The taxonomies he devises and implements transcend mere static depictions; they are instead vibrant mechanisms that propel perpetual scholarly enquiry.

Moreover, Daly’s project is an instance of action research which contains the quality of reflective practice. Bestley and Noble describe the process as a consideration “with the idea of graphic design as an action or intervention, which could also be termed action research” (2005, p.83). Accordingly, for Daly, the application of taxonomy is not merely observational but involves active interventions or 'acts' upon which he subsequently reflects. His taxonomy thus transforms from a method of classification into an operational framework for understanding broader phenomena; it becomes, in essence, a heuristic device for understanding both the language of graphic design and the socio-cultural implications of symbolic representations. Simultaneously, it provides a multifaceted lens through which one can interpret, compare, and understand the complex relationships between graphic symbols and their myriad applications and interpretations.

Specific to my research, the taxonomy asserts the importance of quantitative and qualitative analyses, and self-reflection, which further develop through my experimental practice. Like Daly's organisation of data to trace the evolution of the

love-heart symbol, I amassed symbols that articulate the evolution of sexual and feminine symbolism.

The initial phase of my research entailed the development of a taxonomy of symbols. This process involved the collation, integration, and organisation of symbols that reflect a broad, cross-cultural understanding of sexuality, with particular emphasis on sexual and feminine symbols, including representations of genitalia. Drawing from Chinese, European, alchemy, and other cultural traditions, I examined how symbols relating to female genitalia—such as the lotus, pinecone, tree of life, double happiness (囍), etc. (see from Matrix 1-1, Matrix 1-3, and Matrix 1-4)—appear across cultures, revealing both shared and divergent representations. These symbols often carry layered associations, including taboos surrounding female sexuality and entrenched gender hierarchies. In Western European traditions, sexuality has historically been encoded through Christian, mythological, or classical references, frequently framing the female body within discourses of fertility or maternal nourishment. By juxtaposing these cultural frameworks, I sought to establish a coherent yet flexible symbolic system that acknowledges both commonalities and cultural specificities in the international language of sexual symbolism. This cross-cultural synthesis provides a critical foundation for exploring how symbolic meanings are constructed, negotiated, and transformed within my artistic practice.

Building upon the foundational taxonomy, the second phase required the application of this framework to reassess and critique the identified symbols. This involved a qualitative and self-reflective process, wherein symbols were continually redesigned and re-evaluated to assess their relevance and potential for practical application. This exploratory stage sought to discover additional representations required within the taxonomy. Unlike the more structured approach of the first stage, this phase was dynamic, allowing for creative evolution. Consequently, my reflective practice entails an ongoing reassessment and redesign of these symbols to align with the narrative arc of my work, reflecting engagement with the subject matter.

It is important to clarify my use of symbol rather than semiotics. In my first year of PhD, I have studied the foundational texts of semiotics, for instance, Ferdinand de Saussure's model of the sign as a relationship between signifier and signified (Saussure, 1916). This framework felt too mechanistic and abstract for what I aim to explore in my artistic practice. Semiotics tends to prioritise structure, logic, and encoded meaning—approaches that often reduce complex, embodied, and affective experiences into analytical categories. While valuable in some contexts, this system offered little space for the ambiguity, intuition, and personal resonance that drive my material engagement with the body.

While Peirce's triadic model of the sign—comprising the representamen, the object, and the interpretant—provides a more fluid and interpretive alternative to Saussure's binary model, I have found that it still does not align with the core aims of my practice. At the heart of Peirce's model is the emphasis on the interpretant—the meaning constructed by the viewer through a continuous process of sign interpretation (Peirce, 1931–58). This positions the sign primarily within an external, open-ended system of relational meaning, privileging how a symbol is received rather than how it is embodied or lived.

However, my artistic methodology is not based on audience interpretation or semiotic deferral. I do not aim to generate multiple meanings or to participate in a process of interpretive exchange between viewer and sign. Instead, my work originates from an inward, phenomenological inquiry—a desire to inscribe lived experience directly into form and material. In this sense, Peirce's emphasis on the openness of meaning stands at odds with my introspective and embodied use of symbol. The meaning of my symbols does not unfold through triadic logic but through materialised memory, bodily reflection, and cultural inheritance.

Although I have studied both Saussurean and Peircean semiotics, I have chosen not to apply either framework directly within my practice. While Peirce's triadic model and his emphasis on interpretation offer a more dynamic and flexible approach than Saussure's binary system, it nonetheless departs from the core orientation of my work. In particular, Peirce's reliance on the interpretant—the viewer's understanding—assumes a signifying process centred on audience reception and variation (1932, pp. 135-138). My practice, however, is not primarily concerned with inviting multiple interpretations. Rather, it seeks to assert a symbolic language grounded in my own embodied subjectivity.

In contrast, I find symbols—particularly those grounded in cultural and bodily experience—far more generative for the kind of meaning-making my work requires. I approach symbols not as fixed signifiers to be decoded, but as open-ended carriers of lived experience and emotional weight. This position resonates strongly with the phenomenological point where Merleau-Ponty's (1962) view that perception is always tied to our bodily being-in-the-world, not separable from it. And with Mircea Eliade's argument that symbols are vehicles of realities that exceed rational articulation (1958, p. 15). Together, these perspectives support my use of symbol as a phenomenological and affective tool rather than a semiotic code.

The symbols I employ—such as the lotus, the enclosed garden, or the vulva-rose—are not signs to be decoded, but embodied inscriptions of my lived experience. For instance, symbolically, the lotus holds significant symbolic weight in the discourse of female sexuality, signifying both the external genitalia and the womb (Ronnberg & Martin, 2010). This contrasts with the enclosed garden, traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary and interpreted as a metaphor for physical virginity (Walker, 1988). When integrating these symbols into my work, I selected the lotus for *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (2020) to express the mature, internalised aspect of femininity, echoing the symbolic resonance of the womb. Conversely, *Enclosed*

Heim (2022) uses the enclosed garden to foreground a more cultural-historical view of reproductive enclosure.

The deployment of these symbols is not motivated by a desire for open-ended interpretation but by the need to give form to a deeply personal, situated form of knowing. This approach resists the logic of arbitrariness and instead favours phenomenological articulation—an inscription of memory, affect, and material agency through symbol. While Peircean semiotics externalises meaning into the viewer's interpretive act, my practice remains fundamentally introspective: the symbol does not ask to be read; it asks to be encountered.

This layered process fosters the taxonomy of symbols as a vibrant instrument within my creative repertoire. It facilitates a reflective examination of symbols that resonate with themes of femininity and its relevance, both from a personal perspective and within the broader cultural narrative. My methodology emphasises symbols' dynamic adaptability and contextualisation within artistic practice, mirroring personal records and cultural history of sexuality and identity while enriching the analytical profundity and close-knit integration of taxonomy, typology, and symbols.

The detailed symbol application will be analysed in the subsequent practice review sections. In the forthcoming section, *Applying Symbols through Practice*, I will provide illustrative examples that demonstrate the specific applications of these symbols as they have emerged from my research.

3.1.1 Symbol Matrices

Symbol matrices (see Appendix 1) are a critical component of my research, demonstrating my methodology for examining and collecting the historical, original meanings of feminine sexual symbols, as well as how these symbols are reinterpreted and creatively applied to my work. Figure 3-2 illustrate my initial sketches and research progress, showcasing the process of collecting and analysing relevant symbols. These symbols have been systematically organised based on their shared feminine attributes and diverse historical origins, integrating them into figurative or metaphorical representations that reflect my personal experiences and self-reflection.

The symbol matrices categorise the varied uses, meanings, and visual representations derived from my research into traditional Chinese patterns and sexual symbols from an international perspective. This is evidenced by four distinct matrices, each focusing on specific categories: the Chinese concept of patterns, detailed distinctions within the cloud pattern, international alchemical symbols, and collections of feminine geometric motifs.

Historically, Chinese symbols evolved from traditional patterns extracted from Chinese typography, primitive utensils and clothing, and architectural decorations. Most Chinese traditional patterns have symbolic meanings and symbolism and are not merely decorative motifs. Shan Wu, the historian and scholar of Chinese arts and crafts from the Warring States Period to Sui and Tang Dynasties⁸, explains, “It contains rich social connotations from both forms and contents which directly or indirectly expresses the local cultural customs, regions, and ethics” (2009, p. XVII).

⁸ The Warring States period in Chinese history is specified as occurring between 475 and 221 BCE. Following this, the Sui and Tang Dynasties spanned from 581 to 907 CE.

and ancient figures and mythological patterns (Na Li & Bao Liu, 2019). In this process, I researched the historical development of Chinese traditional patterns and then selected and collected specific patterns relating to feminine representation and sexual symbolism, which could be developed and then applied to my feminist practice.

The creation of the matrix of Chinese Patterns follows the example of the *Atlas of Chinese Patterns (2009)*⁹ by Shan Wu, which is the most authoritative book on Chinese patterns. Wu combines archaeology, history, fine arts, pattern science, folklore, and philology to complete his analysis of Chinese pattern characteristics, examining their emergence, evolution, meaning, symbolism, composition, colour application, and ornamentation. The book is arranged according to historical eras, then classified by types to clearly present the systematic archive of historical developments of patterns (Wu, 2009, p. XX).

To supplement this work the following sources were also consulted: *Chinese Tattoo Book* (Gu, 2010), *Auspicious Design of China* (Shu, 2012), *Auspicious Animals and Birds in Chinese Culture* (Qin, 2015), *Auspicious Chinese Picture Book, Volume of Festive* (Xu, Guo, Sun, Zhang, & Wang, 2015), *Collections of Dragon and Phoenix Decoration* (Yang, 2016), *Hand-drawn Atlas of the Book of Poetry, Volume of Plants* (Okamoto, Hosoi, & Xu, 2019), and *A Comprehensive Study of Chinese Traditional Patterns and Contemporary Textile Design* (Li & Liu, 2019). Specific to the research on the lotus, as the most primitive and significant symbol and pattern in Chinese arts, crafts, traditions, and cultures, I study two academic theses on analysing Chinese plant patterns. Respectively, the *Natural Attracting: The History of Chinese Ancient Patterns of Plant Motifs (2010)* by Xiaoxia Zhang, an associate professor at the School of Art, Suzhou University who majors in conceptual research of the

⁹ The complete works are relatively large and are published in four volumes, containing a total of more than 300 colour pictures and more than 20,000 monochrome pictures with 400,000 words. It is divided according to historical sequence, respectively, Volume 1, Neolithic and Shang, Western Zhou, Spring and Autumn Period, Volume 2, Warring States, Qin and Han period, Volume 3, Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasties, and Five Dynasties, and Volume 4, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. Each volume is divided into two parts as text version and graphic version (Wu, 2009).

application of Chinese traditional patterns and symbols within weaving and dyeing design; and Li Gu's academical research of Chinese decorative patterns and her book, *Study on Decorative Patterns of Song, Liao, Xia and Jin Dynasties* (2016).

The symbol Matrix 1-1, Chinese Notion of Patterns, explores the cultural significance of traditional Chinese patterns. Each symbol—cloud pattern, auspicious knot, double happiness character, lotus, Mandarin duck, sacred tree, and grape motif—carries profound meanings rooted in Chinese mythology, philosophy, and social structures. These motifs serve as visual metaphors for auspiciousness, love, fertility, harmony, and the balance of yin and yang.

In my work, I have specifically applied these symbols to explore themes of sexuality, gender, and reproduction. For example, in *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (2020), I use the lotus motif to represent female reproductive anatomy, with its petals symbolising the vulva and its root interacting with a representation of male genital. Similarly, the cloud and rain pattern convey the theme of sexual union through idiomatic expressions, while the grape motif, positioned between male and female symbols, serves as a symbol of first sexual experiences. The double happiness character is integrated into *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020) through paper cutting, symbolising significant life transitions related to womanhood and fertility.

Additionally, the sacred tree motif is crucial in my research, representing a cultural intersection between Chinese and Western alchemical traditions. Initially interpreted as a symbol of masculinity in Chinese contexts, my exploration of medieval alchemical culture has revealed its feminine connotations, broadening my understanding of its symbolic depth. Through these applications, my work critically engages with traditional Chinese patterns, reinterpreting their meanings to challenge and expand contemporary discussions on gender, sexuality, and cultural identity.

Matrix 1-2, Specific Distinctions of the Cloud Pattern, provides a detailed categorisation of Chinese cloud motifs. My research identifies three primary types: Cloud and Thunder Patterns, Cirrus Cloud Patterns, and Flowing Cloud Patterns. It is worth noting that traditional Chinese cloud motifs encompass many other forms, such as *Yunqi* (cloud and vapour), *Yunshou* (cloud and animal), *Ruyi Yun* (auspicious cloud), *Tuan Yun* (round cloud), and *Die Yun* (layered cloud) patterns. These variations evolved across different dynasties, shaped by the socio-economic conditions, cultural practices, aesthetic values, and technological developments of their respective periods (Zhao, 2016). This section focuses specifically on the three primary cloud motifs highlighted above, as these are the patterns applied in my works.

The Cloud and Thunder Pattern (fig.3-3) represents one of the earliest forms of cloud motifs, originating from decorative elements on bronze artefacts from the Shang and Zhou dynasties (Wu, 2009; Zhao, 2016; Li&Liu 2019). This pattern is characterised by continuous spiralling lines, where curved lines signify clouds and straight lines represent thunder. The fundamental structure of this motif consists of interconnected S-shaped spirals. In bronze artefacts, the Cloud and Thunder Pattern was typically used as a background design, complementing central motifs such as *Taotie* (Chinese mythical beasts), dragons, or phoenixes, serving to enhance the primary patterns and fill empty spaces. Similarly, in my work, this pattern serves as a supporting element, as seen in *Plentiful in Ideals Yet Skinny in Reality* (2020) (fig.3-4), where it functions as a scenery decoration that complements and highlights the central genitalia figures.



Figure 3-3

The Cloud and Thunder Pattern

Rubbings of the cloud and thunder pattern in Shang Dynasty, Western Zhou Dynasty and Spring and Autumn Period.

Resource: Atlas of Chinese Patterns, Volume 1, (2009), p.30



Figure 3-4

Meichen Lu, *Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality*, 2020

Panel 5-6

Exhibition: *Unfolding Narrative 1* (2020)

In contrast, the Cirrus Cloud Pattern (fig.3-5) is defined by more fluid and dynamic lines. According to Wei Zhao's analysis of the origins of cloud motifs, this pattern can be categorised into four structural forms: inward curling, outward curling, combined forms, and extended shapes (2016, p. 60). The inward curling form features symmetrical inward spirals, often seen in classic Wadang (Eaves tile) designs. The outward curling form displays symmetrical outward spirals. The combined and extended forms incorporate elements of the Cloud and Thunder Pattern, integrating triangular and circular shapes or elongated straight-line connections to create new interpretations of cloud motifs (Zhao, 2016). The flowing cloud pattern (fig.3-6) emphasises visual movement and a more flexible structure compared to the rigid cloud and thunder pattern. Unlike the structured arrangement of the cloud and thunder pattern, the flowing cloud pattern highlights fluidity through the extended lines of the cloud head and tail, conveying both strength and smoothness (Wu, 2009).



Figure 3-5
Cirrus Cloud Pattern
Warring States period lacquerware plate, Excavated
in Changsha, Hunan, China
.Resource: Atlas of Chinese Patterns, Volume 2,
(2009), p.111



Figure 3-6
The flowing cloud pattern
Lacquerware in Western Han dynasties, excavated in Hanjiang
Yaozhuang, Yangzhou, Jiangsu, China.

Accordingly, my Chinese cultural background informs my use and selection of cloud patterns, where these motifs hold deep significance. By incorporating this widely recognised traditional symbol into my female-centred works, I aim to express my

lived experience from a phenomenological perspective while critically reflecting on the conventional associations of symbols within patriarchal culture.

Besides categorising the alchemical matrix, it is essential to clarify the motivation behind my study of alchemy in relation to my practice and research context. While my analysis of Chinese symbols is readily understood given my cultural background, my interest in Western alchemy was inspired by Alexander Roob's *Alchemy & Mysticism* (1997), which draws on material from private and public collections and incorporates quotations from prominent alchemists. Most interestingly, each richly illustrated chapter reminds me of contemporary graphical narratives and visual languages, specifically, the section *Genesis in the retort* (1997, p.126-145), depicts the process of producing the Philosopher's Stone. These series of illustrations are taken from the *Elementa Chymicae* of the Leiden chemistry professor J.C. Barchusen (1666-1723), who had them engraved from an old manuscript (Roob, 1997). Take for instance, pages 128 to 129 which display steps 6-13 of production (fig.3-7)¹⁰, alchemy relies heavily on the idea of transformation through stages, which can be visually represented using layering techniques. Just as the four elements (air, water, fire, earth) form the basic material of the metals in Step 8, visual layers can be used to convey depth, stages of transformation, and interconnectedness in understanding graphical sequence. In step 6, the goat represents spirit and soul where the anthropomorphic representation of planets, elements, and even abstract concepts like spirit, soul, and mercury provide a rich lexicon for visual storytelling. Steps 9 and 10 highlight the duality of sulphur (sun) and mercury (moon) - male and female while presenting its typically graphical characteristics.

¹⁰ Corresponding texts explanation: 6/The chamois represent spirit and soul, which unite to form philosophical mercury. 7/The six planets embody the metals to which the bird mercury is related. The locked trunk says that the path to this quicksilver is hidden. 8/The inner circles are the four elements, which form the basic material of the seven metals (fixed stars). 9/Sulphur (sun) and mercury (moon), male and female. 10/Through contact with the moon and the sun, philosophical mercury attains the power of fertilizing the earth. 11/Sulphur and mercury must be freed by fire from the material which contains them. 12/Purification of philosophical mercury by sublimation. 13/Philosophical mercury is joined once more to its sulphur so that a homogenous liquid is produced.

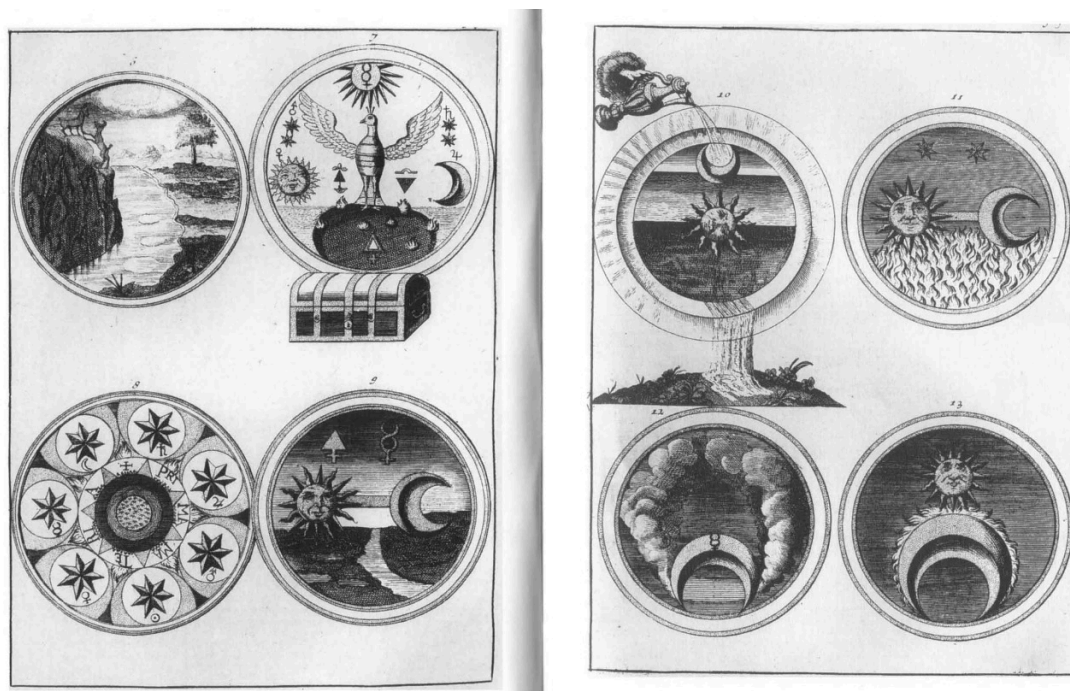


Figure 3-7

Genesis in the retort in book "*Alchemy & Mysticism*, (1997)", pp.128-129. illustrated step 6-13.

As Adele Nozedar insists in his *Encyclopedia of Secret Signs and Symbols* (2009) alchemical culture holds significantly symbolic and mystical connotations, "the work of the early Alchemists was necessarily a secretive and clandestine matter, and its secrets are still held within a rich encrustation of symbols, pictures, oblique references, double meanings, and riddles" (p. 22). Alchemy, with its complicated symbolism, has profoundly influenced my practice-led research, interweaving with feminist consideration and my self-reflection to yield a nuanced, multi-layered exploration of the menstruation, a female-based event intrinsically tied to womanhood, yet often shrouded in euphemisms and taboos. My initial use of alchemical symbols in *Opus Magnum of the Girl* (2020) was intended to emblematically represent my experience of menarche, capturing my early, ambiguous understanding of the physical structure of my body.

The alchemical symbols examined in Matrix 1-3 represent the interaction between opposing yet complementary elements—fire and water, sun and moon, masculine and feminine—highlighting their transformative potential. These symbols are rooted

in ancient traditions and reflect a philosophical pursuit of balance, enlightenment, and spiritual progression. The ladder, *Conjunctio*, Philosophical Tree, and Alchemical Rose further develop these ideas, illustrating transitions from ignorance to knowledge, separation to unity, and material to spiritual forms. However, in my work, I specifically draw on their associations with sexual union to emphasise gender relations. Through symbolic reinterpretation in contemporary practice, these motifs continue to challenge gender norms and contribute to cultural discourse.

The exploration of geometrical motifs in Symbol Matrix 1–4 demonstrates the deep-rooted significance of these forms across cultural, spiritual, and artistic contexts. The analysis of round and oval motifs, including the circle, mandorla, yoni, and vesica piscis, highlight their association with femininity, divinity, and cyclical continuity. These symbols, particularly in pre-patriarchal and Jungian frameworks, function as representations of unity, individuation, and the transcendence of hierarchical structures.

In contrast, elongated motifs such as the pillar and lingam are emblematic representations of masculinity, reinforcing historical perceptions of male authority and generative power. These motifs have been widely used in architectural and religious contexts, with their phallic symbolism underscoring the cultural emphasis on verticality and dominance.

Triangular motifs, including upright, inverted, and double triangles, further illustrate the gendered dimensions of geometric symbolism. The duality of the triangle, paralleling alchemical representations of fire and water, aligns with longstanding dichotomies of male and female principles. Meanwhile, conjunction motifs—such as the lingam-yoni, *Sema*, egg-and-dart frieze, and pinecone-lotus pairings—exemplify the synthesis of male and female elements, embodying themes of sexual union, fertility, and regeneration.

Within my art practice, these motifs are critical tools for engaging with feminist discourse and challenging patriarchal symbolic traditions. By incorporating them into my works, such as *Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality* (2020) and *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020), I aim to recontextualise their meanings, using them as narrative devices that foreground female agency and bodily autonomy, and the intersection of cultural symbolism with contemporary feminist thought. This methodological approach bridges historical visual languages with modern artistic expression and invites a critical reassessment of how geometric symbols continue to shape gender perceptions within visual culture.

3.2 Applying Symbols Through Practice

In the following, I firstly demonstrate my motivation for research on female genitalia since 2017, by presenting some detailed progress of developing the *Intercourse with My Vulva* (2018). Then, I review two artworks, *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (2020) and *Horror of The Little Dickhead* (2020) displayed in the *Unfolding Narratives* (2020) exhibition (fig.3-8) to give an overview of the development of my application of symbols, exploring of how this visual language is central to this research. The application of symbols includes the following: two types of background decoration, the decorative border for individual panels and the creation of the genitalia figures.



Figure 3-8

Exhibition: “*Unfolding Narratives*”

Location: Lower Gallery, London College of Communication

3.2.1 The Method of Creating Genitalia-based Figures

In my first year of PhD, I progressed to develop more complex explorations of my approach towards autobiographical frameworks in creating the vulva figure, building on my earlier work. *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (2020) (fig.3-9) reflects on the first sexual encounter between one of my ex-boyfriends and myself. It uses coloured and black and white colour principles to refer to the plentiful sexual ideals on the left-hand side and the unsatisfactory sexual reality on the right-hand side. *Horror of The Little Dickhead*(2021) (fig.3-10) describes the exploration of my cervix based on the reflection of my inner activities. This is an example of my larger Discovery Series, which logs the ontological journey of exploring my genitalia through the years, shifting from unconscious ignorance to conscious awareness. Vulva figures like those featured in these two practices became nuanced articulations of my experiences. These vulva figures and related narratives were not just symbolic or fictional constructs; they were related to my lived experiences while using abstracted anatomical genitalia.

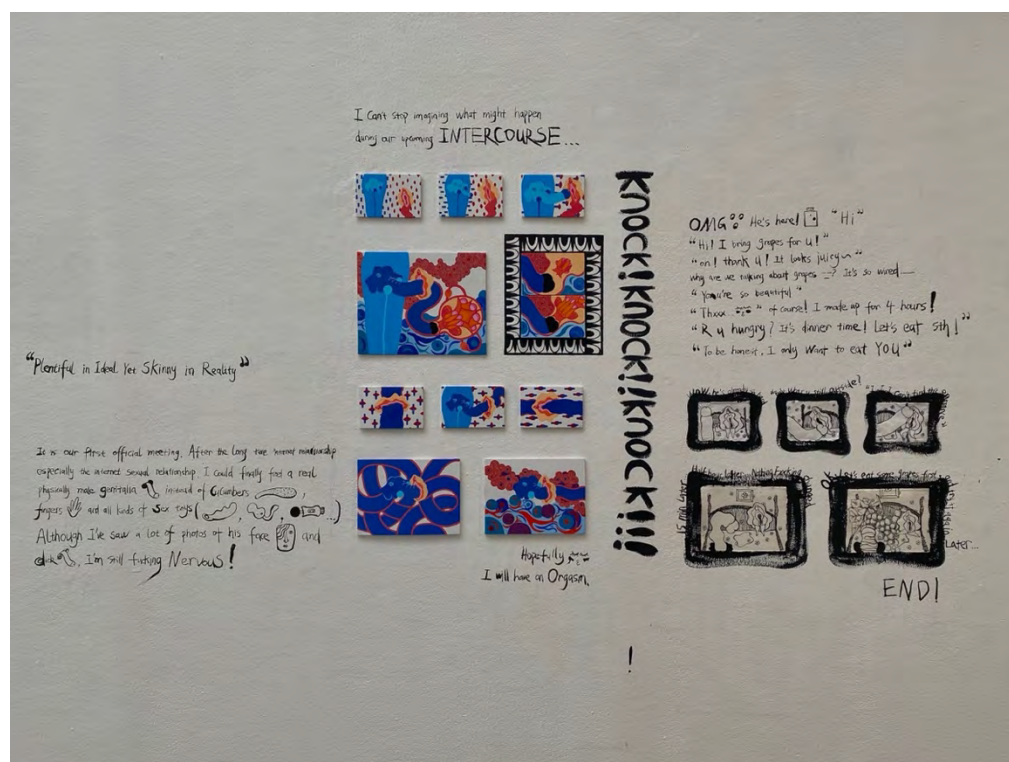


Figure 3-9

Meichen Lu,
*"Plentiful in
Ideals yet
Skinny in
Reality"* (2020)

Medium: Oil
Painting, Posca
Pen and Acrylic
on The Wall

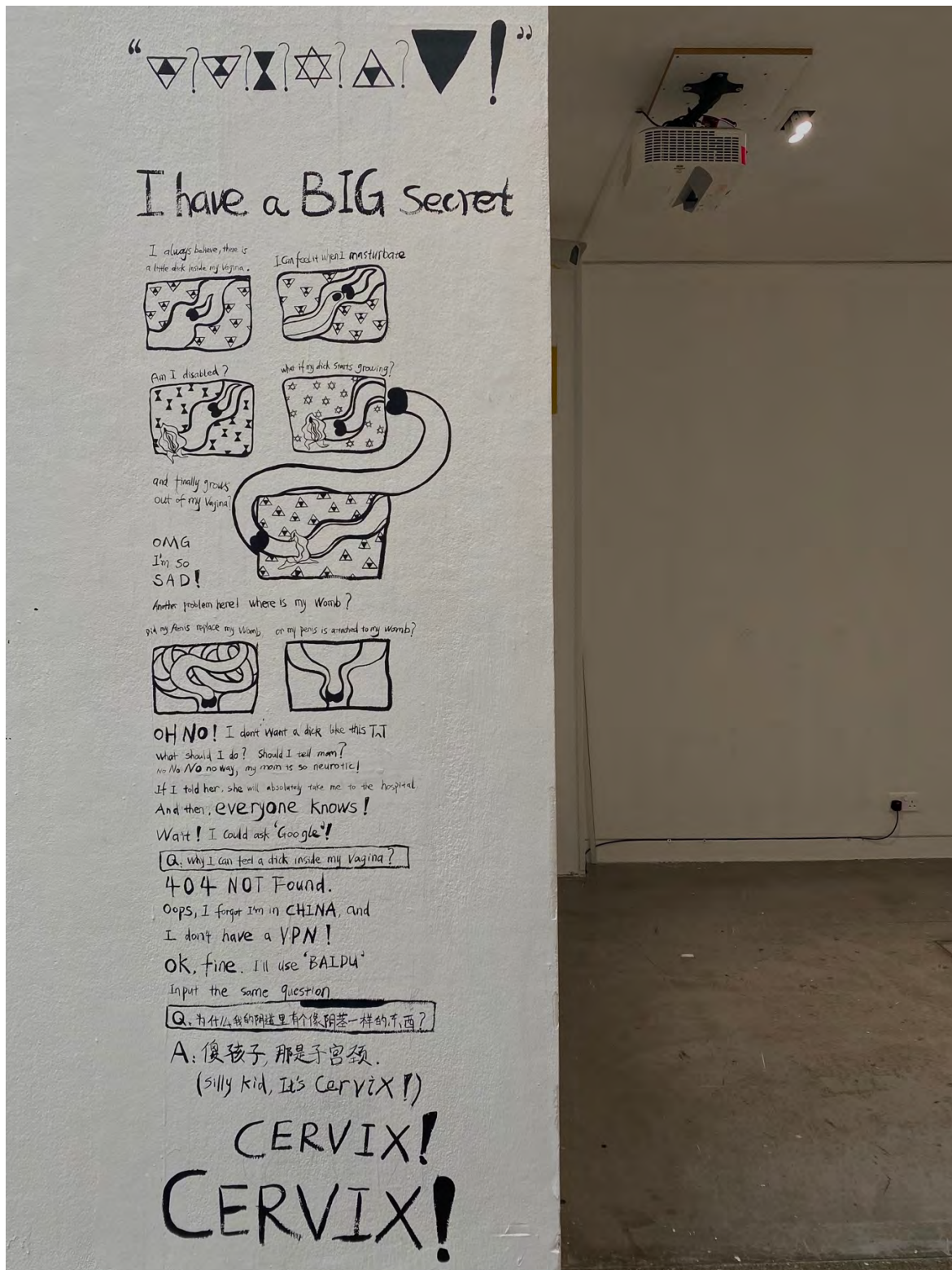


Figure 3-10

Meichen Lu, *Horror of The Little Dickhead*, 2020

Medium: Acrylic on the wall

The creation of various genitalia figures in my body of work is an evolving process that spans different phases of academic and artistic exploration. This process can be seen as a continuum since 2017 that pivots between abstract symbolism and corporeal reality, shaped by ever-changing methodological approaches and thematic focuses.



Figure 3-11

Meichen Lu,
*Intercourse with
My Vulva* (2020)

Embroidered-
illustration

200 x 200 mm

"POSTGRADUATE
SHOW 2018"

London College of
Communication

Initially, as I discussed in the previous methodology section, the genitalia figure first found life in my postgraduate project, *Intercourse with My Vulva* (2018)¹¹ (fig.3-11). This work was perhaps the most rudimentary but ground-breaking stage in the conceptualisation of my anatomical genitalia as figures. The project deployed existing historical symbols and female stereotypes, such as vagina dentata and the

¹¹ Prior to 2018, my representations of the vulva took the form of vulva characters—fiction, often anthropomorphised figures that served as symbolic agents within narrative structures. Under the guidance of a phenomenological approach, this visual language gradually shifted towards vulva figures, which embody a more autonomous, realistic, and self-referential representation of the vulva.

serpent, to build a fictional narrative around the issue of female sexual harassment. Here, the vulva figure was more archetypal, constructed through pre-existing symbols, and existed primarily to serve a narrative framework. In this initial progress of establishing the vulva figure, I took a multi-layered, research-oriented approach that balanced vulva anatomical details, personal experience, graphical abstraction, and sociocultural context.

Then I structure a broad research map to understand the female body, gender, and sexuality, considering anatomical variations through multiple lenses including my own body, porn videos, field research on *The Sex Museum, Amsterdam* (fig.3-12), and existing artworks like Jamie McCartney's *The Great Wall of Vagina* (2008) (fig.3-13). An important first step was realising the anatomical distinction between vagina and the vulva; I acknowledged that the exterior genitalia—comprising the labia minora and labia majora—is called the vulva (fig.3-14). This clarification allowed me to explore the subject matter more precisely and responsibly.

Research on Vulva/Sex/Gender

Since my subject area is related to sex and gender, so I chose to go to Amsterdam during the summer holiday and do a research on the city's sexual culture. Absolutely I went to the sex museum. Once you get inside, you realize that the Sex Museum tries to combine their rich collection of artifacts with the elements of the attraction park.

The Sex Museum throughout more than 20 years of its existence, not only managed to collect many hundreds of interesting pieces of art, unique objects and rare old photographs, but avoiding bluntness of pornography managed to bring them together in an organized and interesting way.

I found a lot of inspiration about the female body and genitalia in sex museum and drew a series of illustrations about sex posture.



Figure 3-12

The archive of field research on The Sex Museum, Amsterdam in 2018, Photography by Meichen Lu



Figure 3-13

Jamie McCartney, *The Great Wall of Vagina*, 2008

Medium: multiple materials, sculpture

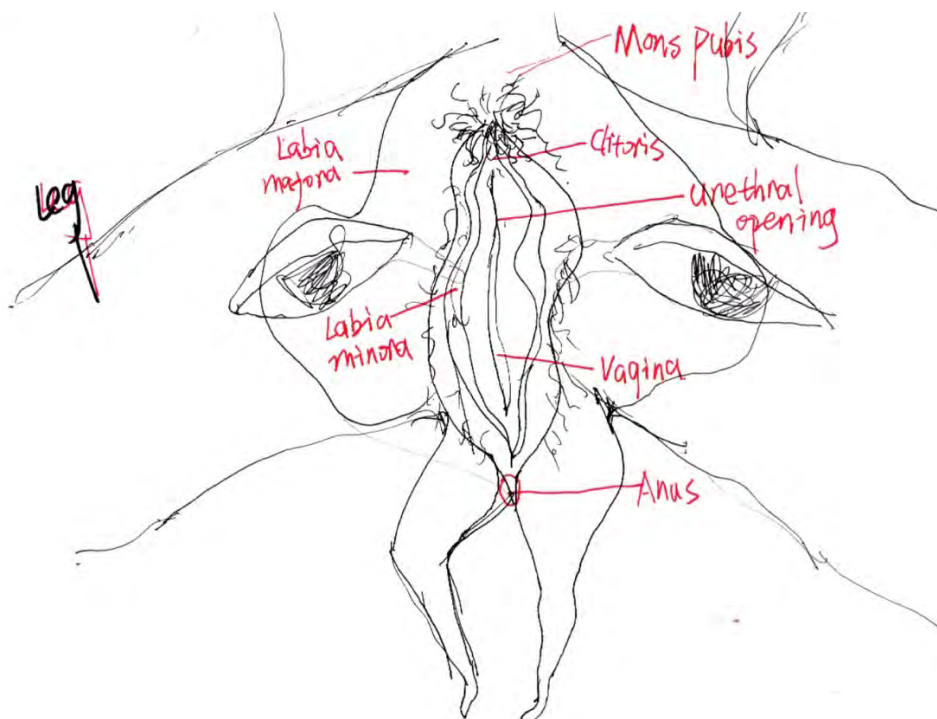


Figure 3-14

Meichen Lu, *The initial configuration of the vulva anatomical structure* (2018)

Exploring cultural attitudes towards the vulva and female sexuality became the next logical step in my research trajectory after visiting the sex museum. Specifically, how contemporary perspectives, especially among younger generations, are shaping the conversation around this taboo topic? I turned to social media platforms, specifically Instagram, as they serve as digital zeitgeists of contemporary thought and lifestyle. I came across an intriguing hashtag, *#lookatthispussy*, that piqued my interest (fig.3-15). This tag is used on posts where people share photographs of everyday objects that resemble the shape of a vulva, such as oysters, kittens (pussy), halves of fruits like peaches, melons, grapefruit, etc. (fig.3-16). The page serves as a curated digital exhibition that unwittingly reframes how individuals could perceive and discuss the vulva in a public yet intimate sphere. The hashtag demonstrates an emerging trend of euphemism, which relates to what Emma Rees's terms as the 'covert visibility' of the vagina. In *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* (2013) Rees assumes that slang terms for the vagina can be seen as an attempt to divert attention away from the reality of women's lived sexual experiences so that individuals do not confront the vagina itself as "slang offers a convenient distraction to something so taboo" (2013, p.85).

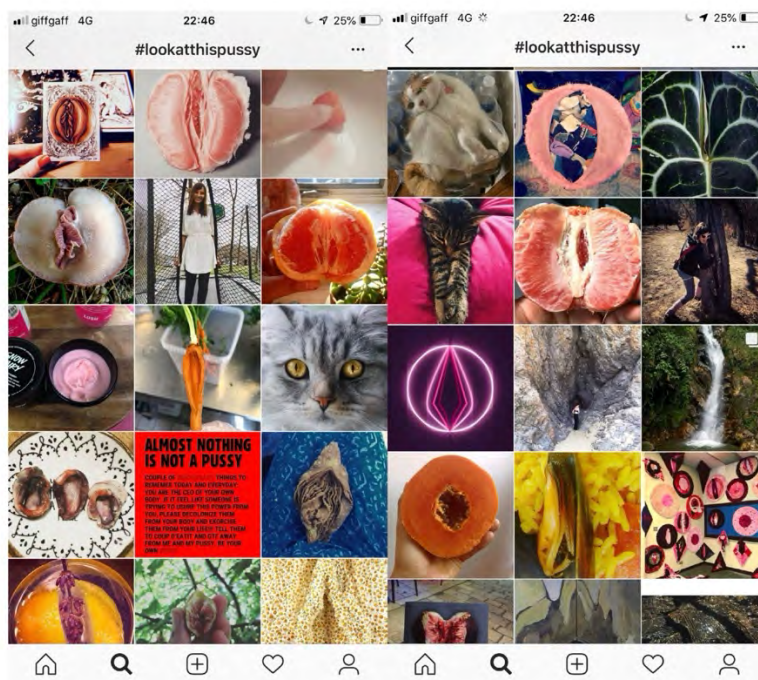


Figure 3-15

Screenshot from Instagram hashtag, "*lookatthispussy*"

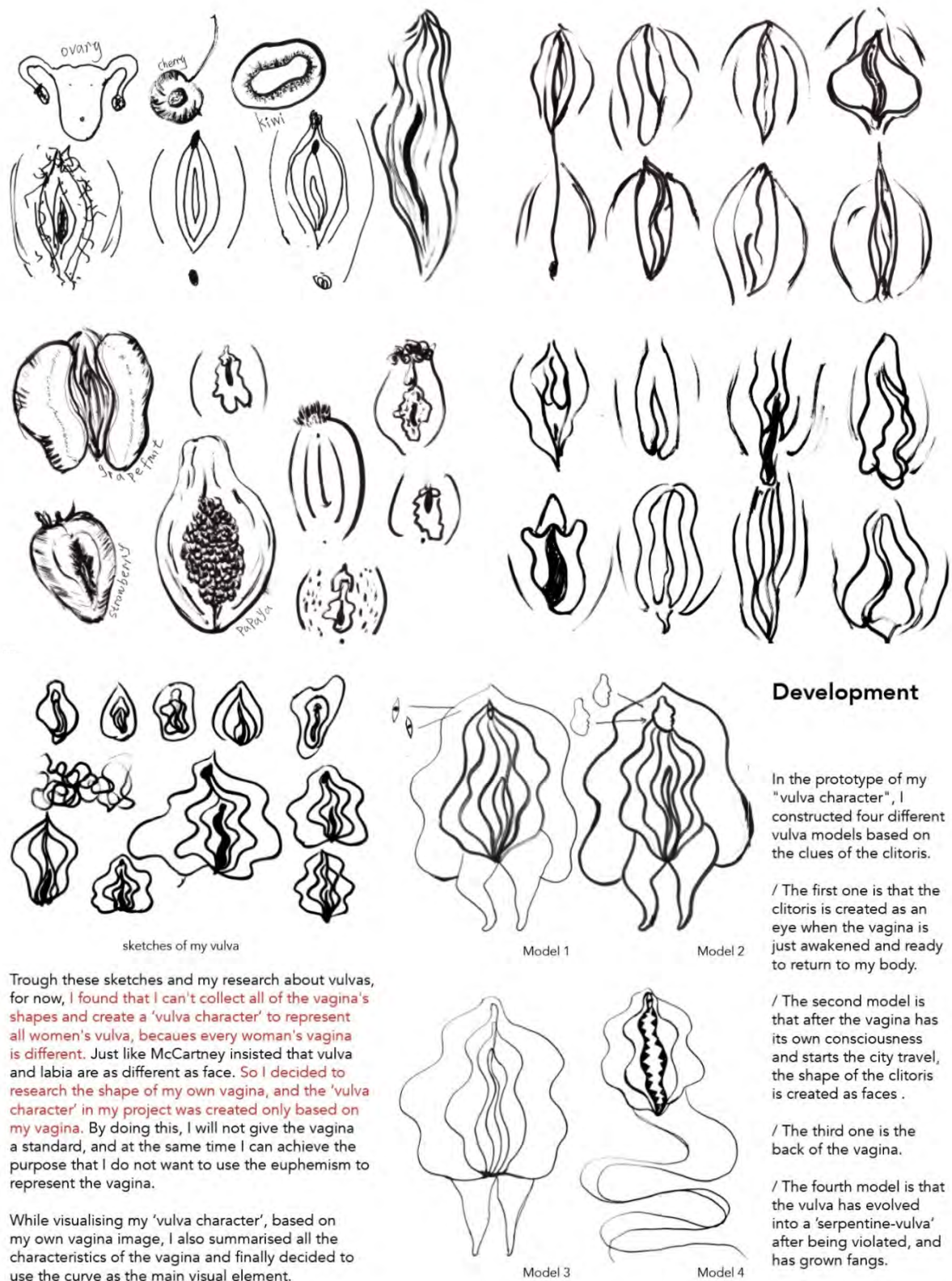


Figure 3-16

Meichen Lu, The progress of creating the graphical "vulva characters" in 2018

The social sphere of the internet shows that objects not traditionally associated with female genitalia are imbued with these meanings, as a form of everyday activism or simply as a way to normalize the conversation around it. The phenomenon had a significant impact on my research, broadening the scope to consider both individual and collective perceptions. It particularly underscored the importance of public platforms in shaping our private understandings of the body and sexuality. I then developed sketches that acted as preliminary drafts or hypotheses where I was quickly confronted with an ethical dilemma about representation—recognizing that every vulva is unique, as McCartney insists. This is the initial motivation that leads me to narrow my focus to the vulva figure as a representation based exclusively on my own anatomy, thereby avoiding the imposition of any normative standard of female genitalia.

By focusing on my own vulva, the fictional graphic narrative *Intercourse with My Vulva* (2018) became a personal counter-narrative to generalised or euphemistic representations. Although it is rooted in my own experience, this focus opens the project to wider resonances, challenging viewers to recognise the diversity and individuality inherent in all bodies. My creation of genitalia figures became amalgamations of selected symbols from the taxonomy, which were integrated with both abstract and anatomically based graphical representations of genitalia.

With the progress of my research, I became increasingly interested in creating a more personalised, individualised and symbolic language—one that is deeply rooted in my own authentically autobiographical vulva appearance. While I initially used an abstract graphical representation of the vulva to represent concepts like femininity or sexuality, after the observation-based daily record practice, 8/9 (2021), discussed in Chapter 4, I started to develop a new visual language based on my observational sketches of various vulva actions combined with symbols from the taxonomy. It becomes a specific term, titled the “vulva figure”, which is not only a universal representation of symbols and abstract depictions of genitalia on the surface surface,

but is unique to my lived experience, bringing a more authentically autobiographical dimension to the project.

3.2.2 Reflective practice: *Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality*, 2020 & *Horror of The Little Dickhead*, 2020

While the creation of genitalia-based figures initially acted as the basic element in my exploration of feminine symbols and their representations, it was essential to move beyond this initial phase.

Unfolding Narratives is an exhibition series held each year by the London College of Communication (LCC), postgraduate research group (PGR) curatorial team since 2020, which reflects on the different forms and stages of research student's learning journeys. *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (2020) and *Horror of The Little Dickhead* (2020) are two works I created in my first year of doctoral research which were displayed in the exhibition, *Unfolding Narratives 1* (2020). Both initially works adopted the method of "Reflection-in-action" which, as defined by Gray and Malins in, *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design* (2004), engages the practitioner in an active cycle of introspection during the creation process, allowing for adaptation and evolution based on immediate challenges and insights (p.10-25). In terms of representation and exploration, *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality*, aimed to forge a pathway into the discourse of comics presented in gallery contexts. Unlike its partner, *the Horror of The Little Dickhead*, which leaned into unpredictability, the former was anchored in detailed planning, foresight, and structural coherence.

When comparing these two works, it is evident that their creation processes follow divergent methods and principles. While the *Horror of The Little Dickhead* embraced a more free-form, spontaneous approach, *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* used a classical exhibiting strategy in intentionality. This level of premeditation in *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* is evident in its exhibition format where every element, from the arrangement of text and imagery to the overarching layout, was pre-conceived (fig.3-17). The process of creating these works demonstrates

sybiotic relationships and reflective creations with the taxonomy of symbols, where symbols evolve from mere representations to integral elements that impact on the narrative and aesthetics of the work.

It is our first official meeting. After the long time internet relationship, especially the internet sexual relationship, I could finally feel a real physically male genitalia instead of any cucumbers, fingers and all kinds of sex toys, etc. Although I've seen a lot of photos of his face and dick, I still fucking nervous! Only 10 minutes left! He's coming! I can't stop imagining what might happen during our upcoming intercourse.....

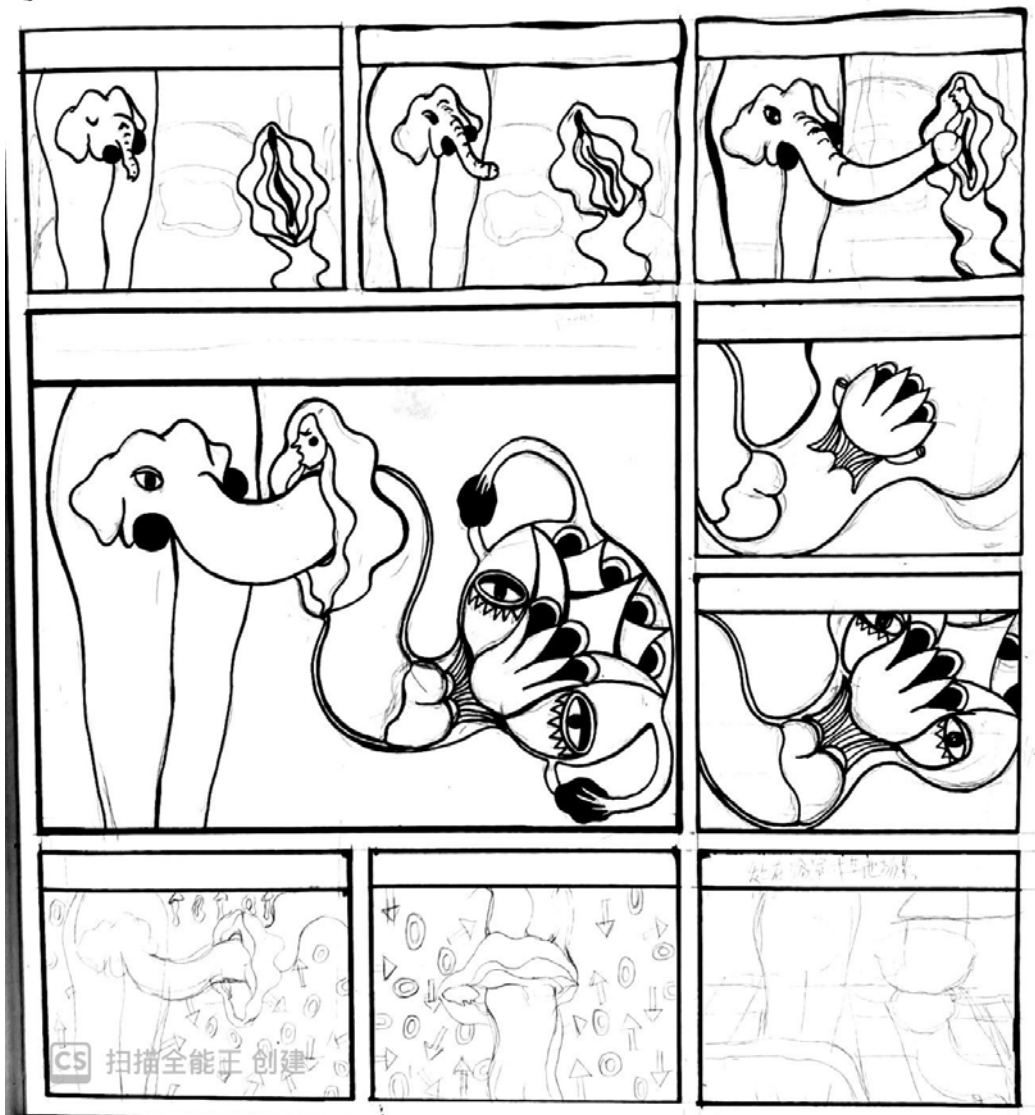


Figure 3-17

Meichen Lu, *draft sketchbook*, 2020

Medium: Acrylic Pen.

The distinction between the draft and final version of *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality*, which offers an insight into the malleability of artistic intentions in the application of the taxonomy of symbols. A critical aspect of this evolution is the symbol frame enveloping panels 5 and 6. What began as a mere framework evolved to become a significant symbolic marker, emphasising its relationship with the taxonomy. Symbols, in this context, transcend their basic representative function and become metaphoric structural elements within the narrative. The symbols that emerged from the taxonomy, particularly the duality symbols like the egg and dart frieze (fig.3-18) or the pinecone and lotus (fig.3-19), carry profound meanings in architectural and cultural contexts. However, their application in the work did not merely rest on their conventional connotations, instead, the work sought to interpret and repurpose these symbols, imbuing them with new meanings relevant to the feminine and sexual narrative context, which respectively represent endless lines or circles of men (darts/pinecone) and women (eggs/ lotus). This fluidity of interpretation challenges pre-established norms and paves the way for innovative expressions. The alternating combination of symbols disrupted pre-defined principles, underscoring the complex changes between original meanings and the exhibition context by adapting them through the evolving nuances of a work in progress.



Figure 3-18
Meichen Lu, *Graphical egg and dart frieze*,
2020
Acrylic



Figure 3-19
Meichen Lu, *Graphical pinecone and lotus*, 2020
Acrylic

Through the reflective approach discussed in previous sections, especially evident in the development of works such as *Horror of the Little Dickhead* and *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality*, it is possible to discern further categorisations within the

decorative applications of symbols, the background decorations and the border decoration.

3.2.3 The Background Decorations

In the realm of graphical narratives, background decoration serves a pivotal role in shaping and enrich the context, tone, and interpretative dimensions of the story. My practice has shown that these decorative elements are not merely passive backdrops but are imbued with purpose, symbolic significance, and layered meaning. From this experiential base, I identify two salient categories of background decoration: motif decoration and scenery decoration.

A close examination of the backgrounds in *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* and *Horror of The Little Dickhead* reveals a multifaceted display of geometric motifs that carry profound cultural and symbolic representation. Panels 1,2,3,7,8 and 9 in *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* and panels 1,2,3,4 and 5 in *Horror of The Little Dickhead* demonstrate how the collection of geometrical motifs was applied to the decoration of graphical panels. Following the principles identified in the taxonomy of symbols, the use of long motifs such as pillars and the Lingam is emblematic of the male principle, an archetype rooted in various cultural representations. Historically, such symbols have been instrumental in conveying masculinity, strength, and authority (Walker 1988). In contrast, the graphic of round, oval, and triangular motifs references the female principle. Symbols like the Mandorla, Yoni, and Yoni Yantra are not just geometric patterns but emblematic of femininity, fertility, and the cyclical nature of life. Their recurrence in graphic narratives is a silent nod to the feminine essence, evoking themes of creation, sustenance, and transformation.

The Lingam-Yoni symbol best exemplifies the fusion of these two principles (fig.3-20). This Tantric representation of male and female genitalia in conjunction serves as a poignant reminder that sexual love is intrinsic to human existence. While in international discourse this symbol might be seen through a lens of vulgarity, its origins provide a different interpretation, which shows that it emerges from a tradition that reveres sexuality as a divine force. It is noteworthy that the individual components, the Lingam and the Yoni, when dissected, continue to retain their inherent meanings, but when combined, they signify union, duality, and the harmonious interplay of masculine and feminine energies.

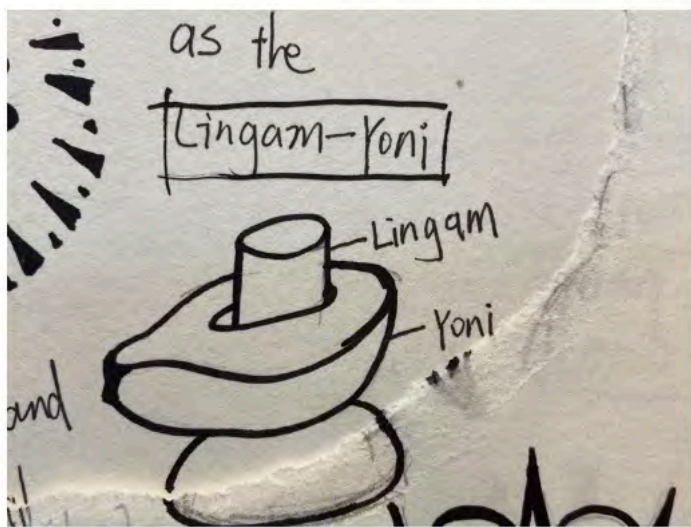


Figure 3-18
Meichen Lu, *Graphical lingam-yoni*, 2020
Acrylic

The application of these symbols in my graphic narratives serves a dual purpose. On one hand, they embellish the background, adding a layer of visual intricacy. On the other hand, they function as significant symbolic elements, grounding the narrative in deeper cultural

and feminine symbolic contexts. The transformation of the rectangle and ellipse motifs, aligned with the evolving dynamics of the male and female characters, is a testament to the fluidity and versatility of these symbols. Notably, the combination of these forms in the background amplifies the sexual undertones of the foreground scenes: the varying degrees of overlap between elliptical and columnar shapes across different frames metaphorically evoke the rhythm and movement of sexual intercourse. This deliberate use of sexual symbolism serves to counteract the conventional framing of such imagery as crude or vulgar, reclaiming it instead as a site of aesthetic and conceptual exploration.

Through this symbolic reconfiguration, the work challenges traditional notions of symbol representation, interrogating how visual codes have historically shaped cultural understandings of sexuality, gender and identity. By destabilising these associations, my practice invites viewers to reconsider the rigidity of social roles and opens space for more fluid and pluralistic interpretations of gendered experience.

Scenery decoration offers a different, yet equally compelling, depiction of symbols and metaphors compared to decorative motifs, which is initially developed from elements like clouds and rain. They are not mere atmospheric additions; in contrast, they are deeply rooted in Chinese cultural narratives, the interaction with the most typically traditional Chinese symbol of the "cloud pattern" bears profound symbolic significance. In ancient thought, clouds were seen as direct indicators of weather conditions and predictors of the future. The connection between clouds and rain was considered inevitable and closely linked to human survival and development (Zhao, 2016). In the Chinese cultural milieu, the cloud and rain dynamic, respectively, serve as emblematic representations of female and male principles. When isolated, the cloud symbolises female sexuality, resonating with its ethereal, nurturing, and transformative qualities; the rain, with its penetrative and life-giving attributes, stands as a symbol of masculinity (ZNBC, 2009). However, their combined depiction transcends these individual meanings, offering a representation of sexual intercourse. This combination, prevalent both in visual and textual forms, has been a linchpin of Chinese symbolism, both in historical and contemporary contexts.

The interplay of cloud-rain imagery has found its way into Chinese idioms and literature texts such as serving as metaphorical depictions of intercourse (fig.3-21). One of the most emblematic works that weave the rain-cloud symbolism into its narrative is the classic Chinese novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber Novel* by Xueqin Cao¹². The relationship between the main male protagonist, Baoyu Jia, and his

¹² One of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, it is known for its psychological scope, and its observation of the worldview, aesthetics, lifestyles, and social relations of 18th-century China. The historian

principal maid, and unofficial concubine, Xiren Hua, is one of the pivotal narrative arcs in the novel. Their first intercourse unfolds during a spring rain. Rain, as previously discussed, is associated with male sexuality and the act of intercourse. This scenario not only emphasizes the blossoming affection and sublimated feelings between Baoyu and Xiren but also subtly alludes to the consummation of their sexual relationship. Such symbolic interplays, interspersed throughout the novel, even the whole traditions of Chinese literature, amplify the euphemistic, obscured, richness of the characters and their sexual relationships. Furthermore, idioms like 云雨之欢 (The joy of clouds and rain), 翻云覆雨 (As changeable as clouds and rain), and 云雨交融 (the conjunction of clouds and rain) are replete with nuances that go beyond their literal meanings. Each idiom not only alludes to the act of intercourse but also nuances it with varying degrees of intensity and sexual pleasure. Of these, “As Changeable as Clouds and Rain” emerges as a particularly potent representation, alluding to the pinnacle of sexual pleasure, often akin to an orgasm or the epitome of intimate union.



Figure 3-21
Meichen Lu,
The general
combination
of cloud-rain
pattern
sketch, 2020

Medium: Oil
Painting

Jonathan Spence specialised in Chinese culture, who depicts the novel as the intricate strands of its plot depict the rise and decline of a family much like Cao's own and, by extension, of the dynasty itself. In his book “*The Search for Modern China*, (1990, p. 106–110.)”, highlighting the author Cao explores religious and philosophical questions, and the writing style includes echoes of the plays and novels of the late Ming, as well as poetry from earlier periods 106–110.

Drawing on these rich idiomatic symbols, I have deliberately incorporated rain-cloud imagery into my graphical narrative panels. In my previous discussion of the symbol matrices, I introduced the primary application of the cloud and thunder pattern, which consists of a combination of cloud and thunder motifs linked with an s-shape. Building on this foundation, I have developed the cloud and rain pattern. The scenery of “As Changeable as Clouds and Rain” embellishes Panel 11 of *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (fig. 3-22), reflecting the narrative crescendo of orgasmic imagination. Meanwhile, “The Joy of Clouds and Rain” is visually echoed in Panel 4 of *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (fig. 3-23), subtly yet evocatively illustrating the act of intercourse. Through the dynamic interplay of rain and clouds, this decorative scenery visually and semantically enhances the narrative. It bridges contemporary storytelling with ancient Chinese symbolism, encouraging critical reflection on how euphemisms and symbolic representations of sexual activity underpin taboos and stereotypes surrounding sexuality.



Figure 3-22

Meichen Lu, *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality*, 2020, panel 11

Medium: Oil Painting, Posca Pen.



Figure 3-23

Meichen Lu, *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality*, 2020, panel 4

Medium: Oil Painting, Posca Pen.

Another example of scenery decoration can be seen in *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020) section, where the use of 天癸水至 (Tian Gui Shui Zhi) is a key application of the flowing cloud pattern. The scenery decoration is integrated with the main figure, together symbolising the onset of menstruation.

3.2.4 The Border Decoration

The delineation of a frame or panel in graphic narratives often serves as more than just a boundary for the main content. As was seen in the display of *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (2020) during the *Unfolding Narratives 1* exhibition, the border can actively contribute to the narrative itself. The application of border decoration underscores the idea that every component of a graphic work, including what might initially seem peripheral, can play an interactive role in conveying the story.

The development of my use of border decoration came from visiting an exhibition of French medieval Book of Hours¹³ produced in the early from the special manuscript collection at the British Library London. The delicate decorative illuminations in the book leave a strong visual impression, especially the luxurious borders, lively marginal figures, and fanciful architectural settings that feature abundantly in this manuscript (fig.3-24). The border decoration is extraordinarily rich, with gold paints and marginal creatures on every page especially shows on *Belles Heures of Jean de Berry*¹⁴, which contains mainly graphic images with very short lines of text (fig.3-25). Many scholars note that the Book of Hours present a set of essential relationships between text and image, however, I am more interested in the role borders play and how they interact with the paintings in the illuminated pages. The borders of the paintings for the *Hours of the Virgin* have a heavily embellished band on three sides, inside the thin gold line is surrounded by scrolling bryony vines, which provide the basic setting for all the pages of the manuscript. Although this type of border is used on all of the text pages as well as most of the illuminated pages but has differences in terms of the decoration details. Wendy A. Stein analysed the borders of Folio 166r and Folio 171r (fig.3-26), noting that the thin gold line in Folio 166r is replaced

¹³ The book of hours is a Christian devotional book popular in the Middle Ages.

¹⁴ The *Belles Heures of Jean de Berry* (The Beautiful Hours) is an early 15th-century illuminated manuscript book of hours.

by a broader band or ribbon of painted foliage, interlace, garlands, or other patterns in Folio 171r to highlight specific saints, they then argue “the borders of the illuminated pages in the Hours of the Virgin tell a special story” (A. Stein, 2010 March 24). It proves that, by changing the general appearance of decorative lines, the role of the border is not limited to the decorative function but also interacts with the illumination of the page.



Figure 3-24

Book of Hours (1400–1410) ,

Format: Manuscript

Language: LatinUsage terms

Held by:British Library



Figure 3-25

Belles Heures of Jean de France, duc de Berry, (1405–1408/9).

Hours of the Virgin

The Presentation in the Temple, Folio 57r

Herman, Paul, and Jean de Limbourg

Medium: Ink, tempera, and gold leaf on vellum.

Size: 9 3/8 x 6 5/8 in. (23.8 x 16.8 cm).

Held by: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, 1954 (54.1.1).



Figure 3-26

Details of the borders from Folio 166r and Folio 171r in *Hours of the Virgin*

With the inspiration of the borders function in *Book of Hours*, I created a border specifically interact with panel 5 and 6 of *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* to simultaneously enhance the continuity of sexual action and replace the function of original texts. The egg and dart frieze is one of the most ancient ornamental motifs and characterised by its alternating oval (egg) and arrow (dart) design (Barbara 1988 p.471). Historically, as seen in classical Greco-Roman architecture, it symbolises continuity and infinity, life and death, or duality – the egg denoting birth or life, and the dart representing the finite or death. This continuity and duality inherent in the egg and dart design provides a fitting metaphor for the narrative sequence of panels 5 and 6, emphasising the unending cycle of life. Facing the challenge of bridging panels 5 and 6 and adding depth to their continuity, the decision to adapt and

reimagine this motif demonstrates the malleability of historical symbols for male and female representation. The decorative border, directly drawn onto the wall as seen in figure 3-22, not only augments the panels' content but also intentionally redefines the space in which the narrative exists.

Integrating the egg and dart motif into a contemporary graphical narrative, centred on feminine sexuality and self-acceptance, is a bold statement. It becomes an act of reclaiming and reframing historically male-centric traditions, making it resonate with female experiences and sensuality. In panels 5 and 6, the motif's continuity and cyclical nature subtly mirror the cyclical nature of womanhood – from menstruation to childbirth, emphasising the unending and powerful continuum of female existence.

3.3 Employing Alchemical Symbols in *Opus Magnum for a Girl*, 2020





Figure 3-27

Meichen Lu, *Opus Magnum for a Girl*, 2020

Full view and detail images

Medium: Chinese watercolor, oil painting, paper cutting.

In creating *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (fig.3-27), I primarily employed the alchemical symbols categorised in the symbol matrix to represent the ambiguity of bodily experiences during my formative years. Rather than merely interpreting symbols for their conventional meanings, it was essential to consider them as devices for reflecting the lived experiences of a girl undergoing menarche. The artwork comprises twelve panels, at the heart of the piece is a complex, tri-layered paper artwork set within a large square pink metal frame, serving as an all-encompassing depiction of a comprehension *Opus Magnum for a Girl*. The outermost layer features the auspicious Chinese symbol 囍 (xi) in a repetitive pattern, suggesting themes of joy and celebration, often linked to weddings. The middle layer incorporates various

symbols: a ladder, amulet, lotus and pinecone. These could represent the masculine and feminine principles and fertility, tying into broader themes of union and procreation. The innermost layer is a graphical depiction that integrates symbols with anatomical elements, with a central tree-like form that could be interpreted as a *Tree of Vulva*, blending imagery of natural growth with female anatomy. This central image is accompanied by the Chinese idiom 天癸水至 (*Tian Gui Shui Zhi*), which can allude to the arrival of a significant moment or event, related to the menstrual cycle. The rest of the surrounding panels are segmented into three distinct groups that each highlight and critique specific themes: the euphemistic portrayal of female genitalia, the menstrual process, and the imagining the reproductive function.

The practice creates a dialogue between traditional cultural symbols and contemporary artistic expression, exploring themes of lived experiences and the ambiguity of the female body. It highlights the anxiety and vulnerability experienced by a 12-year-old girl as she confronts the onset of menstruation—an experience that shapes her sense of embodiment and positions her within social expectations of femininity.

Incorporating Jungian concepts of alchemy into my practice resonates with the alchemists' spirit of curiosity and discovery in their quest to unveil the unknown. This echoes my own experiences during menstruation at the age of 12, when I faced a sense of uncertainty and isolation. I embarked on a journey to understand and come to terms with the changes occurring in my body. This personal exploration deeply influenced my use of alchemical imagery and themes in my artwork, allowing me to express and my journey.

Initially, I intend to utilise a range of symbols that I have carefully collected and organised into a matrix, to evaluate the effectiveness of this method. In total, 16 different symbols were applied to depict various aspects of feminine sexuality, particularly emphasising the lack of sexual understanding typical at the age of 12.

Critically, integrating reflective theory into the application of symbols in my practice offers a rich framework for interpreting deeper meanings. Reflection-in-action is an instrumental during the creative process itself. For instance, the decision to depict a partially visible vulva was made amid the artistic process, aiming to give an obscured impression, much like how female genitalia are symbolised in alchemy. This immediate reflection enables me to stay aligned with the aim of the work, ensuring that each symbol contributes to the aesthetic appeal and reinforces its thematic underpinnings. Reflection-on-action allows me to retrospectively analyse the choice and arrangement of symbols within my work. By reflecting on the symbol selection of the Tree of Life, the Alchemical Rose, the Ladder, Solar and Lunar, etc, I can evaluate how effectively these symbols communicate the intended narratives, especially the portrayal of sexuality and my understanding of this during my formative years.

3.3.1 Understanding practice: Symbols, Cultures, and Self

In this section, I first address the significance of the tree symbol within the realms of alchemy and symbolism. The tree emerges as a potent emblem, symbolising life, growth, and the intricate connection between the earthly and the divine. I analyse of the Philosophical Tree as depicted in the *Pandora* (1582), along with the exploration of the symbolic language prevalent in alchemical traditions. This will further elucidate how using alchemical illustrations requires an understanding of the symbolic language inherent in alchemy, a principle that is also reflected in the application of symbols within the context of my own practice. The integration of these symbols with feminine imagery enriches their meaning, suggesting an ancient acknowledgment of the feminine principle's central role in creation and sustenance. This perspective

challenges traditional patriarchal narratives, simultaneously acknowledging and suggesting the feminine as a potent source of power and renewal.

Alchemy is an ancient branch of natural philosophy and a pre-scientific tradition. In his book *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), Jung explores the deep connection between the symbolic world of alchemy and the processes of the unconscious mind in psychological development. The main concept centres on the idea that the alchemists' work, with its rich symbolism and quest for transformation (turning base metals into gold or creating the philosopher's stone), mirrors the process of individuation¹⁵ in Jungian psychology (Jung 1980b, p.406-407). In other words, Jung interprets alchemical imagery as symbolic representations of the individuation process, suggesting that the alchemists, though ostensibly focused on material transformation, were unconsciously working towards psychological and spiritual enlightenment. For Jung, the ultimate goal of the Opus Magnum (great work) is leading to personal growth and self-realisation.

I will give a brief explanation of Carl Jung's alchemical studies from a variety of his writings, including *Psychology and Alchemy* (1980a), *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious* (1980b), and *Alchemical Studies* (1983) to avoid any confusions with my later analysis of symbolism. Jung suggested that alchemical symbolism reflects an intrinsic part of the unconscious psyche, which remains largely unknown yet fundamental to our existence and consciousness (1980a, p.316-320; 1983, p.286). In *Psychology and Alchemy*, he posited that consciousness is not self-originating but emerges from a preconscious psychic life rooted in the unconscious, likened metaphorically to the alchemists' concept of *prima materia*¹⁶—a primary

¹⁵ Roughly, Jung posited what he means by the individuation process, "as the name shows, it is a process or course of development arising out of the conflict between the two fundamental psychic facts" (1980b, p.288). This progress encompasses Jungian concepts of archetype, collective unconscious and consciousness which are fundamental to his analytical psychology and are deeply interwoven with his interpretation of alchemical symbols.

¹⁶ Jung explained the *prima materia*, in alchemy, is "the basis of the opus... is one of the most famous secrets of alchemy. This is hardly surprising, since it represents the unknown substance that carries the projection of the

substance devoid of distinction, embodying unity and the essence from which all things are derived. Jung elucidated the significance of alchemical opinions and fantasies “because the views of the alchemists were derived to a large extent from unconscious archetypal assumptions which also underline other domains of human thought” (1983, p.285).

Specific to the philosophical tree, Jung (1983, p.272) interprets the tree in alchemy as more than a mere botanical entity; its symbolic meaning is fundamental to understanding the phenomenology of the tree symbol. The philosophical tree is closely linked to the *Lapis philosophorum* (also known as the Lapis or Philosopher's Stone), and mandala symbolism¹⁷, both of which are intimately connected to Jung's concept of the individuation process. Jung posited that the tree, as the life principle, “would then be the outward and visible sign of the realisation of the self” and represents the unified unconscious and conscious of individual personality. An image from *Rosarium Philosophorum* (1550) referenced in Jung's *Alchemical Studies* (1983), depicts the *filius* or rex in the form of a hermaphrodite, a figure that symbolises the union of opposites – a key concept in Jung's theory of individuation (1983, p.123) (fig. 3-28). This image illustrates the alchemical conjunctio in progress, the ritual cohabitation of Sol and Luna. The hermaphroditic figure embodies the psychic “wholeness” that Jung (1983 p.139) associates with the culmination of the individuation process, which is accompanied by the presence of the Philosophical Tree with golden flowers which further emphasises the theme of transformation and the integration of the various elements of the psyche (1983, p.122-152).

autonomous psychic content”; it has been subject to a multitude of definitions, as alchemists have variously interpreted the prima materia (Jung, 1980a, p.316).

¹⁷ As I mentioned in the precious chapter, mandala is generally the female principal emblem; in Jungian theory, “the magic circle or mandala can be a form of mother archetype” (1980b, p.81).



The *filius* or *rex* in the form of a hermaphrodite. The axiom of Maria is represented by 1 + 3 snakes: the *filius*, as mediator, unites the one with the three. Characteristically, he has bat's wings. To the right is the Pelican, symbol of the *distillatio circulatoria*; to the left, the *arbor philosophica* with golden flowers; underneath, the chthonic triad as a three-headed serpent. From *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550), fol. X, iiiv

Figure 3-28

"Rosarium Philosophorum (1550)" in Jung's "Alchemical Studies (1983)", figure B2

Jung's analysis of the Philosophical Tree and other archetypal symbols as found in his commentary on various alchemical texts and his own clinical observations, reveals that he interprets these symbols as metaphors for individuals' psychological growth and development. He viewed the tree as a representation of the life that develops out of the union of opposites and their integration, which is essential in the journey towards achieving a balanced and whole self. The Philosophical Tree, therefore, is not just an alchemical image but a symbolic representation of the fundamental method of Jung's analytical psychology.

My analysis explores symbols from a feminist viewpoint, especially within an international context, unfolding a complex interplay of symbolism that varies across cultures. Although I do not employ Jung's psychoanalytical approach in my symbolism research, his extensive works on alchemical traditions remains indispensable. I reference a mythological tree discussed by Jung to frame and explain my narrative approach to the symbolic content under study.

In the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, the king himself is a tree. There is a very ancient, indeed primitive idea that the tree actually represents the life of a man; for instance, a tree is planted at the birth of a child, and its and the child's fates are identical. 'Therefore, the tree is the image and mirror of our condition'". (Jung 1983, p.272)

Jung posits that understanding of tree symbol offers profound insights into human being, reflecting the symbiosis between nature and humanity. The tree in this context is seen as a reflection and symbol of human existence, with its life cycle mirroring that of an individual. In my practice I seek to engage viewers from a similar standpoint, proposing that every symbolic figure and content—be it the tree, rose, ladder, secret garden, vulva figures, etc., serve as a mirror to my own condition. Each symbol I incorporate is a reflection of my existence, echoing the affective essence of the individual. The phenomenological aspect of my reflective symbol applications extends beyond mere graphical representation; it serves as a primary tool to externalise my inner emotional and existential states. It evolves in my body of autobiographical works, capturing and conveying the complexity of internal

experiences—the myriad feelings, thoughts, and emotions that constitute the lived experiences of women. According to Husserl, the *seele* and the living body are not spatially or quasi-spatially related but rather integrally united. Adopting Husserlian notions to my works, the symbols I employ are not merely separate entities; they are extensions of my *seele* and body, representing my lived experiences, perceptions, expressions, and psyche (in here, psyche represents Jungian psychic processes; however, it is not related to Husserlian *seele*). This mirrors Husserl's concept that the *seele* is fundamentally intertwined with the living body, emphasising that all lived experiences, including those that are reflected in my art, are experiences with the intentional acts of consciousness, reflecting how we perceive, think about, and interpret the world in our immediate experience. Accordingly, I encourage viewers to engage with my practice, particularly through the phenomenological lens of Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's explorations of the *seele* and the lived body.

To articulate the methodology underpinning my practice, it is necessary to further elucidate the distinctions between Jungian and Husserlian terminology. Jung's conception of the *seele* as synonymous with the psyche, encompassing all psychic processes, stands in contrast to Husserl's view, which does not conflate the *seele* with the mind or psychic fields. Jung emphasises the totality of psychic processes, while Husserl focuses on the lived experiences of the Ego in its bodily context. In my art practice, by adopting a Husserlian perspective, symbols I incorporate are not merely reflective of an inner psychological state but embody the experiences of the self. They are not simply tools for expression but are experiences of existence itself. This stands in contrast to Jung's approach, where symbols serve as pathways to the deeper, often concealed aspects of the psyche. Consequently, while Jung may perceive symbols as channels to the internal mechanics of the human psyche, Husserl considers them as direct expressions of lived experience, requiring no translation or interpretation to reveal underlying meanings. My practice, therefore, encourages viewers to interact with these symbols phenomenologically, to perceive them as immediate experiences, rather than as symbols needing further psychological dissection.

Next, I examine specific examples from my work *Opus Magnum for a Girl* to illustrate my phenomenological approaches to the use of symbols. By comparing the symbolic strategies in *Opus Magnum for a Girl* and *The Dinner Party*, 1974 by Judy Chicago, I highlight the potential for symbols to either obscure or illuminate the female experience.

In the alchemy, the red rose is regarded as a masculine, active, expansive principle of the solar and male spirit, where the white rose represents the feminine, receptive, contractive principle of the lunar and female soul. When the alchemical red and white rose are in conjunction, it becomes the sacred womb that flows with precious rose-coloured blood (Roob, 1996). Roses are widely used through my body of work, it could also be found in *Enclosed Heim* (2022), *8/9* (2021), *Familias Fantasy* (2022-2023). It transcends significant meaning in my practice and even for me. Panels 7-9 of *Opus Magnum for a Girl*, each featuring a variant of an alchemical rose within a square frame. From the aspect of symbolism, the droplets and ovals surrounding the roses could be respectively interpreted as symbols of blood, the vulva or womb, which are all reminiscent of the menstrual cycle. However, its association with the half-seen vulva figures evokes personal memories or physical sensations related to menstruation — a natural bodily function experienced by women. The three panels depicted here are intended to evoke my reflections on the physical sensations and personal affections associated with menarche, encompassing the pain, confusion, and the intrinsic sense of rhythm and cycle that it introduces into an as yet unforeseen womanhood. The aspect I intend to emphasise is that a 12-year-old girl, upon realising she will experience monthly bleeding for a significant part of her life, may indeed feel afraid. This fear is often juxtaposed with the attitude of her female elders, like her aunt, who assert that it is simply a woman's destiny.

In the following panels 10-12, three oval frames applied the alchemical symbol *Conjunctio*, which symbolises the mystical union, often representing the coming

together of opposites (moon and sun, female and male, and in the Jungian notion, the unconscious and conscious). However, I apply the *Conjunctio* here as a direct, lived experience of the young girl's confrontation with her changing body and identity rather than symbolising a path to unconscious integration. The estrangement is not a metaphor but a real, embodied feeling as she encounters the physical and emotional shifts of puberty. These symbols are expressions of my direct experiences with menstruation and the societal narratives surrounding it, such as the potential for childbirth, which my aunt ambiguously discussed at the time. My work also employs a range of symbols to encapsulate my experiences with the ambiguity of sexual intercourse. For instance, the ladder often symbolises the masculine principle, with mythology suggesting that ascending the ladder represents union with the divine feminine (Walker, 1988 page 90?). Similarly, in Assyrian culture, the pinecone and lotus sequence signify a continuity of male and female forms, symbolising an eternal cycle of gender and fertility. In contrast to Jung, the concept of the *Opus Magnum* for me is not a great work, it is a mirror of my conditions as an ambiguous living body. I invite viewers to engage directly with the symbols in my work, to perceive them not as abstract ideas in need of interpretation, but rather as tangible elements of my lived experience, imbued with personal significance and immediate resonance.

My focus on the tree symbol is not only due to its archetypal significance but because there is also the metaphor of trees in relation to women within my cultural background. I distinctly recall a lesson from my primary school days in China, where the metaphor explained was that a father is like a big tree; tall, strong, and providing shelter from wind and rain. In contrast, a mother was likened to water, universally perceived as gentle and nurturing, sustaining the big tree. Numerous myths recount the Tree of Life or World Tree, integral to narratives about the creation of the universe, the origins of humanity, and the bestowal of divine gifts such as nourishment and civilised skills (Walker 1988, p.472). In alchemical culture, it often referred to as the philosophical tree (*Arbor Philosophica*) or the alchemical tree. Generally, the most common associations attributed to its symbolism include growth, life, and the unfolding of form both physically and spiritually (Walker, 1988 page

no?). It represents development, a progression from below upwards and from above downwards, embodying the maternal aspect and personality; it also symbolises the concepts of death and rebirth (Jung, 1980b page no.?).

A less commonly recognised aspect of the tree, as posited by Barbara Walker (1988, p.459), is its depiction as female, embodying an all-nourishing, all-giving mother, which might be interpreted in alchemical symbolism as a representation of the primordial mother tree. In my body of works, the motif of the tree is recurrent, symbolically linked to my interpretation of the vulva figure. This motif is especially prominent in my works titled *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020). The tree is rendered within a complex, tri-layered paper composition, which is then thoughtfully presented within a large square frame. This approach enriches the feminist discourse by intertwining traditionally masculine symbols with themes of femininity and cross-culture identity.

For instance, the illustration from Hieronymus Reussner's *Pandora* (1582) (fig.3-29) is rich in symbolic alchemy, representing one of the most emblematic depictions of the alchemical tree intertwined with female figures, notably the “Mercurius as virgin, Pandora” (Jung 1980a, p.394). The central figure in the image is portrayed as a woman, crowned and naked, with branches that sprout from her head and bearing fruits and a phoenix, accompanied by the sun on her right and the moon on her left. Jung initially identifies the Arbor Philosophica as a significant symbol within the alchemical process while affirms the interconnectedness of the tree and the female form, declaring that “as the giver of new birth, the mother is identical with the tree” (1980a, p.394). Although Roob does not provide a specific definition of the philosophical tree, he affirms the feminine depiction of this illustration, especially in its association with the concept of the alchemical matrix (2001, p. 407). In the progress of opus magnum more generally, the matrix could be related to prima materia, is not just a physical location or substance, but instead a source of creation which forms the foundational starting point for all alchemical transformations and is symbolically perceived as the womb (Roob 2001, p.405-408). As noted by Roob,

“the tree... bears ‘in-effable fruits of diverse effect’, ‘comes from the seed of men (birds on the left) and of women (bird to the right)’” (2001, p.407). Accordingly, it is a straightforward task to conceptualise the tree as a representation of the womb, as it yields fruits from the collaborative contributions of the male and female principles, corresponding to the graphical juxtaposition of the sun and moon.

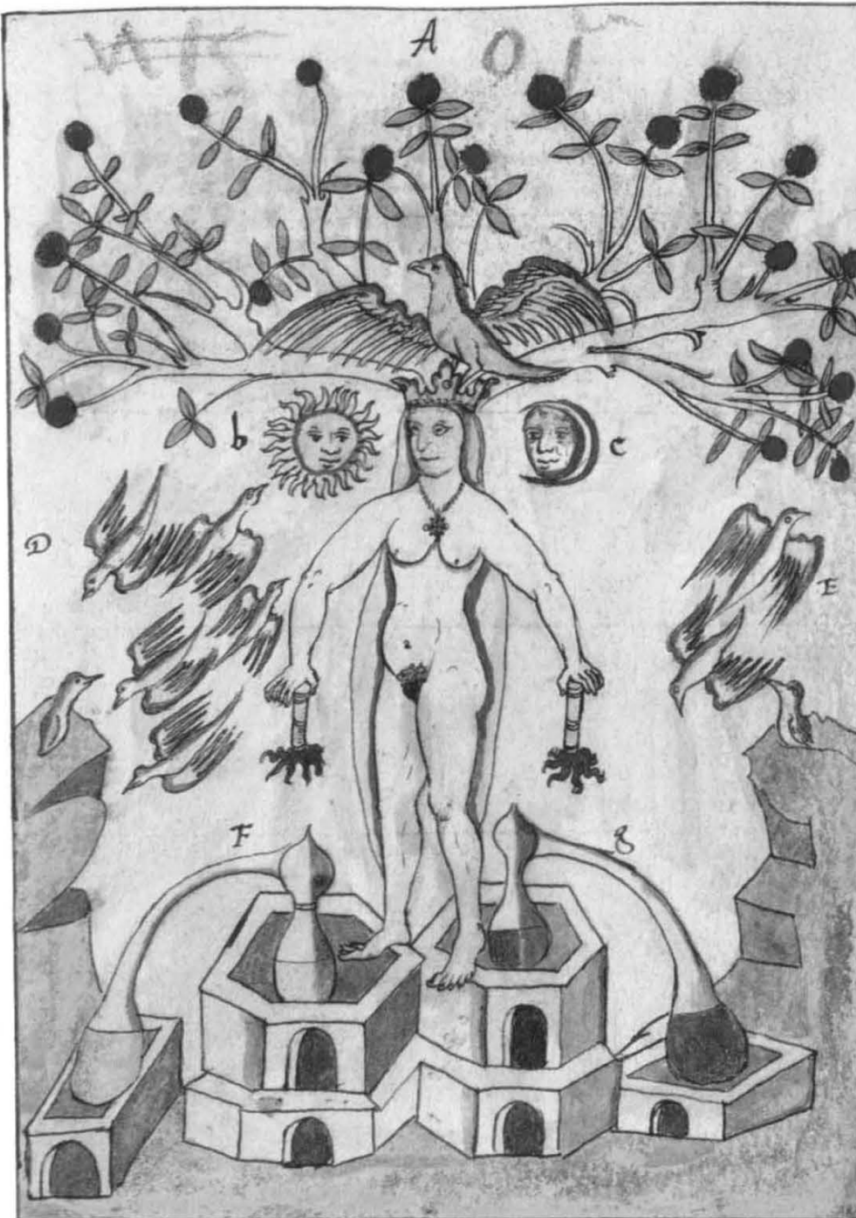


Figure 3-29

Hieronymus Reussner's "*Pandora (1582)*" in Roob's "*Alchemy Mysticism (2003)*", p.503

However, in ancient Chinese mythology, as listed in the symbol matrices section, the sacred tree known as Fu Sang, which is comparable to the Western Tree of Life,

transcends its botanical identity to become a cosmic symbol embodying the male principle and fertility (Zhang, 2010). It has been interpreted by scholars such as Zhang (2010) and Jin (2001) as being linked to male sexual identity and phallus worship, indicating a cultural overlay of masculine attributes onto what is traditionally a feminine symbol. Drawing from my Chinese cultural background, an initial interpretation of the tree symbol has predominantly been phallic, reflecting its elongated morphography, a perspective reinforced by Walker's definition (1988, p.58) where long way motifs, such as the pine tree, typically represent the male principle. It was through my exploration of medieval alchemical culture and archetypal symbols that I gained awareness of the feminine connotations of the tree, symbolising nourishment and life-giving qualities.

Interestingly, when we consider the symbol of the tree, its interpretation varies significantly across different cultural contexts, highlighting the fluidity with which symbols are imbued with gendered meanings. The persistent focus on the phallus as a primary symbol of fertility and creation can be seen as a reflection of historical and cultural biases, which have often placed masculine principles at the centre of life and creativity narratives, at times to the exclusion or diminution of the feminine (Beauvoir 1953). I sought to critically interpret and artistically render the tree symbol, inspired by the depiction of the Philosophical Tree emerging from the female form in *Pandora* (1582). The result was *Tree of Vulva* (2020) (fig.3-30), a sketch piece where the tree's shape merges with the graphic representation of a partially visible vulva figure, embodying a fusion of masculine principles and feminine imagery that links to menstruation and inner lunar blood. From a feminist perspective, understanding the symbols across cultures challenges the often-patriarchal underpinnings of symbolism by bringing to light the equally potent feminine associations with creation, life, and sustenance. This broader view of the tree symbol as both masculine and feminine emphasises the need for a balanced appreciation of both aspects in understanding the cycles of life and the process of creation, thus enriching feminist discourse. By moving beyond a phallocentric view, we can receive the tree symbol, even other long

way principal motifs as holistic representations of generative forces, inviting a more egalitarian and balanced understanding of gender roles in the process of creation.



Figure 3-30
Meichen Lu, *Tree of Vulva*, 2020
Application of the alchemical 'tree of life'
210 x 297 mm

In my works I further incorporated symbols with strong associations to menstruation to amplify the feminine perspective. The term 天癸水至 (*Tian Gui Shui Zhi*), translating to menstrual blood comes from the sky, is an archaic Chinese euphemism for menarche, originating from 寿世保元 (*Shoushi Baoyuan*)¹⁸ a classical medical text of the Ming Dynasty. The four-character idiomatic expression, 天癸水至 (*Tian Gui Shui Zhi*), combines 天 (*tian*), meaning sky, with 至 (*zhi*), signifying arrival.

¹⁸ "Shoushi Baoyuan" authored by Tingxian Gong during the 43rd year of the Wanli era (1615), is a comprehensive ten-volume medical text from the Ming Dynasty. This work serves as an integral resource, with notably detailed discussions on the fundamental theories of traditional Chinese medicine.

癸水 (gui shui), or water Gui, denotes menstruation, invoking ancient feminine imagery not commonly used in contemporary Chinese.

Stemming from the Heavenly Stems¹⁹ and associated with Yin, water Gui symbolises the final phase in the ten-day cycle of yin and yang, with the capacity to nourish the 甲木 (jia mu, wood Jia), initiating the next cycle. In *Shoushi Baoyuan*, volume 7, it describes “室妇十四岁,经脉初动,名曰天癸水至 (When a woman is fourteen years old, her meridians and collaterals begin to change, in which it called ‘Tian Gui Shui Zhi’)” (Gong, 1615). Consequently, embodying clarity and obscurity, water Gui is revered for its life-giving and transformative qualities, thus holding profound feminine significance and representing menstrual functions.

I reference the archaic Chinese idiom and text to highlight the euphemisms my aunt used while imparting menstrual knowledges, such as "down there", "triangular area" and "your little flower". The use of 天癸水至 (*Tian Gui Shui Zhi*) further emphasises ambiguity and unfamiliarity of the alienated body. The graphical depiction of 天癸水至 (*Tian Gui Shui Zhi*) (fig. 3-31) inspired by the traditional Chinese painting method of cloud and sky which could also be found in the scenery of the "As Changeable as Clouds and Rain", "The Joy of Clouds and Rain" and "The Conjunction of Clouds and Rain" shows in *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (2020), highlight the spiral part of the cloud pattern.

¹⁹ A Chinese system of ordinals that first appear during the Shang dynasty, c. 1250 BC, as the names of the ten days of the week. The Heavenly Stems were used in combination with the Earthly Branches, a similar cycle of twelve days, to produce a compound cycle of sixty days, which is used to record the year, month, day, and time. In the "I Ching" and the Chinese medicine system, Heavenly Stems corresponds to a lot of relevant information, such as geographical location and body organs.

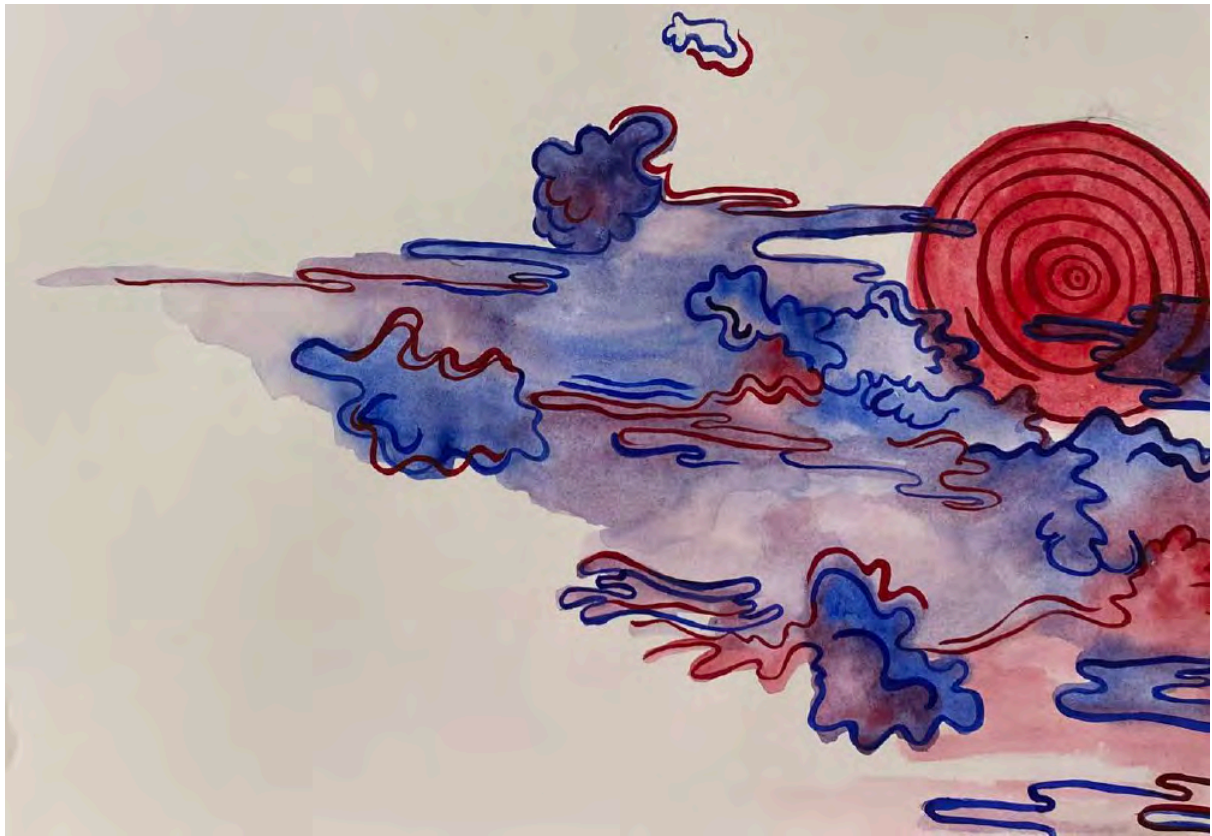


Figure 3-31

Meichen Lu, 天癸水至 (*tian gui shui zhi*), 2020
 The Chinese archaic euphemism for menarche
 210 x 297 mm

In addition to the spiral as the main part of the cloud pattern, a new component called "cloud tail" also appears in the pattern system. It enhances the sense of strength and speed of clouds and wind in the pattern composition and enriches the aesthetic aspect of the cloud pattern. For example, *Cheng Tang and Xia Jie* (fig.3-32), painted by the Chinese artist Dawu Yu, depict an ancient emperor standing by a river with the sky as background to enhance his imperial temperament. The fluid lines of this motif create a seamless connection between the menstruation water descending from the sky and the central figure, Tree of Vulva (2020) (see fig.3-30). In this context, the scenery decoration is integrated with the main figure, together symbolising the onset of menstruation.



13 西边的太阳，红而无光，就要下落。这时，天空突然
响起轰轰的雷声，费昌很是惊异。

Figure 3-32

Dawu Yu, *Cheng Tang and Xia Jie*, 1982

78x109mm

Printed book

The outermost layer features the auspicious Chinese symbol 囍 in a repetitive pattern, suggesting themes of joy and celebration, often linked to weddings; it is also a typical Chinese dual symbol representing harmony, partnership, and the joining of two individuals or families. The symbol 囍 composed of two separate single words 喜, it originally symbolised that two happy events occur at the same time, and was mostly used in the greatest celebrate events especially weddings. Posting paper

cutting 囍 symbols in the front door or windows is a well-known traditional Chinese folk festive custom. The border decoration of 囍 applied to panel 5 indicate there are two happy events for my aunt or my parents, the first one is I have menstruation and the second one is I could give birth in the future. The vertical flipped 囍 could refer to the conventional Chinese traditional symbolic approach of 福. Posting 福 in such an inverted method is one of the traditional Chinese New Year customs. In Chinese pronunciation, the status of the vertical flip is equivalent to "coming", so when posting the celebrated symbols such as 福 and 囍 through vertical flipped approaches indicates that happy events are coming soon.

From a feminist standpoint, the use of euphemism could be critiqued for potentially side-lining the realistic, physical aspect of menstruation in favour of a more palatable, abstract, or celestial depiction. This tendency might be seen as a negation of the female bodily experience, aligning with broader societal tendencies to sanitise or obscure female bodily functions. Thus, this application serves as a primitive platform for evaluating the nuanced interplay between individual experiences and broader societal narratives surrounding emblematic femininity and authentic menstrual processes. Through navigating the symbolic realm and reflecting on my menarche, I sought to create a dialectic between women autobiographic experiences and feminine symbolic representations, laying the groundwork for a more nuanced and informed discourse on menstruation as the inquiry progressed.

Other feminist artists apply vulva-related symbols to emphasise female agency, such as Judy Chicago in her controversial work about new forms of female self-representation expressed in core imagery and her well-known *The Dinner Party* (1974). The symbolic meaning of Chicago's work can be initially seen from the vast triangular dinner table, which indicates the symbolic feminist applications behind the party and the rule of femininity. *The Dinner Party* (fig.3-33) features a series of ceramic chalices and porcelain plates inspired by butterflies and vulva to represent 39 notable women from history and mythology (Warr and Jones, 2012). The “guests

of honour” commemorated on the table are designated with intricately embroidered runners, each executed in a historically specific manner. For each place setting, golden ceramic chalices and tableware, napkins with embroidered edges, and a painted plate with a central pattern designed based on the individual woman’s personality and characteristics in the shape of butterflies and vulva, incorporating Chicago’s core imagery theory.



Figure 3-33

Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974-1979

Brooklyn Museum

Medium: Ceramic, porcelain, textile

Size: 576 × 576 in. (1463 × 1463 cm).

In 1970-1971, Chicago set up the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts (De Biaso. F, 2012), “as a result of my struggle, I suspected that the reason women had trouble realizing themselves as artists was related to their conditioning as women” (Chicago, 2015, p.1). The program intensely worked with the fifteen women Chicago chose as students to explore the climate for women artists; ultimately, the most influential work of the first year of the program was performance art (Chicago, 2015). In date, Chicago and Miriam Shapiro published an article titled *Female Imagery* in the *Womanspace* journal, introducing the concept of "central-core imagery" to name and publicise Chicago's development of the symbolism of the vagina. Based on the theory, Chicago created a large body of work that expanded her interest in the collective experience of women, women-centred iconography, the body's identification with art, and the erasure of women throughout history. The *Flower* (1973) and *Great Ladies* (1973) are two typical examples; in the former (fig.3-34), Chicago initially used flowers as symbols of femininity and allowed interior blank spaces to represent the undefined spaces, the space that transcends feminine boundaries. The *Great Ladies* (fig.3-35) series represents various vital women in history. At the same time, Chicago discovered the erasure of women's achievement, which provided the impetus for her major work, *The Dinner Party*.

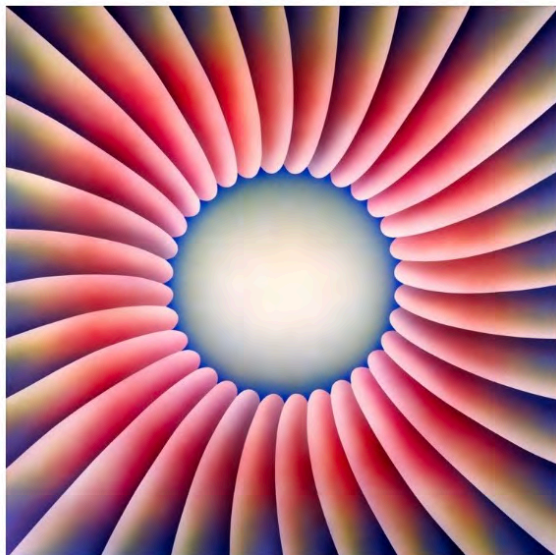


Figure 3-34
Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 1973
Medium: sprayed acrylic on canvas
Size: 60x60 in.

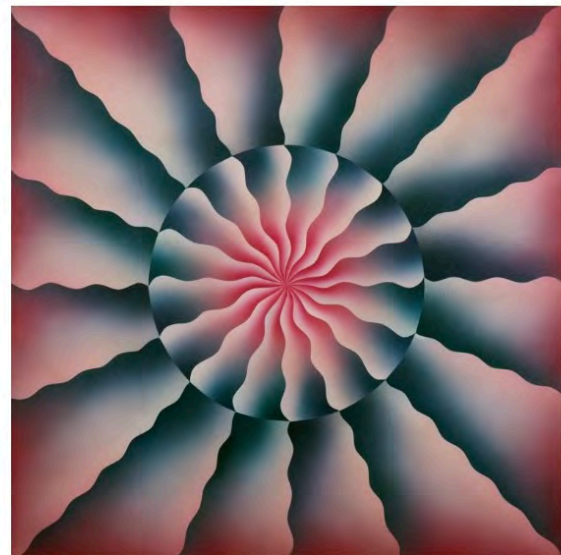


Figure 3-34
Judy Chicago, *Queen Victoria from the Great Ladies series*, 1973
Medium: sprayed acrylic on canvas
Size: 40x40 in.

Chicago had already experimented with shifting from the original Great Ladies to the graphical butterfly shapes in the *Transformation Painting: Great Ladies Transforming Themselves into Butterflies* (fig.3-36) before creating the motifs on the plates for *The Dinner Party*. As De Biaso (2012, p. 22) insisted, these collections provide a fusion of Chicago's Modernist roots established by minimalism, formalism, and finish fetish, with a novel feminine aesthetic containing flowers, softness, layering, central cores, space, and specific colour choices.

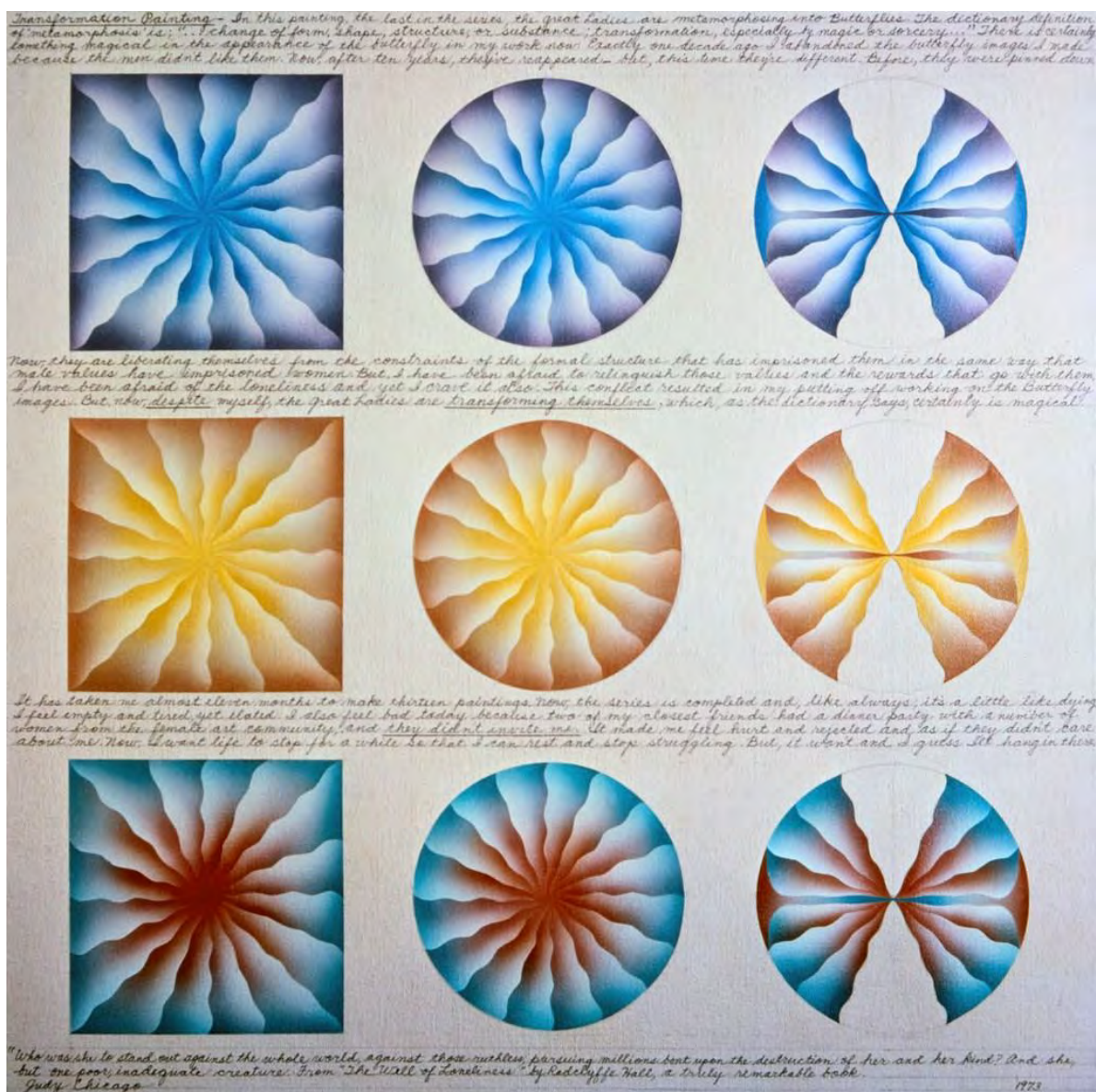


Figure 3-36

Judy Chicago, *The Great Ladies Transforming Themselves into Butterflies*, 1973.

Particular to the finished fetish art form, originating in southern California in the 1960s, which denotes a style of art related to pop art, minimalism, creating seamless, bright, and pristine-looking objects. As Stephanie Barron and Sheri Bernstein clarify in their book *Made in California - Art, Image and Identity 1900-2000* (2000), finish fetish is an artistic approach that derived from “new materials of cars and surfboards-fiberglass resins, tinted glass, and a host of other high-tech products developed by the massive aerospace industry (2000, p.208)”. It aims to blur the boundaries between painting and sculpture and 2D and 3D handcrafted and industrially produced objects. Barron and Bernstein exemplify several practices to make a detailed discussion of finish fetish (2000, p.208-209). For example, the *Untitled Wall Relief* (1967-2008) (fig.3-37) by Craig Kauffman made of acrylic lacquer on vacuum-formed Plexiglas (plastic), and the *California Loop Series* (1970) (fig.3-38) by Marvin Lipofsky with the materials of glass, paint, and rayon flacking. However, these works share a similar underlying feature: they were both created by male artists, reflecting a context in which the contributions and conditions of women artists were largely overlooked within the California art community of the 1960s. While the aerospace industry and automobile culture essentially inspired the specific materials of the finish fetish genre, that could be seen as the arguably macho agency which lacks and ignores women’s voices.



Figure 3-37

Craig Kauffman
Untitled Wall Relief, (1967 – 2008)

Medium: Acrylic lacquer on vacuum formed plastic

Size:132.0 x 183.0 x 38.0 (cm); 52.0 x 72.0 x 15.0 (inch)

Estate of Craig Kauffman
Courtesy Sprüth Magers.



Figure 3-38

Marvin Lipofsky, *California Loop Series*, 1970

Medium: engraved, blown and flocked glass

Size: 10 1/2 x 14 1/2 x 8 inches

Presented by: Micaela Contemporary Projects, California.

Judy Chicago expresses the difficulties she faced of being a female artist in 1960s California in her first autobiographical book, *Through the Flower, My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (1975). In her later introductory essay, *Feminist Art Education: Made in California*, Chicago noted “I suspected that the reason women had trouble realising themselves as artists was related to their conditioning as women. I had found that society’s definition of me as a woman conflicted with my own sense of personhood (and, after all, it is a person who makes art)”. (Judy Chicago, 2005, p.1)

Therefore, for Chicago, selecting the finish fetish as the artistic approach to create a series of ceramic vulva forms shown on *The Dinner Party* is a determination to

overcome masculine prejudice of heavy-duty industries and high-tech materials that merely belong to the boy club, as opposed to the more culturally valued, male-dominated fine art world. Thus, through the minimalised geometrical-formed core-imagery practice as the representation of shapes of the vulva, Chicago intends to replace and eliminate the traditional masculine aesthetic strategy, demonstrating that the vulva and the female body could become the subject rather than the object and the initiative, rather than being passive in art.

However, feminist criticism of *The Dinner Party* has also tended to focus on the vulva imagery on the plates. American art historian Amelia Jones (2013, p155) also claimed that central core art initially concentrates on the labial and vulvic shape images instead of the anatomical vulva. In other words, the aesthetic and expressive aspects have dominated abstraction—the vulva imagery, the vulva has very little salience. Thus, applying the completely abstract minimalist approach to represent the vagina may not be the best method to express the agency of the vulva. Maureen Mullarkey criticised the inauthenticity of the women it claims to represent. She stated that the symbolisation of Emily Dickinson's "multi-tiered pink lace crotch" in *The Dinner Party* is contrary to the extreme privacy of her personality, and O'Keeffe vehemently denied that her works contain any sexual meaning (Hilton, 1980). Therefore, defining the personality and characteristics of other women from any perspective will always bring arguments and doubts.

In my work *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020), I applied symbolic elements as tools that contrast with Judy Chicago's use of core imagery in *The Dinner Party* (1974), while engaging in critical dialogue with her feminist approach to symbolism. Chicago's use of vulvic and butterfly-inspired imagery on porcelain plates celebrates women's histories and achievements through stylised, abstract representations of femininity. In contrast, I incorporate symbols rooted in my cultural and personal experiences, such as the Chinese idiom 天癸水至 (Tian Gui Shui Zhi), which euphemistically refers to menstruation, and the repetitive 囍 motif, traditionally associated with joy

and celebration. By merging these symbols with elements like the Tree of Vulva—a reinterpretation of the tree as a fusion of masculine and feminine principles—I critique the phallogentric emphasis on fertility and creation in traditional symbolism, inspired by the Philosophical Tree in alchemical culture.

Regarding the use of euphemisms, as discussed before, 天癸水至 (Tian Gui Shui Zhi) serves as both a cultural reference and a critique of societal discomfort with female bodily processes. Euphemisms highlight the alienation and obscurity surrounding menstruation, reflecting a broader tendency to abstract or sanitise the female body. In *Opus Magnum for a Girl*, I juxtapose euphemistic and explicit representations to critique this alienation while celebrating the transformative power of menstruation. By blending traditional Chinese motifs and symbols with feminist themes, I challenge Chicago's reliance on modernist and minimalist aesthetics. This synthesis invites a rethinking of feminist art practices by incorporating diverse cultural aesthetics and philosophies. *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020) advocates for an inclusive, culturally sensitive approach to symbolism—one that bridges abstraction with visual expression and lived experience while accepting the complexity of cultural specificity.

This chapter has critically unpacked the use of symbolic language in relation to sexuality and femininity through a structured analysis of visual taxonomies, typologies, and reflective art practice. Section 3.1 established a foundation by constructing thematic and conceptual matrices to trace the cross-cultural meanings of genital and feminine symbols. By distinguishing between taxonomy and typology, I demonstrated how symbolic systems can be both categorised and established, offering a layered vocabulary through which to explore sexual representation.

In the following section, I applied these insights through artistic practice, examining how symbolic motifs—particularly those rooted in traditional Chinese decorative arts—were materialised in genitalia-based figures and background embellishments.

My works *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* and *Horror of The Little Dickhead* became sites of reflective engagement, revealing how visual language can interrogate gendered expectations and bodily narratives.

Then, I further developed this symbolic inquiry through the appropriation of alchemical imagery in *Opus Magnum for a Girl*, where symbols of transformation, balance, and cyclicity enriched the feminist reading of the work. The integration of Eastern and Western symbolism enabled a hybridised framework that resists essentialist binaries and opens up space for more pluralistic articulations of identity.

Together, these sections reflect a methodological synthesis that combines semiotic analysis, cultural research, and practice-based experimentation. The chapter demonstrates that symbols are not static signifiers but evolving forms of expression that can challenge dominant visual and ideological paradigms. By foregrounding phenomenological understanding of symbols, cross-cultural dialogue, and feminist critique, this chapter contributes a nuanced and embodied knowledge of visual language within contemporary art practice.

Chapter 4: Archival Research: Feminist Autobiographical Visual Narratives

This chapter explores the interplay between autobiographical comics by female comic book artists, feminist discourses, and personal experiences, focusing on the themes of sex and desire. It explores how underground feminist comics influenced my understanding, and expression, of intimate experiences, in relation to societal expectations especially in long-distance relationships. In this chapter I examine the following areas: feminist autobiographical underground graphic comics, comics' aesthetics and the application of symbols, and graphic characters within existing works by female comic artists that deal with issues of female self-reflection and sexuality.

Conducting archival research at the UAL Archives and Special Collections Centre and the LCC Zine Collection has influenced my journey in depicting authentic personal sexual experiences. I will demonstrate how the underground and alternative comics in these collections have empowered me to articulate my own experiences and enriched my understanding of the diversity of sexual representations created by female comic book artists. graphic

The final sections of this chapter will focus on the autobiographical aspect of my practice, starting with case study of *365 Days* (2007) by Julie Doucet and analysing this in relation to own my autobiographical work, *8/9* (2021), a 31-day diary produced in response to Doucet's work. At the end of the chapter, I will consider how the new term 'bioautography' proposed by Lisa Samuels to identify the difference between autobiographical and bioautographical, can be applied to the approach taken in my body of work.

This chapter aims to contribute to broader socio-cultural and academic discourses on female autobiographical themes by highlighting how the original works of female comic artists challenge traditional boundaries and promote a more open understanding of female sexuality and expression, both in art and life. My exploration underscores that these narratives have enriched my knowledge and demonstrate the power of these works in articulating diverse sexual representations by women in graphic narratives, thereby empowering women, such as myself, to speak about their own experiences.

4.1 Archival Research in Autobiographical Feminist Comics

This section explores the role of archival research in studying autobiographical feminist comics, with a particular focus on the Les Coleman Collection housed in the University of the Arts London (UAL) Archives and Special Collections. It examines a range of autobiographical feminist comics to undertake a comparative analysis, examining their thematic, stylistic, and narrative similarities and differences. This approach provides a broader contextual understanding of how these works contribute to feminist discourse and the evolution of autobiographical storytelling within the graphic narratives.

Key themes include the representation of graphic characters and sexual objectification, highlighting how feminist comic artists challenge conventional portrayals of women through subversive imagery and storytelling techniques. I discuss the aesthetics of comics and the application of symbols, emphasising how artistic choices influence meaning-making in feminist autobiographical works. Then, the concept of the autobiographical—or the bioautographical—is explored, considering how personal narratives intertwine with larger feminist discourses and how these comics function as both personal testimony and cultural critique. The archival research examines how underground feminist autobiographical comics serve as a space for self-expression, identity exploration, and social critique, often challenging dominant narratives in mainstream comics. This research aims to uncover hidden histories, artistic innovations, and the broader applications of feminist autobiographical comics within the visual medium.

4.1.1 Underground Feminist Autobiographical Comics

The Les Coleman Collection in the UAL Archives and Special Collections , contains works spanning the pivotal North American underground and alternative comic movements, providing an overview of developments within these comic genres. Comic scholar Paul Gravett (2013), a friend of Les Coleman's for nearly thirty years, notes this collection included the work of Robert and Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Pascal Doury, Rory Hayes, Julie Doucet, Joe Coleman, Topor, Siné, H.M. Bateman, and Diane Noomin etc. Notably, the most significant component of the collection is Coleman's Robert Crumb material, possibly the largest in the UK.

The 1970s marked a transformative epoch in the American socio-cultural landscape, with the feminist movement gaining momentum and challenging entrenched societal norms. This zeitgeist was vividly mirrored in the American underground feminist comics of the era, where they did not merely serve as passive reflections but actively shaped and propagated feminist ideologies. My investigative journey was based on the 1970s underground feminist comic genre—a period pivotal for the emergence of feminist discourses and revolutionary aesthetic expressions, thereby foregrounding the agency of female comic artists in broaching pressing societal issues and intimate experiences (Chute 2010, pp.3–4).

Hillary Chute reveals the specific culture and gender situation in her *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics* (2010); according to her assertion, foregrounding female self-representation as a pioneering aesthetic in comics is particularly resonant in these works. These comics by artists such as Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, and Marjane Satrapi serve as intimate chronicles, often investigating traumatic memories and sexual experiences that found little space in mainstream discourses. Thus, the emotive power of comics, where actual events are complexly woven with personal memory, becomes evident.

Kominsky-Crumb's artistic style, self-termed as "primitive, painful scratching that's not for everybody" (Juno, 1997, p.168), encapsulates the raw and visceral essence of her narratives. The seemingly chaotic renditions, ever-shifting character representations, and the blurring of consistency, as seen in *Dirty Laundry Comics* #1²⁰ (fig.4-1) and *Hard Work and No Fun* (1973)²¹ (fig.4-2), co-authored with her husband Robert Crumb, can be interpreted as employing a deliberate artistic strategy. Joseph Witek provides an analysis of Kominsky-Crumb's comics style in *Comics Modes: Caricature and Illustration in the Crumb Family's Dirty Laundry* and notes that although she obtained qualification from art school. Witek notes that she "draws in a blocky, intuitive style that is...almost entirely independent of any fine-art or popular-culture artistic traditions" (2012, p.35), which different is from her husband Crumb's work which draws on the traditions of commercial comics. For instance, in Figure 4-1, Robert's character, across four panels, manifests a pronounced uniformity in visual elements. He consistently wears styled glasses, distinct facial features, and a recurring plaid shirt, anchoring his physical identity and alluding to



Figure 4-1
Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Robert Crumb,
Dirty Laundry Comics #1, 1974
UAL archives comic book collection

potential thematic interpretations. This visual homogeneity might be emblematic of Robert's static or unchanging nature, his resolute perspectives, and his certainty of the reader's expectation that "in comics...figures will look more or less the same throughout the narrative" (Witek, 2012, p.37).

²⁰ The Complete Dirty Laundry Comics collects the two issues of Dirty Laundry Comics as well as other comics that were collaborations between Robert Crumb and his wife Aline Kominsky-Crumb (Witek, 2012).

²¹ One single story from *Goldie a Neurotic Woman* series published on *Wimmen's Comix* #2 in 1973



Figure 4-2
 Aline Kominsky-Crumb, *Hard Work and No Fun*, 1973
 Issued: *Wimmen's Comix #2*
 UAL archives comic book collection

Conversely, Aline's portrayal exudes a more fluid visual lexicon. While a foundational semblance exists that threads her identity across the panels, nuanced variabilities punctuate her representations. The hat becomes a distinctive feature in panels 2, 3, and 4, whereas panel 1 accentuates her curly hair. Yet, amidst these oscillations, the overalls in panels 1 and 3 act as a persistent visual motif, serving dual roles: offering continuity amidst change and anchoring her multifaceted depiction. Joseph Witek highlights Kominsky-Crumb's self-commentary from an interview, "It's unfiltered artless expression. It's like outsider art" (2012, p.38).

For me, the raw depiction in Aline Kominsky-Crumb's comics evokes a primitive expression of the female body. Examples of Aline Kominsky-Crumb's autobiographical comics are discussed in two aspects: the graphic mode and the sexual politics. For the former, Kominsky-Crumb's primal "artless expression"

challenges the traditionally accepted boundaries of visual continuity in comics, introducing a bold visual lexicon that often defies the conventions of the medium's traditions. Specifically, Goldie is displayed as a completely different graphic character in the last three panels on the bottom right corner of the first page in *Hard Work and No Fun* (1973). Her hair is rendered in a rich, deep shade in the far-left panel, creating a sense of volume and depth. As we shift our gaze to the upper right panel, the same hair is portrayed using wave-shaped outlines, offering a contrasting, lighter visual tone. This metamorphosis continues in the bottom panel, where the hair is detailed with line textures, evoking a different artistic mode. The frontal portraits of Goldie, especially when juxtaposed between the left and right panels, are so dramatically varied that, if considered in isolation, they might not be recognized as depictions of the same character. The facial shape, contours, and features are so distinct that they challenge the reader's perception of visual consistency (Witek 2012, p.64).

One of the fundamental skills of any drawing in the comics field is to present the appearance of objects consistently. Creating characters is almost the primary expectation in comics, and "no matter how stylised or iconic the drawing may be, the characters should look the same throughout the narrative" (Witek 2012, p.37). However, in Kominsky-Crumb's autobiographical comics, the seemingly artless style, by diverging from classical comic aesthetics, seems genuine. This is different from traditional approaches to making cartoons and comics, and the work of cartoonists such as Art Spiegelman and Winsor McCay, who generally employ anthropomorphic characters to construct a fictional world, in which "its images often stand in for concepts rather than for physical bodies, and its narrative strategies are deployed not simply to replicate action in space but to embody conceptual relationships (Witek 2012, p. 34)". Witek insisted that, in contrast, what is drawn on the paper by Kominsky-Crumb is the depiction of her psychological state when the stories happened, and it is as free as possible from technical conventions and social restrictions (2012, p.39). Her crude drawing style without stylistic references to any comic traditions depicts the authenticity of her complicated life, "It's just completely

her own thing”, as her husband Robert Crumb described her art in an interview (February 13, 2007). In essence, by breaking the unwritten rule of consistent character portrayal, Kominsky-Crumb forces readers to engage more deeply, question, and recalibrate their expectations in relation to mainstream comics' traditions. Meanwhile, through style, different depictions of characters allow for comprehensive emotional and psychological nuances to be conveyed.

One of the most memorable pieces of Kominsky-Crumb's work examined during my archival research, which directly discusses and presents feminist sexual politics, was *Goldie: A Neurotic Woman*. This was published in the first issue of *Wimmen's Comix* in 1972 and is a story which exemplifies the complexities of a woman's journey from adolescence to adulthood. The five-page narrative, which is both audacious and vulnerable, underscores significant and memorable moments from her life – her evolving relationship with her body, her confrontation with burgeoning sexuality, and



Figure 4-3
Aline Kominsky-Crumb, *Goldie: A Neurotic Woman*, 1972

Issued: *Wimmen's Comix* #1
UAL archives comic book collection

the often-tumultuous journey of self-discovery. Specifically, the second page of the story (fig.4-3) recalls Goldie's father being unsatisfied with her appearance, and her miserable circumstances include listening to her parents have sex. This is combined with images from her sexual imagination concerning her father, who has an extremely long penis walking towards her, "Don't touch me!" she shouted. The following panels depict her character naked, facing readers, masturbating with a variety of vegetables, displaying both an exaggerated direct depiction of the vagina and the act of masturbation.

By tapping into a primitive art style, Kominsky-Crumb channels the raw representation of the female body, devoid of polish or decorum. This choice acts as a direct counter to the often sanitised, stereotyped, or idealized depictions and fantasies of women prevalent in much of mainstream media. Particularly arresting is her portrayal of the traumatic interplay between memory, imagination, and sexuality (Chute 2010, p.29-31) while the imagery, as with her father's exaggerated phallus, is jarring, intended to disconcert and question societal taboos.

Chute confirms the significance of Kominsky-Crumb's contribution to the feminist visual culture noting that "uninhibited representations of her own forceful sexuality in a light that is not always palatable, or favourable, make her a pioneering figure" (2010, p.30), in relation to male-dominated principles. In other words, her lack of stable representation can be seen as a metaphor for the flux and instability of identity, especially in the realm of feminist introspection. Such inconsistency, rather than diminishing the narrative's integrity, augments its authenticity. It mirrors the complexities of self-perception, self-representation, and the multifaceted nature of womanhood. Accordingly, authenticity becomes a vessel to represent the female body with its unvarnished truths, blemishes, imperfections, and moments of raw emotion. However, as for me, Aline Kominsky-Crumb's autobiographical comics, when examined within a phenomenological context, reveal a profound alignment with the principles of this philosophical approach, particularly in terms of understanding human experiences.

In the phenomenological context, as established by Husserl, the approach to understanding phenomena is centred on how these phenomena are experienced and constituted in consciousness. From a phenomenological perspective, Goldie's concern for her body and desire could be rephrased as; how is the experience of masturbation or sexual desire constituted in the consciousness of an adolescent girl. Such an inquiry would explore various dimensions such as how the initial awareness of masturbation is formed, how the girl comprehends the changes occurring in her body, how this awareness intersects with her developing sense of self how sexual

desire and her living body manipulate each other. It would also consider how her understanding is influenced by cultural, familial, and educational contexts, and how these factors shape her experience of this significant biological and personal milestone. Kominsky-Crumb's work, in this light, can be seen as an exploration of her own subjective experiences, particularly as a woman navigating her way through various stages of life. She confronts all complexities and often uncomfortable realities of a girl's adolescence journey, including masturbating with vegetable, encountering her parents sexual behaviours and imagining her father's genitalia.

Applying Husserlian concepts to Kominsky-Crumb's work, her departure from conventional comic aesthetics and her adoption of an artless style aligns phenomenologically with his concept of individuality and lived experiences. Her comics do not conform to the traditional character portrayals or polished art styles typical in comics; instead, they present a raw and unfiltered representation of life. This approach mirrors Husserl's emphasis on the concordant unity of a person's modes of behaviour, activities, and passivities, collectively contributing to their psychic basis (1969, p. 291). In works like *Goldie: A Neurotic Woman*, Kominsky-Crumb attempts to capture the essence of her experiences as a woman from adolescence to adulthood, exemplifying the phenomenological focus on individual lived experience. Her portrayal is not just a depiction of events but an expression of an Ego, capturing the subjective reality of her own experiences of thinking, perceiving, remembering, and fantasising. This fluidity and dynamism align with Husserl's description of the nexus of lived experiences not being a mere stream of consciousness, but a series of experiences lived by an Ego (1969, p. 290). Therefore, Aline Kominsky-Crumb's comics practice serves as an avenue to reclaim the narrative of the female body, casting aside polished artifice to expose the raw, primitive, and undeniably authentic experiences of women's living bodies. Through her body of work, Kominsky-Crumb challenges viewers to rethink conventions, question societal patriarchal norms, and embrace the unrefined essence of femininity.

A key outcome of my research into the feminist underground comics movement is that it inspired me to express women's lived experiences directly. This graphic approach is fundamentally different from theoretical interpretations. For instance, when engaging with complex feminist and phenomenological texts, it often requires considerable and repeated analysis to grasp their insights, such as the understanding that the *see/e* is a fundamental presupposition for all human being, according to which the masculine principle and the feminine principle are equal. In contrast, the visual expressions in autobiographical comics are stark and direct, showing how specific phenomena are experienced and interpreted by the individual involved. The study of autobiographical comics offers raw, unvarnished, and authentic perceptions into the themes of women, identity, and the complexities of human experience. In this context, I consider my graphic practice to be a crucial key to comprehending the abstruse terms found in theoretical frameworks.

4.1.2 Graphic Characters and Sexual Objectification

The elegance and refined characteristics of popular comic art, embodied in its meticulous linearity, ornate character portrayals, and carefully demarcated gutters, is conspicuously absent in Aline Kominsky-Crumb narratives. Instead, her artistry is characterised by an unapologetic, unrestrained authenticity. As a female viewer, I find this divergence offers a refreshing perspective. The characters rendered by Kominsky-Crumb evoke a palpable sense of ease and relatability, particularly in their depictions of the female form. This contrasts sharply with mainstream comics, which have often been critiqued for their perpetuation of the male gaze²², which was

²² In terminology, the male gaze is the act of shaping woman from a male-dominated, heterosexual perspective which present women as sexual objects for the pleasure of male viewer (Mulvey. L, 1972). The male gaze and the objectification theory (Martha Nussbaum, 1995) will be comprehensively discussed with other feminism theories together in chapter 6, relating to the realm of menstruation.

posited by film theorist Laura Mulvey in 1972 and refers to the act of depicting women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective.

In the realm of comics, the male gaze often translates into hyper-sexualised, objectified renderings of female characters, catering predominantly to a presumed male readership. Take, for instance, DC's *Power Girl* (fig.4-4) where the character is



Figure 4-4
JSA Classified #1 (2005)
Created: Gardner Fox (writer) Everett E. Hibbard (artist) Sheldon Mayer (editor)
Publisher: DC Comics

emblematic of a recurrent motif in mainstream comics that female characters are rendered in hyperbolic, often anatomically improbable forms, underpinning their perpetual state of objectification. Fredrickson and Roberts have argued that sexual gazing is what enables sexual objectification, and when these acts occur women's body parts are what defines her as a

person rather than her personality (Miller 2017, p.22). Thus, such depictions are not merely aesthetically jarring but also perpetrate harmful stereotypes, reducing female characters to mere visual spectacles, devoid of agency and depth. In Kominsky-Crumb's comics, the gaze always belongs to herself, with her unique hyper exaggerated primitive style portraying her own nudity and sexuality from a female perspective. Chute (2010, p. 20) commented on Aline Kominsky-Crumb's work, the kind of explicit images did not exist previously in the context of autobiography, whether "above' ground" or in the comix underground.

It is not difficult to read that the world of comics has long grappled with representations of gender, and female characters in particular have been ensnared in a quagmire of hyper-sexualization, objectification, and passive roles, especially within the precincts of mainstream comics. To dissect this phenomenon critically, it is pertinent to juxtapose two emblematic figures, representing two diametrically

opposite spectrums: DC's renowned *Catwoman* and Dot Bucher's parodic *Bosomic Woman* from the women's underground comix magazine *Tits 'n Clits Comix*.²³

In mainstream comic books, such as those from the DC and Marvel universes, women are usually secondary characters who may help advance the plot but usually do not actively drive the story (Race, 2013). Using Laura Mulvey's seminal framework which elucidates the male gaze in cinema, one can discern the deliberate fragmentation of the female form in sequential comic art. Race asserts, "Occasionally, a shockingly poignant moment will draw the eye to pause, look for context, and make a decision about the character depicted" (2013, p10). *Catwoman*



Figure 4-5
Catwoman (2011) Judd Winick, Guillem March
Issued: Vol. 1: The Game
Published: Nuevo Universo DC Book Series

serves as an apt illustration, responding how the sexualised female body is applied to a poignant moment, by merely focusing on the male gaze. As depicted in one specific sequence (fig.4-5), the readers are inundated with a visual spectacle where Catwoman's body is dissected and commodified. Her form is not showcased in its entirety, but rather in fragmented close-ups - a lacy red bra beneath a

provocatively unzipped catsuit, voluptuous lips poised for action, all conspicuously highlighted against a stark contrasting backdrop. This visual treatment not only diminishes her agency as a formidable anti-heroine but also compels the reader to perceive her through a lascivious lens. Instead of immersing oneself in her narrative plot or her feats of agility, the reader is insidiously drawn to her fragmented anatomy,

²³ Dot Bucher was one of the female comic artists who contributed to the women's underground comix magazine *Tits 'n Clits Comix*, started in 1975 by Lyn Chevely and Joyce Farmer. Dot Bucher drew in a style which parodied superhero comics - especially her feature 'Bosomic Woman', about a super-endowed heroine who fights enemies with her breasts (Lambiek, 2021). Resource from the Lambiek Comiclopedia: https://www.lambiek.net/artists/b/bucher_dot.htm [accessed on: 16/09/2023]

each part laden with an erotic sense. Therefore, instead of using this visual device to enhance the narrative depth or character development, mainstream comics like *Catwoman* exploit it to titillate male sexual desire, reducing the character to a mere sum of her sexualised body parts.

In stark contrast, Dot Bucher's *Bosomic Woman* (1997) (fig.4-6) parodies this trope. Typically, parody as a literary genre, employs a humorous or mocking imitation of something, using the same form as the original that spoofs or satirises something using the same form (Frahm, 2018). However, in the realm of comics, parody serves as a potent tool for artists to both pay homage to and critique dominant cultural narratives that also available in mainstream comics. For example, directly targeting iconic Walt Disney comics, Max (Francesc Capdevila Gisbert) entwines his admiration for their aesthetic brilliance with a pointed critique of the ideological content intrinsic to the plots of Disney tales (Merino, 2012). Accordingly, the involved blend of reverence and criticism encapsulates the true essence of parody in the comics genre. While Bucher's drawing style does mimic the exaggerated anatomical forms prevalent in superheroine comics, an undercurrent of satire challenges and subverts the conventions. *Bosomic Woman*, by its name and presentation, offers a biting commentary on the industry's predilection for objectifying women and simultaneously lays bare the absurdities inherent in mainstream comics' representation of women, using parody as a tool of critique.

In essence, the juxtaposition of two characters, *the Catwoman* and *the Bosomic Woman*, not only underscores the pervasive male gaze in mainstream comics but also illuminates the subversive potential of underground comix. The latter, as exemplified by Dot Bucher, does not merely critique the status; it offers a counter-narrative, empowering readers to view female characters beyond the limiting and often reductive lens of objectification.



Figure 4-6

Dotty Bucher,
Bosomic Woman,
meets the Hunk,
1997

Issued: *Tits & Clits*
Comix #5

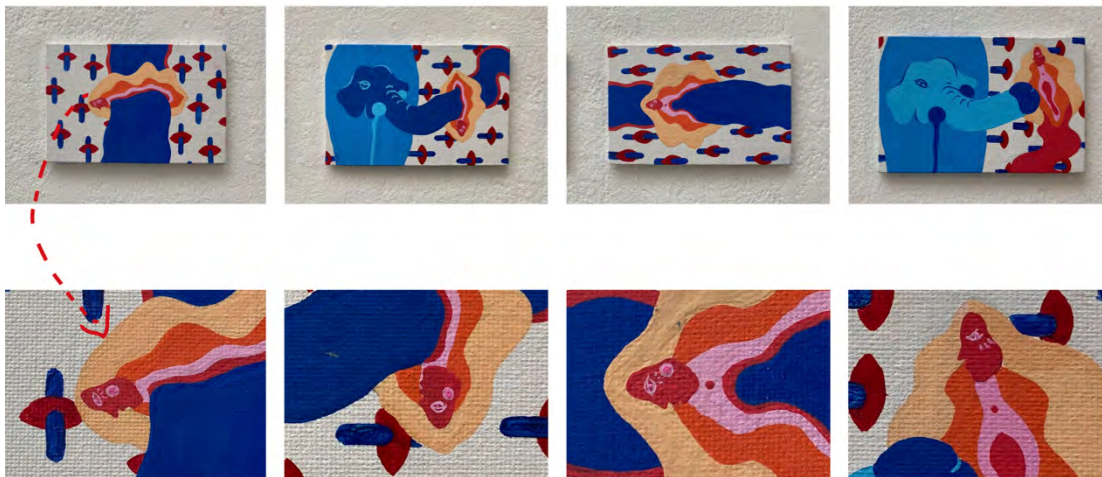


Figure 4-7

Meichen Lu, *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality*, 2020

Panel 4,7,8,9

As for my own practice, the vulva figure transcends mere representation; she assumes an authoritative role, directing the narrative's trajectory and the sequential flow of the panels. In *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (2020) (fig.4-7), this command is linked to integrating the Yoni and Lingam symbols. These two symbols are deeply rooted in ancient symbolism and represent the female and male principles, respectively. Specifically, the elliptical and rectangular shapes encountered in panels 1-3 and 7-9 symbolise the Yoni and Lingam. As the narrative unfolds across the panels, the evolving shapes of the ellipse signal a shift in the vulva figures' influence and interactions with the male counterpart, the Lingam. The initial panels illustrate the vulva and penis figures drawing nearer to one another, with the geometrical shapes morphing to reflect the evolving dynamics of the protagonists. Panel 4 captures the moment of intercourse, with subsequent panels depicting a variety of sexual positions. Hence, the interplay between Yoni and Lingam—the feminine and masculine—propels the narrative. As the figures engage in intercourse and move through various sexual poses, the corresponding geometric shapes engage in parallel movements. This mirroring effect not only reinforces the vulva figures' narrative dominance but also symbolises the unity of feminine and masculine energies. Moreover, this approach creates an interaction between the foreground and the background, intertwining protagonists with decorative elements and facilitating a progressive cognitive comprehension of the symbols.

Thus, not all depictions of women's body parts objectify women. This addresses Martha Nussbaum's concept of objectification, which holds that "objectifying attention to bodily parts is an important element in correcting the deformation and promoting genuine erotic equality" (1995, p. 290), enabling women's self-expression and seeing a domain of natural sexuality behind cultural constructions. Attributing independent agency to objectified body parts, Nussbaum (1995, p. 267) states that "being identified with her genital organs is not necessarily to be seen as dehumanised meat ripe for victimisation and abuse, but [...] is a reminder that the genital organs of people are not fungible, but have their character, and are in effect parts of the person if one will look at them closely without shame". Therefore, observing my own body

closely without shame and recording the progress of exploring my genitalia is one solution to sexual objectification and the male gaze.

4.1.3 Comics Aesthetics and the Application of Symbols

In this research section, I focus on the aesthetics of comics and the application of symbols, particularly exploring how various artists utilise decorative motifs. This exploration supports my own practice of using decorative motifs and symbols and the development of the vulva figure. I aim to understand how these motifs function decoratively while contributing to the narrative within the context of comics. I will analyse a range of comics, mostly from archival research, to provide a comprehensive view of how decorative motifs and symbols are employed in this medium.

One aspect of comics aesthetics is using decorative motifs in comic panels and pages. For instance, Judy Becker uses decorative motifs in her comic panels in her work *From the Day Kennedy Was Shot* (1989), a short comic consisting of just six panels, Becker showcases the decorative application of simple motifs such as black squares, dots, and circles (fig.4-8). The first panel features a dotted flower motif on the curtain, which reappears on the duvet cover in the second panel. From panels three to five, an alternating dot and square motif adorns the kitchen wall, contrasting with the black dot decoration in the bedroom. These motifs serve a decorative purpose and help distinguish different scenes and materials despite representing nothing more than their geometric forms.



Figure 4-8

Judy Becker, *The day Kennedy was shot!* 1989

UAL archives comic book collection

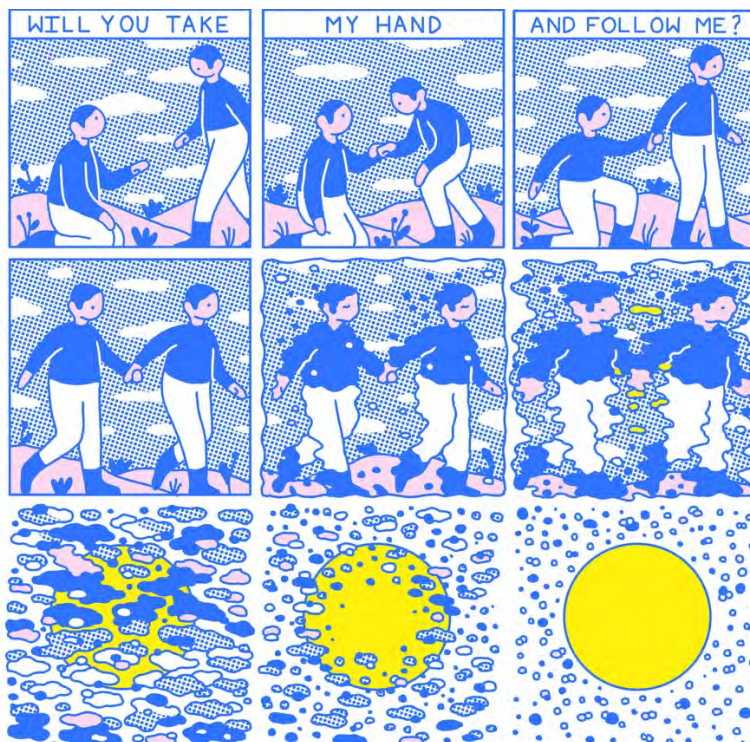


Figure 4-9

Evan Mathew Cohen, *Run Away 4*, 2019

Access: <https://www.evanmcohen.com/life>

Another example is the work Evan Mathew Cohen, a New York-based comic artist who explores digital comic forms with a unique application of motifs. His works are readily accessible on social media platforms, such as Instagram, and his personal website²⁴. In *Run Away 4 (2019)*²⁵, a nine-panel short comic, Cohen depicts the spiritual journey of two characters pursuing the sun, culminating in their eventual melting (fig.4-9). In the initial panels (1-4), the dot motif serves a decorative role akin to Becker's work. However, a shift occurs at the onset of the melting process, as evident in panels 5 and 6, where the characters' forms become distorted and deformed. Irregular round shapes and black squares emerge around the characters, symbolising their disintegration. In the subsequent three panels, the narrative is conveyed entirely through motifs. By panel 7, the characters have transformed into irregular motifs set against a yellow, sun-like shape. Following this, the deformed motifs progressively diminish in size, while the sun grows larger and more prominent. Ultimately, in the final panels, figures morph into motifs themselves, and the sun, initially a background element, becomes the main protagonist. Accordingly, this exchange between foreground figures and background motifs (the sun) during the melting process suggests that the irregular, deformed motifs in panels 7-9 symbolise the figures. Hence, Cohen's work demonstrates that motifs in comics can possess both decorative and representative functions within their geometric content.

Similarly, Olivier Schrauwen employs abstract motifs to enhance aesthetics and narrative his comics. Schrauwen uses abstract motifs to decorate the book's inner cover and hypertext spaces as seen in *Arsène (2014)*. particularly, on pages 172-173 (fig.4-10), where eight individual panels are set against pictorial motifs. This background illustrates the protagonist Arsène entering a large park gate, flanked by spiral plants on the left and a lamp entwined with a twig on the right. These visual complements the accompanying text, "Beyond the gate, Arsène stepped into the

²⁴ Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/evanmcohen/?hl=en>

Personal website: <https://www.evanmcohen.com/>

²⁵ One single page comics in *Life* series comics



Figure 4-10

Olivier Schrauwen , *Arsène* (2014)

Medium: coloured-print book

light of a lantern...”, which appears in the text bubble after the first two panels on page 172. The subsequent six panels on page 173 discusses more detailed mental activities or actions of the protagonist, with the background motifs extending to the margins of the panels, or the gutter. Schrauwen’s use of abstract motifs oscillates between purely decorative elements and integral narrative components. As Crucifix and Meesters observe, his work involves “the conceptual narrativization of abstract motifs that become diegetically motivated...” (2019, p.271). It means the motifs serve not just as a backdrop for a single panel but as a cohesive element across the entire comic page. Motifs are not merely repetitive patterns; they also function as narrative images that disrupt traditional gutter space. The way these motifs break the sequence of panels offers imaginative possibilities for the presence of decorative motifs in comic forms.

My aim, paralleling Schrauwen's, is to explore the realm of decorative elements and utilise suitable motif symbols as graphic embellishments, thereby advancing the visual representation and enhancing the narrative. In the field of comics and graphic

narratives, my initial research into motifs sparked experiments in categorising the application of symbols. As I analysed in Chapter 3, this includes an examination of background decoration, distinguishing between motif decoration and scenery decoration. In my previous practice, *Plentiful in Ideals Yet Skinny in Reality* and *Horror of The Little Dickhead*, I explored how graphic motifs function beyond mere embellishment, carrying layered meanings that engage with themes of gender, sexuality, and cultural symbolism. My practice has demonstrated that these decorative elements are not simply passive backdrops but are infused with intentional symbolism and layered meaning, offering a dynamic consideration on the interplay between aesthetics and symbolism within graphic narratives.

The comics of Julie Doucet and Mack White bear a significant relation to my own practice, particularly in their depiction of female characters combining with the use of potent symbols. Doucet's *Lève ta jambe, mon poisson est mort!*²⁶ (fig.4-11), with its self-portrait interlaced with the hydra symbol to represent ritual goddess figures, which relates to the text "I'm proud of my life". It resonates with my expression of female identity and strength, which are similar to Doucet's by combining symbol elements and figures. Similarly, White's *Ride the Snake* in *Villa of The Mysteries* (fig.4-12) presents an alchemical, mythical backdrop that culminates in a transformation to an intersex character, a nod to the divine hermaphrodite in alchemical culture (fig.4-13). White's comics focus on American history, religion and conspiracy, especially modern religion's antecedents in Roman and pagan mythology and rituals. Similar to White, who extensively employs alchemical symbols in his fictional narrative comics, I too have found that the rich symbolism of alchemy has significantly influenced my practice-led research, but in contrast, my work is more introspective and centred on the personal and experiential aspects of being a woman.

²⁶ Translation as 'Lift Your Leg, My Fish is Dead!'



Figure 4-11
Julie Doucet, *Lève ta jambe, mon poisson est mort!* 1993
UAL archives comic book collection



Figure 4-12
Mack White, *Ride the Snake*, 1996
Issued: *Villa of The Mysteries* #1
UAL archives comic book collection

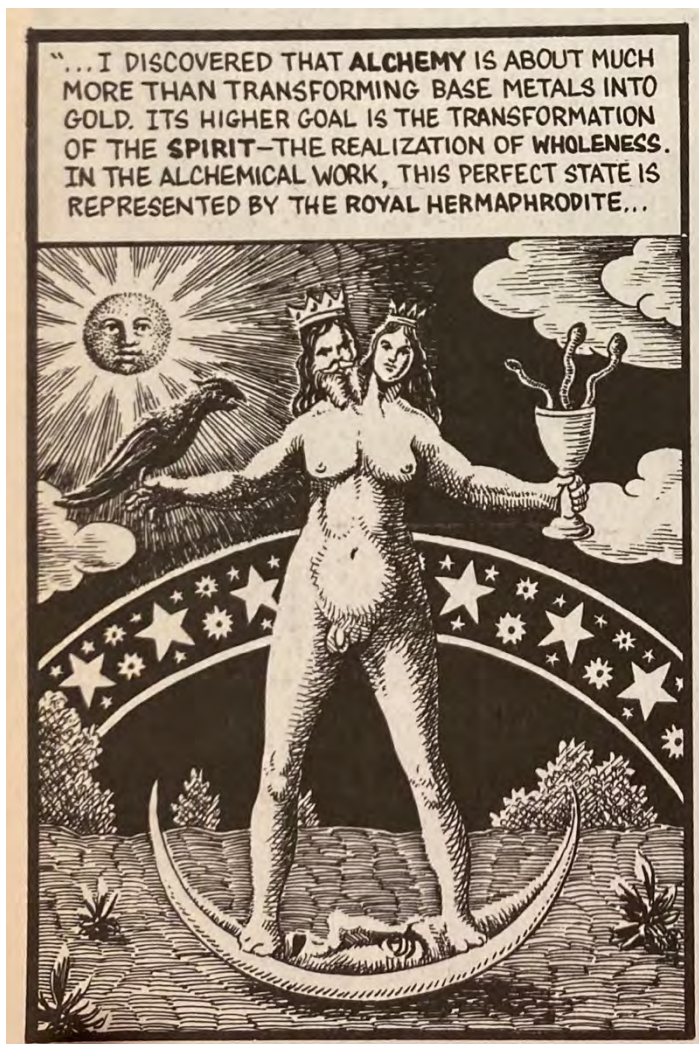


Figure 4-13
Mack White, *Ride the Snake*, 1996
Issued: *Villa of The Mysteries* #1
UAL archives comic book collection

My work tends to explore personal narratives and their societal implications, especially topics around womanhood, often shrouded in euphemism and taboo. According to the symbol matrices, I gather and integrate symbols representing global perceptions of sexuality and femininity, including

representations of genitalia. This process aimed to create a comprehensive framework to understand sexual symbolism across cultures. My experimental practice grows from this foundation, continually evolving to deepen the exploration of sexual and feminine symbolism.



Figure 4-14
Jessica Johnson, *Vagina Dentata*, 1993
Issued: *Dirty Plotte* #8
UAL archives comic book collection

However, in my extensive analysis of underground and alternative comics, there appears to be a singular instance wherein the protagonist is a personified vagina-based character, thus presenting an anthropomorphic non-human central figure. Jessica Johnson's²⁷ work *Vagina Dentata* (1993), depicts a vivid portrayal of a phallic figure ensnared by a toothed vaginal character during coitus (fig.4-14). Spanning merely two pages, the narrative revolves around a candidly named protagonist, *Vagina Dentata*, mirroring the

title of the comic. The inaugural panel captures a close-up of *Dentata*, accompanied by a speech bubble declaring, "Fuck Me". Her gaze, piercingly directed at readers beyond the panel, carries an overtly provocative undertone. The narrative unfolds as she encounters the secondary protagonist, a phallic character rendered akin to an

²⁷ Jessica Johnson was a transgender artist. Jeff Johnson transitioned to Jessica Johnson in the early 2000s, but then in 2010 started calling herself Jess—an ambiguous compromise between Jeff and Jessica (Boyd, 2016).

anthropomorphic worm. This phallic entity exhibits an overt desire to engage in an intimate act with Dentata, expressed through the dialogue, "Get Just One Fuck".

Johnson's visual representation of Dentata delineates a horizontally placed oval, reminiscent of an agape mouth, replete with a double row of teeth, crowned with eyes and anchored with limbs. Notably, Johnson consistently highlights a particular graphic detail - a perpetual dripping liquid from between Dentata's legs, irrespective of the angle of portrayal. I posit that this recurring liquid is a pivotal visual element, alluding to the natural lubrication associated with the vaginal anatomy. As the narrative progresses, the eventual union of Dentata and the phallus ensues on the second page, wherein the phallic character visually and physically inserts into the Dentata. The narrative culmination is marked by the phallus being trapped within the toothed confines of Vagina Dentata, leading to the birth of a novel entity—a confluence of the phallus and dentata, potentially symbolising the lingam-yoni²⁸.

In contemplating the creation of my vulva figures, Johnson's portrayal of Vagina Dentata provides a rich tapestry of inspiration. The visually compelling authenticity of Vagina Dentata as a symbol of a horrifying woman, juxtaposed as both a mouth with rows of teeth and an embodiment of female genitalia, underscores the power of layered symbolism in character design. The overt emphasis Johnson places on the dripping liquid, a metaphorical nod to the natural lubrication of the vagina, imparts the idea that evocative details can be subtly yet powerfully incorporated to enhance the character's depth and nuance. This elaborate detailing prompts me to consider how specifically anatomical elements can be seamlessly integrated into my vulva figures, thereby providing a more authentic and comprehensive understanding of the woman's living body.

²⁸ The Lingam-Yoni is the symbol of male and female genitalia in conjunction, respectively, the lingam in the yoni.

Martha Nussbaum (1995, p.245-257) asserts that treating bodily parts as individual entities with their own character challenges the dehumanising gaze traditionally placed upon them. In this context, vulva figures, steering the narrative in my panels, serve as a testament to this approach. She is not a mere appendage or an objectified aspect; she embodies individuality, agency, and plays an active role in pushing forward the storyline, as the self instead of the other. By attributing a distinct figure and personality to the vulva, I attempt to reclaim and redefine the gaze through which the female body is often viewed.

Feminist underground and alternative comics have been pivotal in challenging mainstream narratives, offering counter-discourses that celebrate the female experience in its myriad forms. My research into the Les Coleman Collection in the UAL Archives and Special Collections, explored work by Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Dot Bucher, Jessica Johnson, Phoebe Gloeckner, and Julie Doucet's depicting the female body. These female practitioners, often eschewing the label "artist", endeavour to examine and elevate the female form devoid of shame or societal prejudice. Initially, I aim to counteract the culture of sexual objectification and challenge the constraints of the male gaze, and conventional depictions of women's bodies. Further, while I draw inspiration from the works of all comics artists, my practice is distinct in its focus on personal female narratives, its methodical approach to symbol analysis, and its commitment to portraying the complexities of female experiences and identities. Contrary to the traditional notion, my depiction emphasises the uniqueness and individuality of every part, reminding the reader that even the most intimate parts of a person can be reflective of their broader identity.

4.2 The Gutter: The Relationship between Texts and Images

Arguably, the graphic depiction of the gutter is readily fixed by the black-bordered panels and white blank spaces as evident in most comics produced prior to the 1990s. Will Eisner argues that for comics, the reader must arrange the sequence of events (or images and pictures) to bridge the gaps in action (2008, p. 39).

Regardless of the size of the gutter, as Barbara Postema insists, “there is always a gap between fragmented moments” (2013, p. 49). Contextually, scholars tend to reveal the gap as a space for human imagination, where is typically graphically expressed by the gutter which is not clearly experienced as a physical object. In other words, the gap in the comics realm is essentially consist of two parts, one is the graphic visualization shown as the gutter, the other is completing narrative by audience imagination, known as closure.

In my practice and research, the exploration of the gutter can be considered in two distinct aspects. Firstly, there is the reimagining and recreation of the so-called gutter, not merely as a blank space but in various shapes and functions as design elements, which I will analyse in the following section. Secondly, the gutter traditionally serves as the space between panels in comic art, but in my work, it assumes a crucial role in both narrative development and as part of a curation strategy. This approach is aligned with the concept of metacomics, as proposed by comics scholars Duffy and Jennings (2013). In my approach, the gutter transcends its conventional role as a mere separator of panels and becomes a dynamic space for storytelling and interpretation. This is akin to how a curator uses the space between artworks in an exhibition. Just as the gutter in a comic book can imply action or time not explicitly shown in the panels, the space between displayed artworks in a gallery can suggest a narrative or thematic connection that is not overtly stated.

In the following, I will start with Scott McCloud's definition of gutters before examining other comic scholars' theories that commonly identifies the gutter, the gap between panels, as playing a role in a cognitive way to complete closure. The monochrome gutters with black and white panels are the most classically recognisable comics format before the 1990s and a stereotype of the visual expression of gutters. This analysis will additionally examine the visual expression of gutters in contemporary works produced after 2000 while also reviewing examples from the pre-comics period, such as Egyptian reliefs, to explore similarities of gutters between archaic and present-day graphic narratives. This section will finally address the definition of the gutter by David Low from 2012 which he titled "gutterance" to clarify the function of gutters as a visual element of comics. Exploring different visual approaches to expressing the gutter shows that these allow comic artists to break with mainstream comic norms.

Fundamentally, the comic structure, in which images are placed in frames called "panels" and separated by white blank spaces called "gutters", is widely described as



Figure 4-15
 "Understanding Comics (1993)" by Scott McCloud, page 66

a mapping of time to space (Ault, 1976; Abbot, 1986; McCloud, 1993). The gutter is widely recognised and applied as the typical and classical element in comic form in both historical and

contemporary contexts. The American cartoonist and comics theorist Scott McCloud

defines the gutter as an aspect of the “medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator” (1993, p.65). This example (fig.4-15) from McCloud’s non-fiction work of comics, *Understanding Comics* (1993), shows how the gutter affects comic narratives. In the first panel, a terrified man is being fatally attacked with an axe by another person. The following panel depicts the scream text ‘EEYAA!!’ rising from the cityscape instead of any characters. Although there are no detailed descriptions of what happened to the man being hunted through his deadly screams, it is not difficult to imagine his ending. Completing the story through fragmented hints and incomplete images is called closure, a “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (McCloud, 1993, p.63). The closure frequently happens in daily life, helping individuals complete unfinished imagining based on their past experiences (McCloud, 1993); this can be associated with the “pregnant moments” proposed by Douglas Wolk (2007, p.131), who defines the gutter as allowing the reader to contribute to fill in the gaps existing between one panel and the next. The gutter in comics relates to our ability to complete closure, taking two separate panels and transforming them into a unified rhythm. Thus, generally, gutters make narratives happen via the panel as a linkage of time and space in the comic field.

Playing with the gutter is significant to comic artists since that is an approach to interact with audiences by setting suspense or (and) continuity, and “some forms of closure are deliberate inventions of storytellers to challenge audiences” (McCloud, 1993, p.63). I have already used examples of comics by the Belgian comic artist Olivier Schrauwen, which apply motifs as narrative graphics to break the gutter space and the sequence of panels. In *Arsène* (2014), the full-page design of pages 172 to 173 includes a landscape pictorial background is part of the narrative. The gutter space is not as usual, blank, instead, it is filled with the same background. This case, is different from McCloud’s definition of the gutter which always provides an unknown sense, linked to audiences’ imagination. Here, the gutter contrarily provides a foresight of the scenario where the protagonist is located, in the past, current, and future. To clarify, the scenario is not the physical definition of the space, it is the dramatic sense of atmosphere, an environmental expression of the graphic

narrative context, the detail visualised being a Belgian-themed park which Arsène has stepped into. It means that the sight of the pictorial landscape-based gutters and pages offers a foreseeing of the scenario, unlike reading comics with classical blank gutters. Thus, the gutter provides an additional function to remind and indicate to audiences that although time and space have changed between panels across the gutter, the environmental scenario where the character exists does not change.

Contemporary comics and graphic novels in the 21st century show a rich diversity in explorations of the gutter, which is very different from the classical 1970s American mainstream or underground comics, which mainly applied monochrome expressions of the blank gutter. The American publisher of alternative comics, Fantagraphics, have since 2017 published a series of comics titled *Now: The New Comics Anthology*, which intends to provide a platform for short contemporary comics experimenting with a range of aesthetic styles and storytelling modes. *Bromeliads* (fig.4-16) by M. Dean and C. J. Aguilera, present in *NOW #6 (2019)*, displays a decorative approach to the gutter space. The story visualises many bromeliad plants cared for by the main character, alongside several motifs composed of arcs, semicircles and triangles, forming a disordered matrix that serves as the background for each page of the comic. The colour composition of motifs is aesthetically aligned with the blue of the character's clothing and the green of the plants (see fig.4-17). In addition to their decorative functions, these motif backgrounds provide dramatic interactions with the comic content due to its unified colour principle, but the gutter has no specific or implicit contextualised function compared to the pictorial landscape-based gutter in the previous example of *Arsène (2014)*.



Figure 4-16

"Bromeliads" by M. Dean and C. J. Aguilera, pp.1-2

Published by Fantagraphics on *NOW #6: The New Comics Anthology*, 2019



Figure 4-17

"Bromeliads" by M. Dean and C. J. Aguilera, pp.5-6

Published by Fantagraphics on *NOW #6: The New Comics Anthology*, 2019

In Amandine Meyer's *Shivering Story* from *NOW #6* (2019), there's an intriguing exploration of the traditional comic format, particularly regarding the treatment of gutters. Meyer's work employs a dense, monochromatic scheme of green lines and dots that omit textual elements, veering towards an abstract, solid aesthetic. This abstraction is most palpable after the core incident on pages 35 and 36 (fig.4-18), where a character's fall precipitates an evolution in the comic's structure. Beginning on page 39, the demarcation of the gutter becomes progressively ambiguous, culminating in it vanishing by page 41 (fig.4-19). Subsequent pages, especially page 41, showcase simultaneous actions across the four quadrants against a backdrop of chaotically intertwined green lines. While the lack of distinct panels, gutters, or discernible gaps challenges conventional comic reading, the trajectory of the protagonist, when analysed, adheres to McCloud's concept of action-to-action transitions that spotlight "transitions featuring a single subject" (1993, p.70). Despite the absence of tangible gutters, the orchestrated sequence of images implicitly calls for closure by the reader. In other words, in this kind of progression, McCloud posits that individual panels depict specific moments of a singular subject in the throes of an action or a sequence of actions. Essentially, audiences witness distinct phases of a single action or observe a chronological series of actions performed by the character or subject, which is a direct transition, concentrating on a solitary subject's motion or emotion. Following the incident on pages 35 and 36 where a character falls off a cliff, the subsequent pages, especially page 41, adopt a unique narrative approach. This page displays actions across its four corners, all seemingly independent of one another. However, due to the dense and chaotic intertwining of green lines, traditional comic demarcations like gutters are absent. While this may initially seem jarring, when analysed through the perspective of McCloud's action-to-action transitions, a pattern emerges. Even though the distinct actions in the four quadrants appear isolated, they are part of a larger narrative sequence, focusing on the protagonist's journey. In the absence of explicit panel separations or gutters, readers are called upon to stitch together the narrative using the individual actions of the protagonist as a guide. The protagonist's trajectory across these actions provides the necessary coherence.

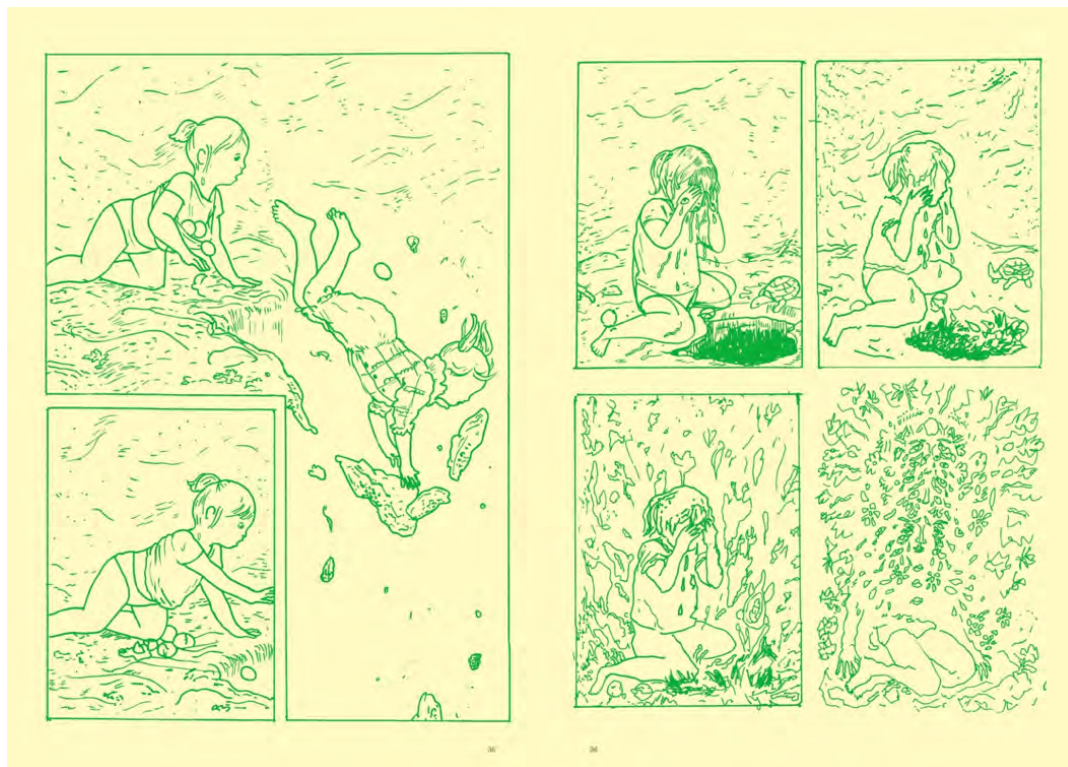


Figure 4-18

“Shivering Story” by Amandine Meyer, pp.35-36

Published by Fantagraphics on *NOW #6: The New Comics Anthology*, 2019



Figure 4-19

“Shivering Story” by Amandine Meyer, pp.41-42

Amandine Meyer's *Shivering Story* transcends traditional comics conventions by eliminating explicit gutters as a phenomenon. Yet, its narrative continuity persists, relying more heavily on the readers' cognitive abilities to discern the underlying sequence. The story, in a sense, becomes a co-creation between the artist and the reader, with the latter playing an instrumental role in interpreting the story's progression. Damian Duffy's (2009a, p.4) insight underscores the essence of comics as a medium: a synergy of cartooning and sequence. While cartooning brings forth the visual representation, sequence ensures the narrative flow. The gutter, as a spatial element, traditionally aids in maintaining this sequence. However, as seen in Meyer's work and the evolution of comics across time, the gutter is adaptable. It's not just a space; it's a tool for pacing, emphasis, and narrative progression. While it might evolve or even disappear in certain contexts, its function – aiding in reader comprehension and guiding them through the narrative journey – remains intact.

In essence, *Shivering Story* manipulates McCloud's concept by challenging the readers to infer the action-to-action progression in a less conventional manner, demonstrating the comic medium's versatility and the active role readers play in decoding narrative sequences. the absence of a visible gutter doesn't negate the essence of comics but rather reiterates the medium's malleability and the indispensable role of reader engagement. The sequence is preserved, even augmented, by the reader's imaginative involvement in the narrative flow.

From a very archaic perspective, Aristotle, in his treatise "*De Anima*", foregrounded the centrality of images to the human cognitive process, positing that our rational engagement with the world invariably entails a mediation through imagistic representation: "Images belong to the rational soul in the manner of perceptions... the soul never thinks without an image" (Aristotle, DA III. 7, 431a, 14-17).

Transposed to the domain of the comic, this Aristotelian understanding underscores the reader's active engagement with sequential art. Such engagement involves not merely passive consumption but an active co-construction of meaning, bridged by what we commonly identify as the gutter. Meyer's *Shivering Story*, see figure 4-20,

with its distinct action-to-action progression that unfolds over successive rows, is paradigmatic of this co-constructive approach. Even if not explicitly demarcated, these gutters are informed by readers' perceptions and imaginings, catalysing narrative closure.

On the other hand, "gutterance", as conceptualised by David Low, presents a nuanced and expanded understanding of the gutter's role in the narrative process. While retaining the spatial characteristics of the traditional gutter, the concept of gutterance emphasises its communicative dimension. As Low suggests, there is a space of "continual, active communication between author and reader" (2012, p.372). Rather than just a physical space between panels, gutterance involves the emotional, cognitive, and interpretative spaces that readers navigate. It encapsulates the myriad possibilities, interpretations, and narrative threads that could exist in the interstitial voids.

Thus, while the traditional gutter serves as a physical demarcation and facilitator of narrative continuity, gutterance deepens this by accentuating the liminal space's potential for diverse interpretations and co-construction of meaning. This is particularly salient in avant-garde or non-traditional comics, where the boundaries of the gutter might be blurred, played with, or altogether redefined. In these contexts, gutterance becomes the process by which readers navigate ambiguity, make sense of disjunctive imagery, or even challenge their own preconceptions.

Shivering Story can serve as an exemplar in this context. The absence or obscurity of defined gutters pushes readers to lean more heavily into the realm of gutterance. With no clear boundaries, readers are propelled into a more intense engagement with the narrative, drawing heavily on their cognitive and imaginative faculties. The narrative, in essence, becomes a collaborative chance between the author's intent and the reader's interpretation, mediated through the dynamic space of gutterance. Accordingly, while both the classic gutter and gutterance play key roles in the

narrative process of comics, their emphasis differs. The former anchors the sequential art's structural and temporal aspects, while the latter deepens the reader's engagement, emphasizing co-construction, interpretation, and the potential multiplicities of meaning.

Significantly, the most crucial component of comics is the constant interaction between images and human perceptions, coined with previous mentioned point that comics are characterised as cartooning and sequence (Duffy, 2009a). Accordingly, the gutter might be considered as a graphic visual element of the comic form instead of crucially sophisticated characteristic to define the comic concept. Transforming the gutter in various shapes and functions, as shows in previous analysis of recent comics works, could be treat as creative activities of comic artists challenging the mainstream norms of the comic strip. Besides, the gutter in my work is not just a space but a tool for visual, narrative, and curatorial innovation, offering new approaches to engage with and understand comics in gallery contexts. A deeper reconsideration of the gutter underscores the evolving role of comics in both graphic and gallery contexts, significantly contributing to the redefinition of how sequential art is perceived and experienced.

In *Horror of the Little Dickhead* (2020) (fig.4-20), the notion of the gutter operates beyond its conventional role as a mere blank divider, becoming instead an active zone of narrative and imaginative expansion. Rather than adhering to a strictly codified comics style—with enclosed speech bubbles and regularised panels—the composition unfolds directly on the gallery wall, transforming the vertical surface into a dynamic sequential space. The decorative symbols at the top and the serpentine black line that weaves through the panels function as an extended gutter, guiding the viewer's eye across images while simultaneously dissolving the boundaries between them. For example, in the sequence where I imagine the “little dickhead” growing and pressing against the vaginal opening, the black line representing its trajectory does not remain confined within the panel; instead, it spills outward, looping into the adjacent frame and visually invading the surrounding space. This movement is

directly connected to the text in panels 4 and 5, which read “what if my dick starts growing” and “finally, it grows out of my vagina!” The phallic shape extending from panel 5 curls into the external space around panel 4, visually linking the fantasy of bodily transformation across panels and gutters. This crossing of frames does not merely link two images—it enacts my own anxiety and fantasy through the disruption of the panel structure, making the gutter an active conduit for psychological movement.

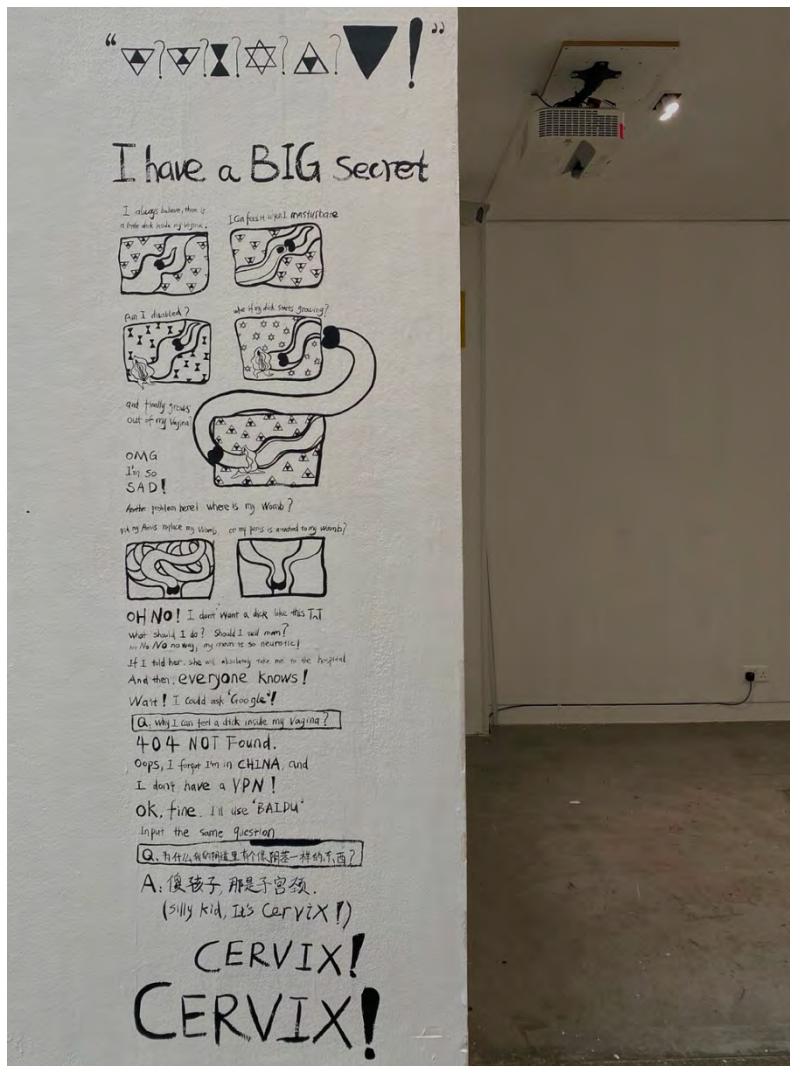


Figure 4-20

Meichen Lu, *The Horror of The Little Dickhead*, 2020

Acrylic on the wall

size variable

Unfolding Narratives 1, London College of Communication

Another moment where this performative quality emerges is in the transition between the visual panels and the textual section at the bottom. Here, the fragmented search engine dialogue—“404 NOT Found,” “oops, I forgot I’m in CHINA, and I don’t have a VPN”—breaks the

pictorial sequence and creates an unexpected temporal shift. The empty space between image and text acts as a hinge that marks a movement from private bodily anxiety to a broader commentary on sociopolitical conditions, such as censorship and digital access. For me, this rupture expands the work’s meaning beyond personal confession and into a wider cultural critique.

Importantly, the absence of conventional speech bubbles intensifies the confessional and interior quality of the work. Instead of externalised dialogue, I let the text float freely within the panels, spilling across boundaries and amplifying the intimate, monologic atmosphere I wanted to create. This decision produces a porous, fluid relationship between text and image, where the gutter no longer just contains meaning but actively shapes it. Thierry Groensteen (2007, pp. 18-19) argues that meaning in comics arises not from isolated panels or discrete textual units but from the relational interplay between images, words, and the multiframe system they inhabit. By allowing text to break free from confined bubbles and interact dynamically with images, I activate a network of connections across the page that draws the viewer into both visual and verbal dimensions simultaneously.



Figure 4-21

Meichen Lu,
*Plentiful in Ideal
yet Skinny in
Reality*, 2020

Oil on canvas,
Posca, Acrylic
on the wall

size variable

*Unfolding
Narratives 1*

London College
of
Communication

This dynamic text-and-images relationship is also evident in *Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality* (2020). In this piece, I mimic the aesthetic of a paper book on a

wall, using the repeated black text “KNOCK!” in the centre as a turning point between imagined and real encounters (fig.4-21). However, the reading experience does not fully conform to traditional comics aesthetics. On the right-hand side, in the black-and-white section, the upper text narrates my interior thoughts, while the text around the lower image panels grows freely outside the frames, uncontained by speech bubbles or rigid boxes. As W. J. T. Mitchell (1994, p. 89) proposes in his theory of “image/text”, the relationship between words and images is inherently unstable and generative, producing meaning through their ongoing negotiation rather than fixed separation. This instability reflects, once again, the phenomenological core of my practice: my artistic strategies are not determined by any fixed artistic norms or stylistic categories but by my responses to unfolding events. When text and image merge in this way, they mark the evolving dynamics of relational and sexual tension, suggesting a shift toward intimacy. In my work, this unstable interplay becomes a deliberate approach for articulating interior states, where the boundaries between visual representation and verbal confession blur, inviting the viewer to navigate meaning across registers of sight, language, and emotional resonance.

In reflecting on this process, I find it essential to distinguish between the traditional understanding of the gutter and the expanded framework of what David Low calls “gutterance”. As Scott McCloud (1993) observes, the gutter in comics is a crucial space where readers instinctively bridge gaps of time and space, constructing continuity and narrative flow. Yet in my practice, the gutter is not simply a blank space awaiting the reader’s closure; it becomes a deliberate tool for revealing my internal landscape. Drawing on Low’s (2012) notion of gutterance, I approach the gutter as a space of active communication between artist and viewer—one charged with emotional, cognitive, and imaginative possibilities. Rather than merely implying what is unsaid, the gutter in both *Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality* and *Horror of the Little Dickhead* explicitly stages my fantasies, doubts, and bodily speculations, turning interstitial space into a site of autobiographical revelation where personal experience and formal experimentation are inseparably intertwined.

This approach also resonates with Eszter Szép's (2020, p. 23) insights into the embodied nature of comics reading, where the reader's body does not merely process visual information but actively participates in the construction of meaning. Szép argues that comics invite a form of "vulnerable engagement", in which the drawn line, the page layout, and even the gaps between panels elicit both sensory and ethical responses from the reader. In my gutter arrangement, I activate this embodied interaction by using the gutter not just as a space for narrative closure, but as a performative zone that draws the viewer's attention to the tension between the intimate and the public, the personal and the political. The serpentine line crossing panels, the abrupt temporal shifts in the text, and the absence of conventional speech bubbles all demand that the reader engage not only cognitively but bodily—with their gaze, their movement around the gallery space, and their ethical positioning as witnesses to vulnerability. Following Szép (2020, p. 23), I see this interaction as an invitation to the reader to immerse themselves in the material and imaginative world of the work while simultaneously becoming aware of their own bodily and ethical position in the encounter. In this sense, the gutter in my work becomes a site of shared vulnerability—a space where meaning is co-constructed through the interplay of drawn form, embodied imagination, and emotional resonance.

In this section, these comics studies have influenced both my understanding of the medium's narrative and aesthetic possibilities and provided a critical framework for reflecting on my practice, where autobiographical form becomes a site of artistic exploration and personal inquiry. Building on this analysis, the next section turns to Julie Doucet's *365 Days*, a key case study that shaped the development of my diary project, *8/9* (2021). Examining Doucet's approach to autobiographical comics deepens the questions raised in this chapter—about intimacy, vulnerability, and formal experimentation—within the context of daily self-representation.

4.3 Case Study and Diary Practice

I explore Julie Doucet's *365 Days* alongside select works from her broader comics oeuvre and juxtapose these with my own work, *8/9* a 31-day continuous record crafted in 2021, developed in response to the case study. This examination reveals significant evolutions in Doucet's artistic style over the *365 Days*, introducing a range of genres and collage techniques. Further illuminates the progression of vulva figure in my work, transitioning from abstract expressions to forms that are increasingly specific, individualised, and autobiographical, a shift underscored through observational methods. I also discuss the Dada artist Hannah Höch's application of photomontage and how it inspired my practice. By drawing on Höch's pioneering work in photomontage, I extend her exploration of identity, gender, and representation into the realm of the personal, using my experiences and memories as a canvas to explore broader societal issues.

4.3.1 Julie Doucet's *365 Days*

Comics scholars' have mainly focused on Julie Doucet early works such as the popular *Dirty Plotte* (1991-1998) series, that specifically express her young adult identity. The word *Plotte* is a Quebec slang of vagina. *Dirty Plotte* was originally a self-published photocopied fanzine created by Doucet between 1988 and 1989 that was recollected and reissued by Montreal publisher Drawn & Quarterly from 1991–1998, with 12 issues in total. (Tinker, 2009). I suggest that a more fully understanding can be obtained by viewing Doucet in the context of her later narrative work like *365 Days* (2007) which is partly, but not entirely, produced in the comic format. In the following chapter, I will make comparisons between Doucet's early comics and her more recent work, especially the *365 Days*, examining the representations of selfhood in each, with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body and other feminist concerns in relation to Julie Doucet's work. In

particular, I will focus on her changing depictions of the body, arguing that this allowed her to explore different aspects of the expression of abjection in female self-representation.

The Montreal-based cartoonist Julie Doucet sealed her reputation with her famous comics series such as, *My Most Secret Desire* (1995), and *My New York Diary* (1999) which are based around her alcohol, drugs and relationships with men. Mixing carnivalesque characters of the unruly and unrestrained body with a parody-based attitude of joy, Doucet's comics expresses her critique of the normative and restrictive representation of the female body in both form and content (Køhlert, 2012). In these works, Doucet's characters keep her classic exaggerated and funny visual style with impossible anatomy and distorted human proportions. Such approaches have been noted by comic researchers as an "interest in bodies manifests itself in an obsession with the grotesque" (Tinker, 2009). The concept of the grotesque body as the aesthetic expression of the carnivalesque was suggested by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Based on Bakhtin's studied of Rabelais' fiction he argues that the human body is a theatre of transformation which ignores the body's smooth surface and focuses on its excrescences and its orifices: the gaping mouth, loins, and anus (Harpold, 1992). This is because the body in many cases is seen as pure whereas the outside world is not, therefore, parts of the body that allow the outside world in or allow elements inside the body out, are seen and used as an exaggeration of the grotesque. The grotesque body is constantly active, exceeding its margins: a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed: it is continually built and created, building and creating another body - eating, drinking, defecation, and other eliminations (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body - all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all events, the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven in this concept (Bakhtin, 1984). Thus, in Bakhtin's concept, the grotesque body becomes the female body through its regenerative powers and the ability to menstruate and give birth to new life, as well

as the natural hole of body, the vulva. The sexist implications of the Bakhtin model are often criticised “Aligning the masculine with the abstract and ‘high’ and the feminine with the material and ‘low’ is part of a misogynistic philosophical tradition privileging the former”. (Køhlert, 2012, p.21) Even though Bakhtin’s ideas are problematic they are still useful for looking at the grotesque in Doucet’s work and further exemplify her core exploration of abjection through grotesque self-representation instead of the carnivalesque celebration of the flesh.

Schnitte (1997) by Julie Doucet is a 24-page illustration book with different self-portrait of Doucet herself in each page. It could provide a paradigm of the general characteristics of the grotesque in Doucet’s depiction of the body in her early comics style. Figures 4-21 all exemplify Doucet’s grotesque thematic focus on physical organs, bodily functions, and the blurring of the inner and outer boundaries of the body. For example, the open mouth in each self-portrait, the genitalia area directly exposed in a nude portrait, and the crying Julie saying, “He’s gone”. These are allowed to obscure the boundaries between the body which is considered pure, and the outside world that is recognised impure, by highlighting the open parts of the body.

In the story *Heavy Flow (1993)* (fig.4-22), Doucet depicts herself as she wakes up in the morning with her menstruation coming. The giant cartoon character shuttles through the city with her menstrual blood is running down streets. Her feet are as big as a helicopter, she’s taller than a skyscraper, and her menstrual blood drowns the cars on the road. She’s sweating, snot coming out of her nose and mouth at the same time. Exaggeration, hyperbole, and excessiveness are all key elements of the grotesque style that Doucet depicts in her works. Doucet’s control of female self-representation subverts the conventions of the form and symbolic of femininity in comics, challenging and redirecting the gaze of male reader. As noted earlier Catwoman beautiful lips and perfect body shape are subject to the male gaze. On the contrary, Doucet’s choice of her grotesque body far away from the conventions

of feminine beauty and female figures of mainstream comics, which fight back the powerfully against sexual objectification and male gaze.



Figure 4-22

Julie Doucet, *Heavy Flow*, 1993

Collected in *Lève ta jambe mon poisson est mort!* (1993).

Source: London College of Communication special archive collection space

Although Bakhtin's grotesque realism comes from a misogynistic philosophical tradition, it may not be negative when discussing its application by female artists. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn draws on Bakhtin's point of view in discussing the subversive potential of unruly women, arguing that the grotesque is not negative but ambivalent, by acquiring its representational and social power through its support of conflicting points of meaning. "By this definition, unruliness is implicitly feminist because it destabilises patriarchal norms" (Karlyn, 2011, p. 11). Thus, although Doucet never entitled herself as a feminist, her grotesque character continues challenging the patriarchy and standard female representations and ideals.

As Emma Tinker noted Doucet's depictions of grotesque bodies are not generally the carnivalesque celebration of the flesh, but the continual exploration of the abject (Tinker, 2009). I agree that reviewing Doucet's work from the perspective of abjection provides a better understanding of her core exploration of female self-representation. In *The Powers of Horror* (date), Julia Kristeva suggests that the abject exist somewhere between the concept of the subject (a part of oneself) and the concept of an object (something that exists independently of oneself), which can be categorised as a part of oneself or one's identity that has since been rejected (Kristeva, 1984). That means abjection is the process by which the subject controls its boundaries by rejecting what is "other" to the self. According to Butler's argument on abjection, the construction of "not me" as abject establishes the boundary of the body, which is also the first outline of the subject (Butler 2006, p.181). In this formulation, abjection is part of self-formation, the process by which the subject could acquire identity and agency.

Köhlert insisted "the abject itself, much like the Bakhtinian grotesque, is usually associated with bodily functions such as sex, defecation, and death, which are physical aspects of life" (2012. p.22). Doucet's characters are always filled with instances of the grotesque that blur boundaries between her body and the outside

15.11.02. FRIDAY. I got up at 8:30 this morning because I was leaving. But yesterday

BEEN SICK ALL DAY LONG

Bouah! SPENT THE WHOLE DAY IN BED. I COULD EVENING ONLY. THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN TO ME IN A LONG TIME. DIDN'T GO TO THE L'OP DE CRAVAIN BOOK LAUNCH. I WILL UNDERSTAND. IN THE EVENING I TRIED TO INGEST SOME FOOD. IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:

a cracker

an orange

a glass of milk

a banana

OTHER THAN THAT, I DID THE SAME

16.02.03. *sunday* YESTERDAY DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE WAR IN IRAK ALL OVER THE WORLD. THE BIGGEST CROWD EVER IN LONDON, IN NEW YORK, THEY DIDN'T SEE THAT AGAIN SINCE THE VIET-NAM WAR. IN MONTREAL, THEY HAD NEVER SEEN

MANY PEOPLE ON THE STREET EXCEPT FOR A 05 SPORTS EVENT (like when the Canadians won the Stanley Cup)... POLITICIANS JOINED IN TOO... AMAZING BIG CROWDS IN PARIS, Mr B... ... LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING IS HAPPENING. MEANWHILE, I HAVE BEEN SOOOO SICK! DICE AGAIN I'VE BEEN PEAKED ALL DAY

AND PART OF THE EVENING, I REALLY CAN'T TAKE IT ANY MORE! I CAN'T DRINK... FORTUNATELY THAT NEVER HAPPENED TO ME WHILE I WAS AWAY!



PANEL 1

I finally wrote to menu
and to blankout yesterday
about a place to stay, maybe
I will be able to sleep at night.

It's raining.

PANEL 2

This weekend
I will be able to
finish
printing the
spreadsheet
before Christ-
mas. Hope
so.

It's sunny.

28.07.03. monday.
i DREAMT i WAS IN AN
APARTMENT WHERE
THERE WAS A FEW SNAKES
LOCKED IN CAGES. AT
LEAST TWO OF THEM
WERE DANGEROUS. ONE
OF THOSE TWO ESCAPED
BY MY FAULT. ITS VENOM
WAS DEADLY. i LOOKED
FOR IT BUT COULDN'T
FIND IT. SO i TOOK AN
ANTIDOTE PILL, AGAINST
THAT MAKE AND JUST
A BIT LATER i FOUND IT:
IT WAS IN MY MOUTH
AND IT BIT ME. i GOT IT
OUT OF THERE, AND
HOPED THE ANTIDOTE
PILL WOULD BE
EFFECTIVE...

50 YESTERDAY
COLLAGES. i WAS
DOING COLLAG
DOUBTS. i'M W
RIGHT THING
But i really
do and i real
at the momen
what was
ok, so
the naked
woman
with this
me at bed
here...


YEAH, IN T
AWFUL WHE
DRIED...IT
SINCE i REA
THE FOREIGN
SUFFER ?
DOCUMENT
"SPELLBOU
ABOUT THE
STATES. WE
FAMILY

185



Figure 4-27

Julie Doucet, *365 Days*, Page 21.11.02,

On 21st November 2002, Julie had a dream about pregnancy (fig.4-27). In this image, Doucet depicts four other women who have babies in their arms while she hold a plastic yogurt jar that contains her baby. In the centre of the page, she

portrays in detail her baby' which has a formless body shape, fluid status where the only recognisable part is a big eye floating in the yogurt jar. In the end of the story, Julie sits on the toilet, exposes her genitalia with blood which indicates her menstruation is coming, thus, there is "no kidding". As Julia Kristeva points out such examples "...in that case, shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside...Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its 'own and clean self'" (1984, p.53). To discuss the abjection, Kristeva details biblical prohibitions and purification rituals, with specific emphasis on menstruation, lactation, and the changeable female body. She also argues that many cultural taboos are attached to situations where unstable boundaries between the body and the non-body, for example, pregnancy and childbirth, sexes, dietary, menstruation and the corpse are often surrounded by rituals to protect individual subjectivity from the physical violation of boundaries' (Tinker, 2009). Reviewing all these materials throughout *365 Days*, proves Doucet's characters in here are still grotesque and her diary content always involves things being removed from or inserted into her body that related to abjection. The carnivalesque expression of the female body, through the combined effect of the grotesque body and the abject, may weaken and subvert the dominant social system



Figure 4-28
Julie Doucet, *365 days*, Page
06.12.02

of repression (Køhlert, 2012). By achieving intersect the grotesque expression of character and the exploration of abjection, Doucet is completing an exaggerated and parodic self-representation.

However, *365 Days* is not just a simple black-and-white hand drawing comic. Doucet combines her grotesque visual style with the new approaches, for example, more realistic sketchbook illustrations (fig.4-28), words or short sentences cut from French magazines and specifically, collage. Collage is an art

form that is made from overlapping materials such as photographs, fabrics, coloured and textured papers, and other types of mixed media in which was coined around 1912 by two artists Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso (Cooper, 1995). In *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912) (fig.4-29), Picasso combined painted elements with an oilcloth printed with a chair caning pattern, framed by a realistic rope motif. In one of the very first examples of collage, as noted by Harris and Zucker (2005), Picasso's early collage experiments were influenced by Braque's use of printed materials.



Figure 4-29

Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912

Medium: oil, printed oilcloth on canvas, rope

Source: Picasso Museum, Paris

In *365 Days*, Doucet mainly applies and explores two collage methods, the *papier collé* and the photomontage. The *papier collé* is a French term translated as pasted paper, it refers to sticking papers, such as newspapers and patterned papers on a

flat surface rather than using a collage of different materials (Katherine, 1989). *Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, Guitar, and Newspaper* (1913) is a typical example of the *papier collé* where Picasso incorporated newspaper clippings and abstracted objects of a guitar, glass and wine bottle cut-out from coloured paper in white, grey and black (fig.4-30). This specific form of collage can be seen on the cover of *365 Days* which comprised of Doucet's diary drawings and cut pieces of newspapers that indicated the key information of the book, such as title, author, and publisher, as well as the countries she travelled during these *365 Days*. (fig.4-31)

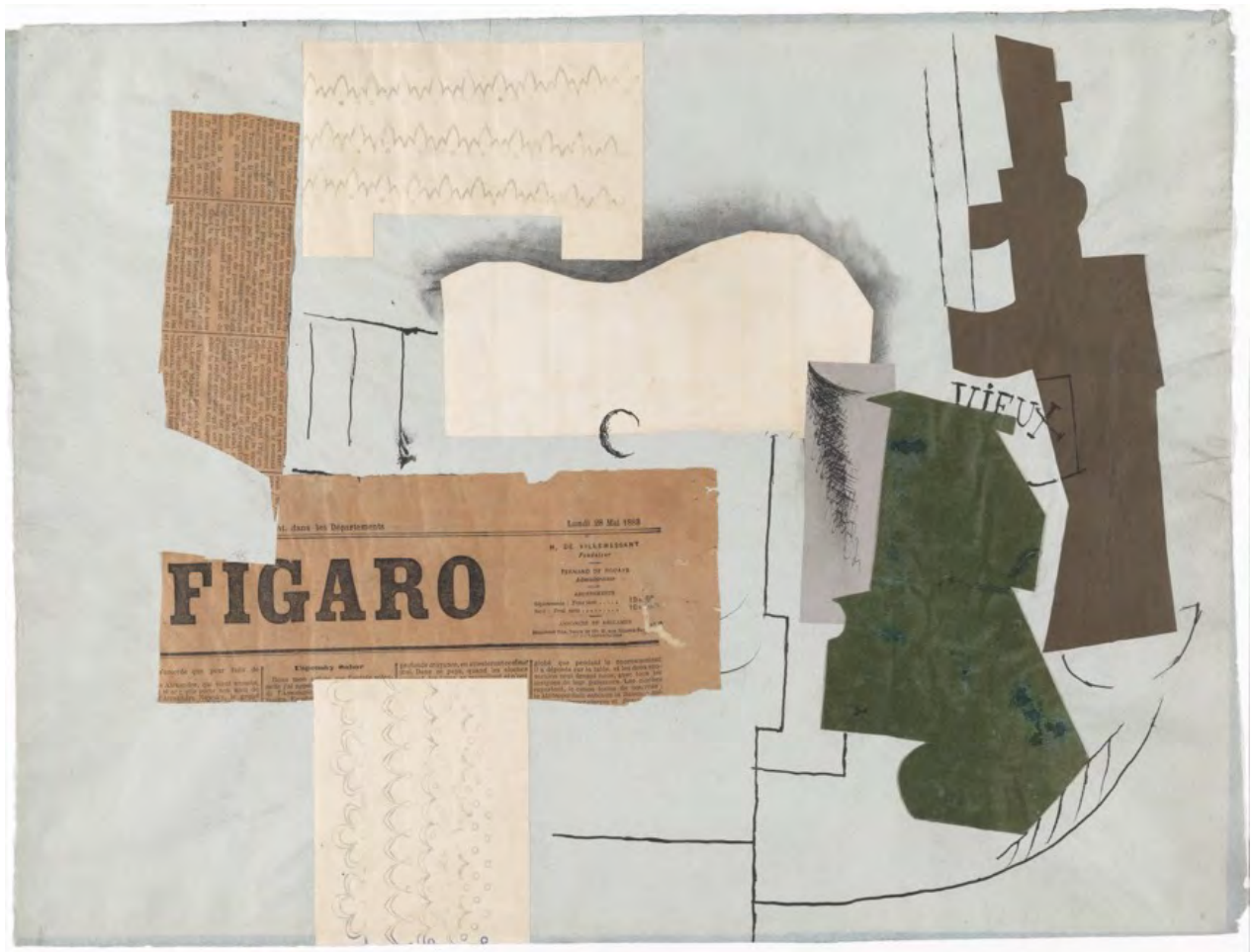


Figure 4-30

Pablo Picasso, *Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, Guitar and Newspaper*, 1913

Medium: Printed papers and ink on paper

Source: Tate



Figure 4-31

Julie Doucet, *365 Days*, 2007

Publisher: Drawn and Quarterly

Doucet's application of the *papier collé* basically has two functions through the diary book. In the first function, such as 26.11.02 (fig.4-32) and 02.12.02 (fig.4-33), the newspaper clippings contain individual meanings but do not interact with the story content, instead, it replaces the normal gutter and its function in comics. The other



Figure 4-34
Julie Doucet, *365 days*, Page 14.01.03

function is, for example, in the diary page 14.01.03 (fig.4-34) which shows Julie spending her day making a collage for an art magazine. Doucet incorporates several cut pieces from newspaper with her drawn character so that the collage scenery interacts with her main text. When the collage is directly applied to the character, it may contain stronger emotional interaction and expression.



Figure 4-32
Julie Doucet, *365 days*, Page 26.11.02

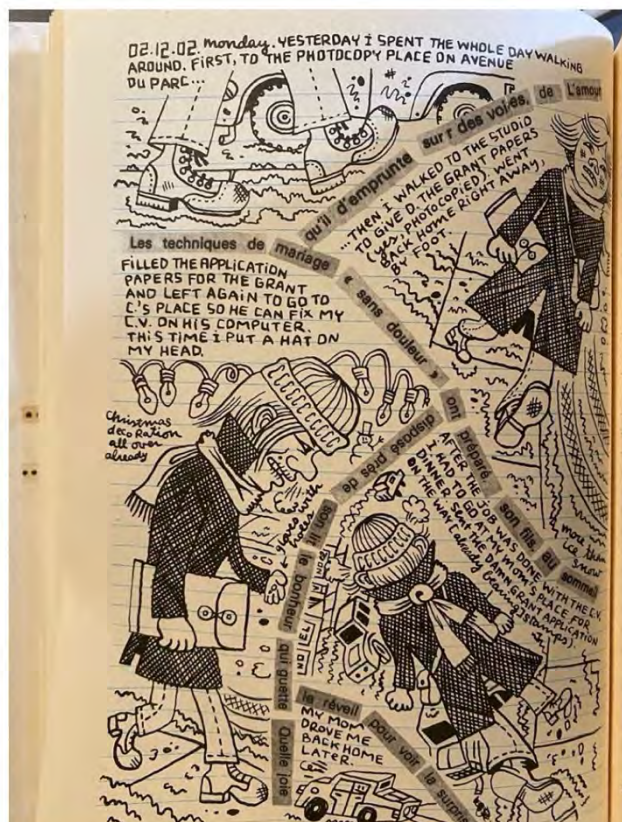


Figure 4-33
Julie Doucet, *365 days*, Page 02.12.02

For the diary entry on 20th December 2002 (see fig.4-25), an image of a headless upper torso female model was pasted on the right-hand side of the page. The image interacts with Julie's character in this panel, with a severed arm and a bra of the same structure as the collaged headless female model. It depicts a grotesque and dramatic body shape while the text narrated her real plan "this weekend, I will be able to finish printings...hope so...". On this page, Doucet imagined herself as the collaged model without arms to highlight the heavy-duty of her work. She lost her hand, in other words, she was imprisoned. Thus, the role of the collage here is not just to decorate the panel, but to guide the audience to consider the conflict between the text and the images, the authentic feeling of Doucet that is hidden behind the everyday talk. In the page 30.11.02 (fig.4-35), the diary text states that Julie has to

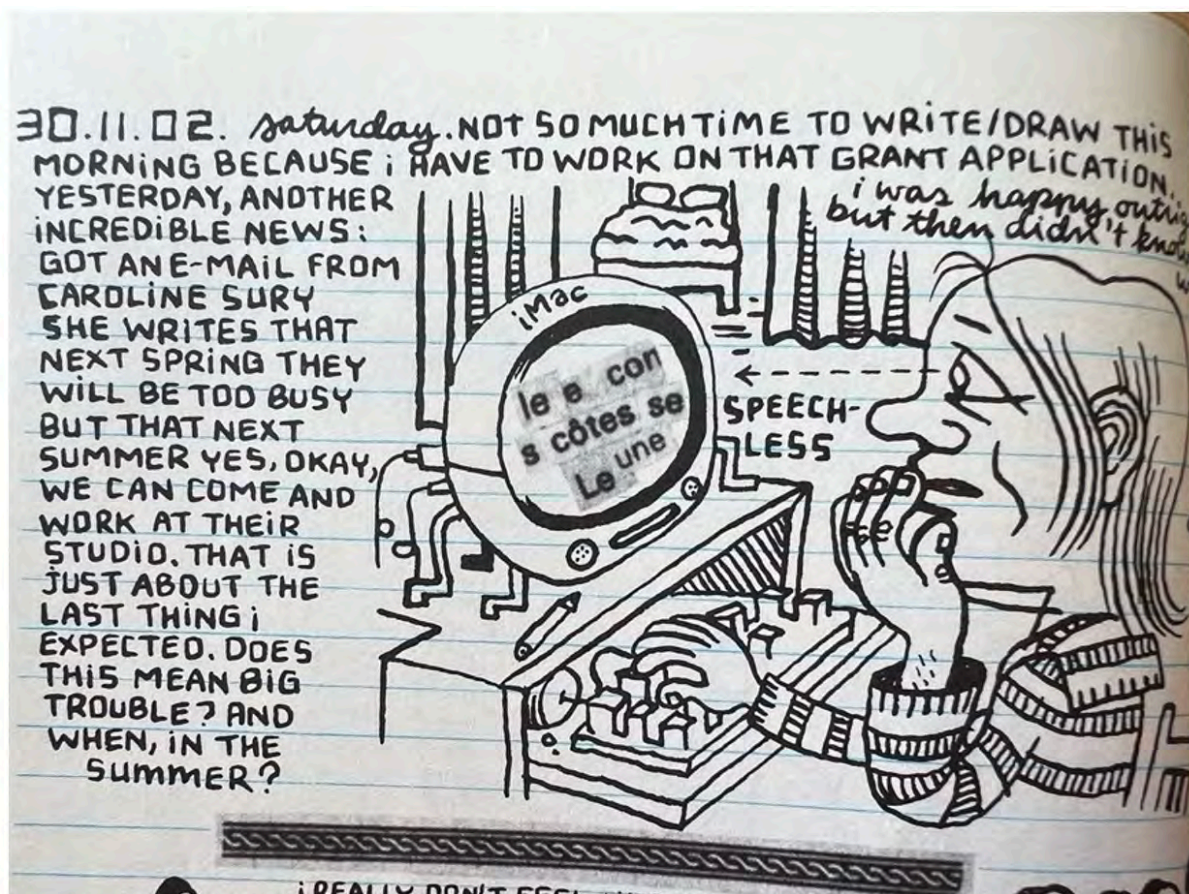


Figure 4-35
Julie Doucet, *365 days*, Page 30.11.02, “

work on an application, and she hates it. The graphic image depicts Julie's unsatisfied stare on the computer screen with the “speechless” words written next to her. Some clippings of French words are pasted on the hand drawn iMac screen,

interestingly, the collage is not a complete sentence, but just some random words. For example, “le” translate as “the”, “côtes” contains both the meaning of beach and rib, “con” means “sucker” and “se” is an accessory word without specific meaning. However, it is a combination without sequenel, which perfectly indicates with Doucet's "speechless" mood at that time. It is also a rare example of the papier collé approach in *365 Days*. In the diary 25.12.02 (fig.4-36), whole page consists of a big collage work with only 3 short sentences. In here, Doucet incorporates cut pieces from newspapers which her drawing of graphic motifs covers. It is difficult to distinguish whether the abstract collage related to the Christmas dinner diary story, but it provides a full view of Doucet's exploration on the papier collé approach.

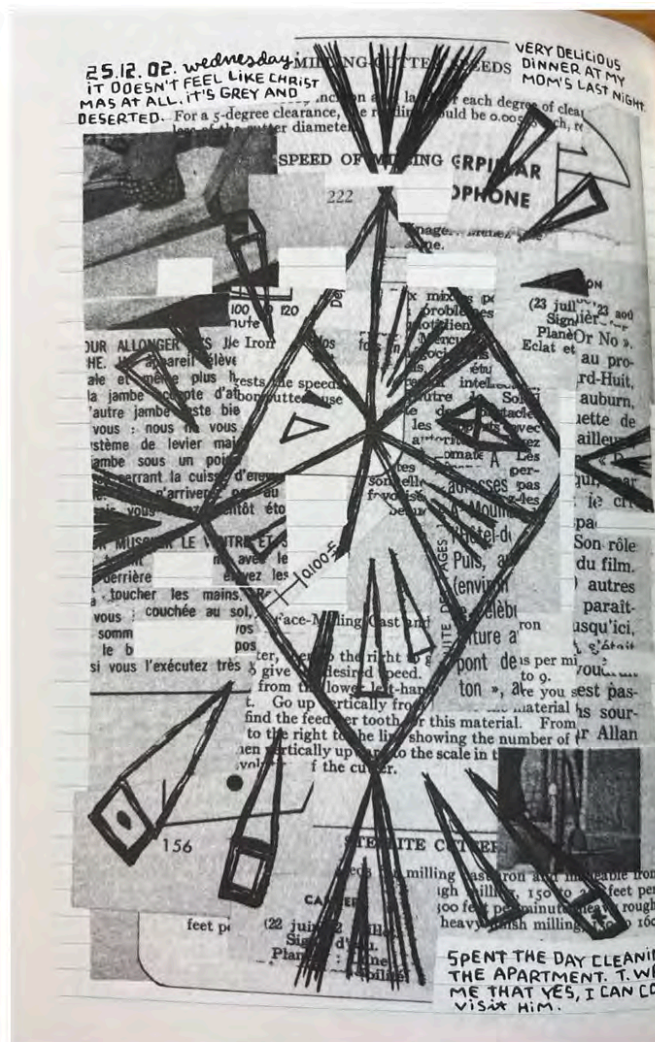


Figure 4-36
Julie Doucet, *365 days*, Page 25.12.02

Doucet's use of photomontage is characterised by carefully arranged photographs that always contain profound metaphors that “manifests itself as a pictorial metaphor with the entire energy and the power of the reality” (Bostanci, 2022).

Photomontage is a collage constructed from two or more photographs, using the process of cutting, gluing, rearranging, or overlapping to become a new image. For instance, in *The Art Critic* (1920) created by Raoul Hausmann, the main protagonist is an anonymous black and white head cut from a magazine pasted onto a coloured body image, a

fragment of a German banknote pasted behind the critic's neck suggests that he is

controlled by capitalist forces. Through multiple layered photographs Hausmann developed and applied photomontage as a tool of satire and political protest (Alley, 1981). Doucet also applies photomontage in *365 Days*, notably on page 30.11.02 (fig. 4-41). In this composition, Doucet combines a fragmented photograph of a leg wearing a shoe, bent at the knee, with another photographic element that resembles an arm or a folded limb. The resulting image creates a visually ambiguous form, suggestive of both movement and tension. At the bottom of the page, a collaged French phrase, “*en marche vers l'amour*” (translated as “on the way to love”), anchors the image. The leg and shoe visually reinforce the idea of movement or transition, while the photomontage as a whole can be read as a metaphor for Doucet’s evolving journey towards greater strength, self-awareness, and artistic maturity, both mentally and professionally.



Figure 4-37

Carpet weeper Tales (2016) by Julie Doucet, book cover

Publisher: Drawn and Quarterly

Doucet also deploys photomontage in her most recent collage book *Carpet Weeper Tales* (2016).

Consisting of short narratives made from photo collage (fig.4-37) using “*fumetti*”, the Italian word which means photo-novels, for the visuals, and speech balloons clipped from vintage magazines.

Doucet builds a unique dialogue of love and travel between characters sitting in classic cars, driving through cities and pristine countryside through the

photomontage (Rudick, 2016). While I focus in this chapter on *365 Days* as the main case study in relation to my diary project *8/9* (2021), I refer here to *Carpet Weeper*

Tales to highlight Doucet's use of photomontage as a key formal strategy across her practice.

365 Days is an aesthetic exercise, an elegant piece of design that reflects a period in Doucet's life during which her identity as a mature adult artist developed. Although there are no romantic encounters, no nudity, and of course no sexual actions but this doesn't affect Doucet's exploration of abjection and the grotesque body in *365 Days*, which is more focused on the boundaries of the self, the core of her work all along. Many critics found the book's lack of intimate personal details frustrating, accusing it of being bland and lacking narrative momentum. Nevertheless, it is substandard to judge the quality of a female artist's work only by reviewing whether she narrates her own private actions in her practice. As Emma Tinker (2009, p173) suggests Doucet's work is marked by the restless mobility of one who refuses to stop thinking. Her most defining characteristic is constant, creative change. Thus, I argue that although Doucet's life changes during various periods the critique of masculine control over her female self-representation does not change. Redeploying feminine stereotypes through her grotesque characters and expressing abjection continues to challenge authority and the common order throughout her works.

4.3.2 Diary practice review: 8/9, 2021

“I quit comics because I got completely sick of it. I was drawing comics all the time and didn't have the time or energy to do anything else. That got to me in the end. I never made enough money from comics to be able to take a break and do something else. Now I just can't stand comics... I wish my work would be recognised by a larger crowd of people as more art than be stuck with the cartoonist label for the rest of my life...” (Nadel, 2007. p. 47)

When Doucet was interviewed by Dan Nadel in 2007, she was explaining the misery of continuing to make comics and being identified as only a cartoonist. Arguably, as I discussed before, having a fixed drawing style is a symbol of maturity and professionalism for a cartoonist. As for Doucet, it becomes a shackle that prevents the diversification of her artistic practice. Central to her practice is developing an everchanging graphic style. The reason why I decided to record August to September in 2021, was because my life was experiencing many changes during that month. In that month, I moved to a new apartment, I broke up with my boyfriend at that time, I reobserved my vulva which is totally different from 2018, I owned a new kitten, I went to Scotland with an old friend, who is actually my ex ex-boyfriend, to complete our promise. Everything changing, then changed. For me, 8/9 (2021) was an inevitable product to record the changing status of my life, mentally, physically, graphically, and aesthetically.

8/9 is my 31-day diary record from 18th August 2021 to 18th September 2021 (fig.4-38). This multiple-medium graphic narrative developed out of the case study of Julie Doucet's *365 Days* is more directly related to the autobiographical aspects of my practice. 8/9 also extends the exploration begun in the Discoveries series, continuing to record and reflect on my body and sexual life over 31 days. Unlike the Discoveries series, which focused on documenting expressive and sexually formative moments

from my past, *8/9* concentrates on capturing the everyday nuances, emotions, and bodily experiences of the present. In this section, I will first give an overview of the *8/9* practice. Then, analysing the change of the vulva figure in terms of both technique and symbolism, highlighting my use of photomontage by reviewing the work of German Dada artist Hannah Höch and Carolee Schneemann.

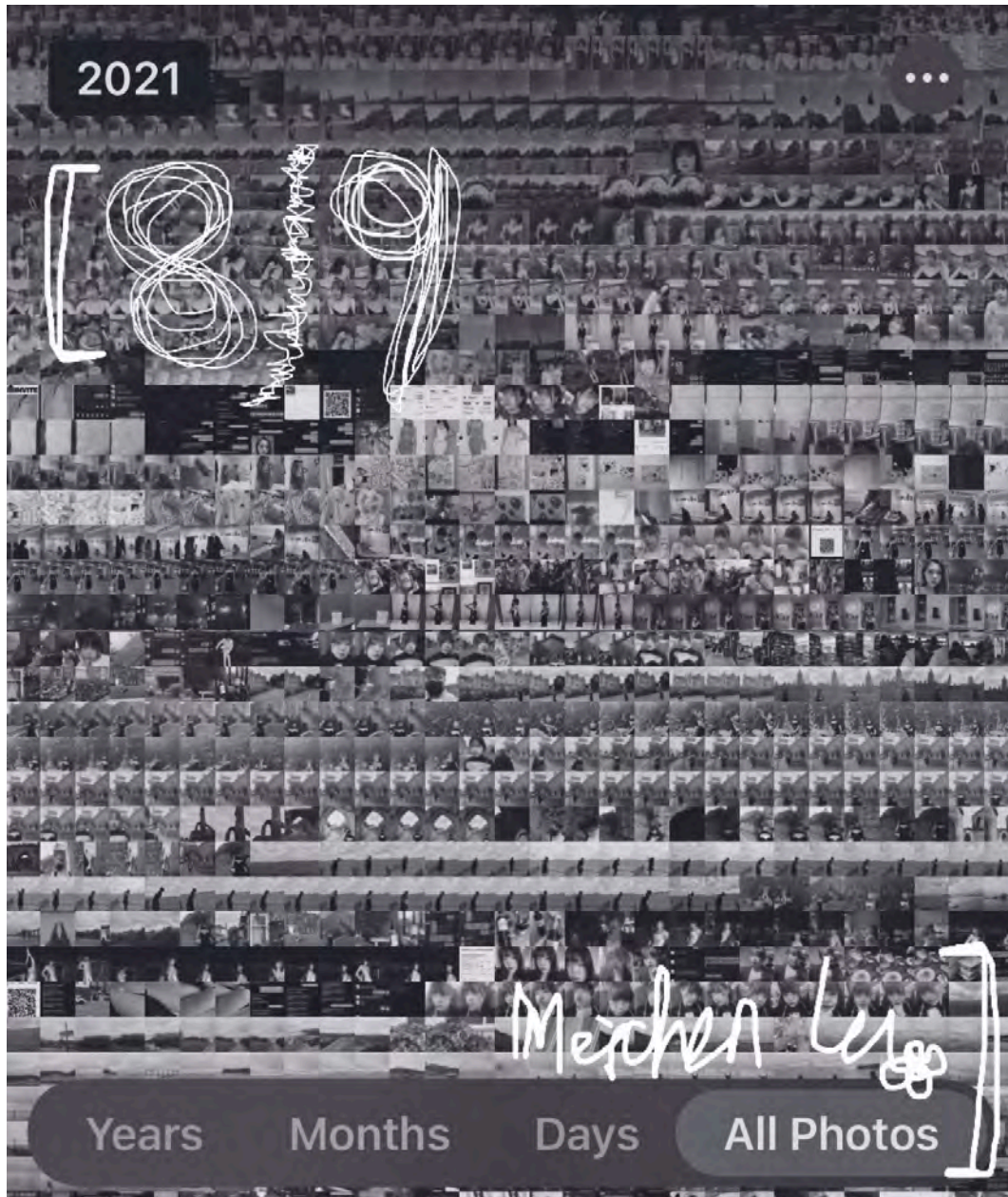


Figure 4-38

Meichen Lu, *8/9*, 2021

Cover Front

Collage, Photography, Drawing

Digital version, 350 x 410 mm

The 8/9 consists of two parts, the first part is pre-8/9, and the second part is 8/9 itself, the formal diary that is distinguished by the blank page containing the handwritten text “Oh, I’m coming”. The pre-8/9 is my first attempt to continuously record my daily life. Although the record obviously failed, the vulva observation done at that time still contributes to the final practice. It started at the end of July, since my research object was Julie Doucet's *365 Days*, there are two basic and ultimate goals of the diary project. The first one is to keep recording, and the other is to clarify the recorded content which always reflects on sexuality in my daily life.



Figure 4-39

Meichen Lu, 8/9, 2021

Pre-diary page

Collage, Drawing

Digital version, 410 x 700 mm

On 16th July 2021, the records experiment started (fig.4-39). The content depicts the progression of re-observation the shape of my genitalia for the first time since 2018. The observation progress took me three days to visualise vulva images on the sketchbook, which means I missed the first goal of the diary project to produce continuous records. Thus, this page became the self-observation of the vulva, it provides different approaches to reconsider the vulva figure, and whether it could be

more specific, individualised and autobiographical in my future practice. The second experiment began on 19th July 2021, the first time I was starting to experience the authentic connection between vulva and flowers in the real world. As I discussed previously, if flowers are always the euphemism to replace the vulva, both literally and visually, what if the vulva could also represent flowers? Flowers such as lotus, roses, and peonies, have borne many connotations and interpretations to represent the feminine, sexuality, and the union of genitalia, especially the vulva shape (Walker, 1984). 8/9 investigates how the vulva and flower could refer and represent each other terms of symbolism, highlighting the agency of the vulva and challenging the stereotype in the symbolic meaning of the vulva and flowers.

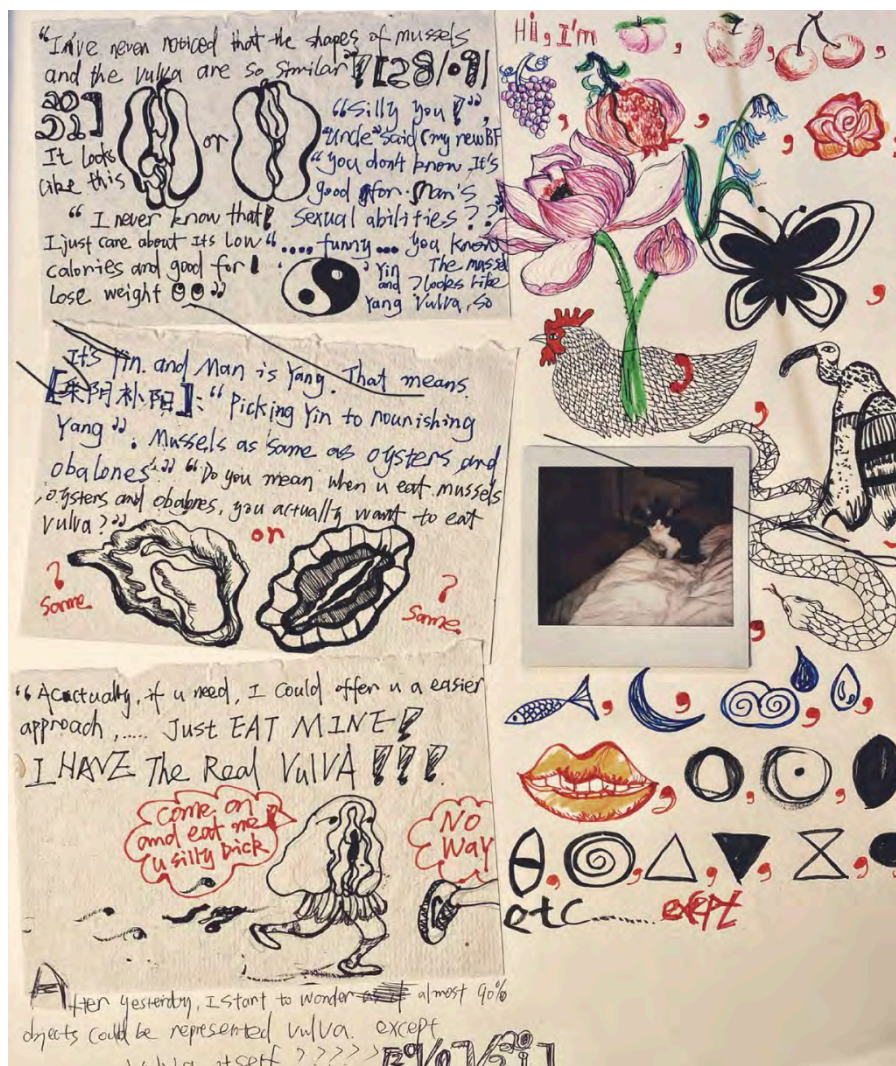


Figure 4-40

Meichen Lu, 8/9, 2021

Pre-diary page

Collage, Drawing

Digital version, 350 x 410 mm

The drawing method during the first of three pages influences by Doucet's *365 Days*, consisted of black and white hand drawings. That approach specifically changed on the page [28/07/2021]

(fig.4-40), a dinner experience that records a discussion about the representation of

mussels with my boyfriend at that time. I collaged three smaller size papers on that page because the original sketchbook with big size of a3 which is difficult to carry outside. Since the inconvenience of the material, regarding me to explore a new approach that suited me, both graphically and technically. The day before I moved, when I was packing my closet, I found a red polka dot dress that I love that contains gorgeous peplums very similar to the shape of the labia. I couldn't stop fantasising about the combination of the dress and the vulva, so I decided to explore this visually while wearing the dress. I observed my vulva from two angles—one from a vertical bottom-up view, the other from a horizontal perspective—combining these observations with the bud-like shape of the skirt's peplum in two drawings. Both appear on the page dated [01/08/2021] (fig.4-41). The page is also my first attempt



Figure 4-41

Meichen Lu, 8/9, 2021

Pre-diary page, 01/08/2021

Photomontage, Drawing

at photomontage, where the pasted layers are all actual photographs including the detailed red dot textured pattern, the reproduced and reorganised dress peplums' shape, and two panels of my relevant drawing. It also reflects my custom of taking photos by using mobile devices to record daily life, "...photographs are both a direct record created by the world and an interpretation created by the photographer's choices, whether conscious or unconscious" (Bowcock, 2015), that is both documenting and staying in the moment for me. Autobiography, as James Olney (1980, p. 236) argues, is fundamentally shaped by being lived through the unique medium of the individual, meaning that the autobiographical subject holds significant and specific agency in how selfhood is presented. As a feminist artist I narrate my life, through my practice in drawing and painting. Also, as a research-based foreign student and female individual living alone, capturing scenes, time, moments by mobile devices especially the phone is an accessible and convenient approach to record daily life

Development of the vulva character in this practice moved away from the merely abstraction of form derived from the analysis of Judy Chicago's core imagery theory as outlined in her *Feminist Visual Arts: Expressions of The Vulva* which expressly notes that purely or mainly abstract form may not be the best approach to express the vulva's agency. As I also argue when discussing my work *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020), it is important to strike a balance between abstraction visual expression and vulva anatomical agency. Therefore, based on the record of re-observed anatomical genitalia creating a more specific and individualised vulva figure became a main concern. *The Great Wall of Vagina* (2008) provides unique new insights of vulva's representation in art, created by Jamie McCartney it displays 400 examples of various women's anatomical external genitalia as sculpture. All casts have been handmade by the artist via white plaster, as he explains the traditional artist's material has lovely quality and relatively cheap, also easy to work on the human body, while the white monochrome presentation denies any racial differences and references to pornography (McCartney, 2011). McCartney introduces the process of casting which is complicated and restricted in some detail. The process contains

around 18 steps, and the model must lay on a flat surface to help the paste mixture smoothly runs down (McCartney, 2011). That means the material allows only one genitalia status to be captured which limits my need for diverse vulva figures that require standing, walking, running, and sitting. Thus, applying plaster to my practice is not a suitable approach. But the direct expression in his work offers insights into the appearances of real feminine genitalia, inspiring me to visualise my own genitalia moving from two-dimensions to a more three-dimensional approach creating genitalia figures with a detailed realistic surface.

According to traditional painting methods, impasto is used to highlight the paint quantities that make it stand out from the canvas surface to create a three-dimensional and sculptural effect. The 19th-century painter Vincent van Gogh made notable use of impastos, building up and defining the forms in his paintings with thick, nervous dabs of paint, especially in his still life floral paintings which make extensive use of the impasto technique for both aesthetics and expression (Naifeh & Smith, 2011). For instance, specifically focus on roses, *Still Life: Vase with Pink Roses* (1890) (fig.4-42) and *Still Life: Pink Roses in a Vase* (1890) (fig.4-43), were all made in 1890 by Vincent van Gogh in Saint-Remy. The roses chosen by Van Gogh, is the unique local rose, a variety known as the Roses de Provence (often referred to as the "hundred-petaled rose"), to ensure that the typical colours and objects of Saint-Remy were represented and expressed (Mancoff, 2008). Although the trace of the pink pigment has faded over time, the surface of each rose petal still has its own natural reality to vividly represent the vital character of the flower. These two rose painting contains the basic function of impasto that builds up layers of paint to add realism to the rose, making the Roses de Provence appears more vividly and authentic.



Figure 4-42

Vincent Van Gogh, *Still Life: Vase with Pink Roses*, 1890

Oil on canvas

27 15/16 × 35 7/16 in. (71 × 90 cm)

The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of Pamela Harriman in memory of W. Averell Harriman, 1991



Figure 4-43

Vincent Van Gogh, *Still Life: Pink Roses in a Vase*, 1890

Oil on canvas

36 5/8 x 29 1/8 in. (93 x 74 cm)

The Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg Collection, Gift of Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg, 1993, Bequest of Walter H. Annenberg, 2002

The Russian artist Evgenia Ermilova provides a more decorative and sculptural new technique which she entitled as sculptural painting. For example, in the *Purple Rain*, (2021) (fig.4-44) depicts flowers such as peonies and roses with a realistic expression of floral petals implying an extremely decorative function. Ermilova mixes plaster with fiber glass make the material too solid to be broken (Gowri, 2019). During the making process as recorded by the artist, the material is soft and thick when it is wet, the palette knife gently scoops up coloured decorative plaster and spreads it on to the wooden panel surface to form a voluminous flower. The material features have similarities with paint but is much more solid which makes it easier to construct shapes. The technique incorporates the impastos three-dimensional features offering a great emphasis on the object but replace its original softness of media such as oil or acrylic paints. As Ermilova (2016) insists “I strive to convey its beauty not just on the plane, but in volume. My flowers are almost real, but their beauty will never fade”, as for the technical aspect, that conform parts of my requirement of the vulva figure, specific, anatomical, realistic and individualised.



Figure 4-44

Evgenia Ermilova, *PURPLE RAIN*, 2021

Acrylic, Plaster on Wood

50x100cm

Access: <https://www.singularart.com/en/artworks/evgenia-ermilova-purple-rain-1143305>

However, the connotation that her floral practice express is underdeveloped compared to her technique. In the 'Spark of Love, (2021)' (fig.4-45), a 25x25cm square panel with a single enlarged blossom rose, Ermilova (2021) describes states "...they say that to enhance the charm of single ladies of marriageable age and attract many grooms, it is worth hanging images of flowers in the living room. The energy of the flower will help you find a good husband who will take care of a woman and provide for her...". It could be understood that Ermilova focuses more on the commercial application of her technique, since she also has her own production line of material, which she supplies to different parts of the world. But her statement is a totally devaluation of women and full of gender inequality, masculine worship and sexism, several using words such as, 'marriageable age', 'attract grooms', 'find a good husband', etc. From that statement the work makes women relatively become the other, *The Second Sex*, suggesting that humanity is male, and that man defines woman not as herself but as relative to him (Beauvoir, 1953). It also against feminisms purposes which was initially aimed at the inequality of men and women in political issues, especially representational politics. Her practice also endows the flower with an extremely negative and stereotypical form of female representation to merely attract the male. However, denying women's independence under any circumstances is highly undesirable. Overall, Ermilova's technique and materials have unique advantages, but it is difficult to identify with her creative motivation for representing flowers.



Figure 4-45

Evgenia Ermilova, SPARK OF LOVE, 2021

Acrylic, Plaster on Wood

25x25cm

Access:

<https://www.singularart.com/en/artworks/evgenia-ermilova-spark-of-love-1345651>

Implying impastos to my practice on floral and memory exploration started in 2020. *3 in 1* (2020) (fig.4-46) recorded a coffee shop (fig.4-47) and a restaurant (fig.4-48) that I visited when I was traveling in Llandudno, Welsh on September 23, 2020. The painting specifically combines the objects from the two places that are deeply memorable to me, red chandeliers from the cafe and the yellow rose with the dark green vase from restaurant. The impasto technique is to highlight and restore the characteristics of these memorable objects. As for me, the technique is essentially an effective approach to preserve memories, when I see the painting again, I always remember the authentic scenery depicted in the painting, stories behind it and my emotions at that time. I therefore continued to the impasto technique in my *8/9* practice to further explore the feminine and daily memories. The first attempt of using the oil pastel material is shown in [18/08/2021] (fig.4-49), the collaged painting records of the background photograph depicting a selfie of my naked upper torso and some dry flowers. The medium is different from my previous impasto paintings and traditional general paints, I applied oil pastels to the depictions of flower and vulva figures for a more precise controlled effect and result. Then, the *Selected Vulva Shape* (2021) (fig.4-50) appears on [20/08/2021] further experimenting with the medium on various vulva figures referenced from the labia library by Jamie McCartney. The labia library is an official website resource created by the McCartney that invites the audience to confront the cross-section of normal, natural, vulvar variation. The *Selected Vulva Shape* (2021) depicts 4 various vulva appearances selected from the labia library (2022), specifically including the lichen sclerosus (fig.4-51), the non-infectious dermatological condition and the condyloma acuminata, genital warts caused by the HPV virus, as well as another half-seen sitting position of my own vulva figure. The oil pastel enables the creation of the genitalia's surface, somewhere between paint and plaster, not too solid to be too hard to shape, nor too liquid to portray details. Thus, oil pastel becomes the crucial medium for creating more realistic, individualised and autobiographical vulva figures throughout the *8/9* project, and my future practice, such as *Familias Fantasy* (2022-2023).



Figure 4-46

Meichen Lu, 3 in 1, 2020

Oil on canvas

18x23 cm



Figure 4-47

Llandudno 1, photo by Meichen Lu



Figure 4-48

Llandudno 2, photo by Meichen Lu



Figure 4-49

Meichen Lu,
8/9, 2021

18/08/2021

Digital version,
410 x 350 mm

Figure 4-50

Meichen Lu,
Selected
Vulva Shape,
2021,

Oil pastel, 210
x 150mm





Figure 4-51

Jamie McCartney, lichen sclerosus cast in The Great Wall of Vagina, 2008

Access: <https://www.greatwallofvagina.co.uk/education/>



Figure 4-52

Meichen Lu, *A Rose? My Vulva*, 2021

21/08/2021

Oil pastel, 210 x 300mm

As part of *8/9, A Rose? My Vulva* (2021) (fig.4-52) displays the combination of the alchemical rose symbolism with the individualised autobiographical vulva figure to depict the mature vulva in its full shape. I analysed the basic colour representations of the alchemical rose when

discussing *Opus Magnum for a Girl*. In terms of alchemy the white and the red rose are well-known symbols for the lunar and the solar. In the next section, I will analyse the specific choice of the alchemical rose as the symbolic basis, which is combined with the anatomical vulva. This work also references *Dat Rosa Mel Apibus* (fig.4-53)

illustrated by the engraver, Matthäus Merian to identify the seven petals of the alchemical rose.



Figure 4-53

Robert Fludd, *Title page of Summum Bonum*, 1629

illustrated by Matthäus Merian

source access: http://www.levity.com/alchemy/fludd_rose.html

In alchemy, the rose is primarily a symbol of the operation of conjunction, the mystical marriage of opposites, the union of male and female. The alchemist George Ripley depicts the 5 petals of an alchemical rose in the *Ripley Scroll* (1588) (fig.4-54), An image of a large rose with 5 red petals intertwined with 5 white petals. That shows that the red petals representing the masculine agency and the white petals representing the feminine agency are united as a conjunction. In *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, Carl Jung (1966, p. 321) also discusses the archetypal basis of love between human beings in the term of rose as “the wholeness which is a combination of ‘I and you’ is part of a transcendent unity whose nature can only be grasped in symbols like the rose or the *coniunctio* (Latin, in English as conjunction)”. The figure depicts the king and the queen, respectively represented by the Sol and the Luna

motifs, physically combined. The *coniunctio* of medieval alchemy provides and depicts symbolic rather than pornographic meaning. As Jung (1966, p. 327) argued “The real meaning of the *coniunctio* is that it brings to birth something that is one and united”, which means the *coniunctio* should be understood as the union, at the biological level it is a symbol of the highest unity of male and female.

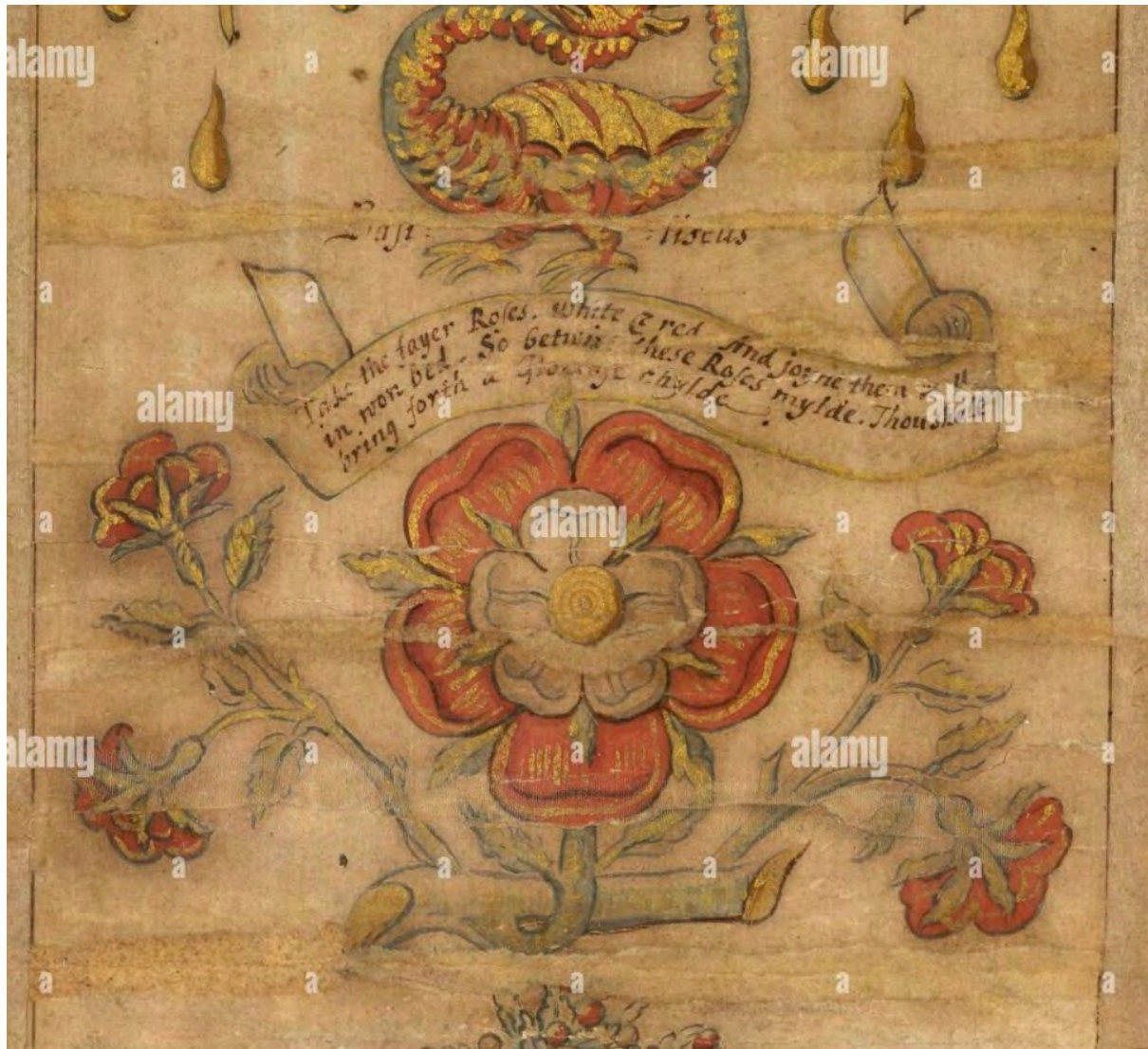


Figure 4-54

Alchemical rolls (The Ripley Scrolls). late 16th century. Ripley, George.

Access: <https://www.alamy.com/a-large-red-and-white-rose-with-four-other-smaller-roses-in-profile-alchemical-rolls-the-ripley-scrolls-late-16th-century-source-add-50253-detail-author-ripley-george-image226914039.html>

Since the alchemical rose contains the same symbolic meaning as the *coniunctio* which shows the unique association with sexual energy, the connection of male and

female power becoming a union, that subverts the contemporary rose's stereotype of merely being the feminine representation of woman. Thus, the alchemical rose provides a new insight of mythical signification and representation, in which expressing female bodies and menstrual blood by comparing them to flowers or pebbles does not turn them into myths, "assimilating her with natural objects is simply a prejudice" (Beauvoir, 1953, p.496). Differently, the alchemical rose contains strong meaning of the wholeness instead of individual female agency, providing the equality representation that woman—like man—is a being rooted in nature.

The twelfth-century Persian alchemist Farid ud-din Attar wrote "mystery glows in the rose bed and the secret is hidden in the rose". Roses in alchemy also symbolise secrets, the unspeakable things, the representation of silence. Roses, especially red roses, have been a symbol of love since ancient times, and making love is a private matter that cannot be discussed publicly (Stevenson, 1990). Therefore, Cupid (the god of love) offered the rose to Hapocrates (the god of silence), "Hence, the red rose of Aphrodite became the general symbol of silence and secrecy, and perhaps also of invisibility. Anything spoken sub rosa - under the rose - was confidential" (Stevenson, 1990. p. 97). Correspondingly the vulva has been reviewed as the most secret part of the female body in both literature and visual representation. Combined with the previous analysis of the alchemical rose, the mysterious object has become the most proper symbol to combine with the anatomical vulva. Thus, the vulva figure, incorporating the alchemical rose and individualised genitalia challenges the stereotypical symbolic meaning of rose that merely represents feminine agency, as well as to highlight the secret part of female body, the vulva, which is also widely symbolised by roses.

The application of the seven petals alchemical rose was inspired by the rose symbol from the title page of Robert Fludd's *Summum Bonum* (1629) (see fig.7-56), published in Frankfurt. The sevenfold rose symbol has become well-known as a Rosicrucian (rose Croix) symbol illustrated by the engraver Matthäus Merian (McLean, 1991). Therefore, the seven petals of the alchemical rose could be

analysed from the number seven and the rose cross symbol. The seven circles made up of seven rose petals symbolise the square of Venus' magic circle (7x7-magic square of order 7 called Venus), representing the "intelligence" (as opposed to spirit) of the goddess (Eberly, 2000). Barbara Walker introduced the sign of Venus (♀), the universal symbol of love and sexuality, now the botanical and zoological emblem of femaleness in general (1988, p.225). Thus, when the number seven enables the rose, it creates plural engagements with femininity. However, Walker (1988, p.59) assumed that "the cross with a central rose used to be a bisexual sign, comparable to the Ankh". The ankh (fig.4-55) is a conventional Egyptian symbol with a similar graphic identity to the sign of Venus. Taking the cross as the basic shape, replacing the upper part with an oval is the ankh, a sign of sexual union that is well-known in Egypt (Brier, 1980). Generally, the rose cross symbol, the ankh, and the Venus sign all contain the connotation and representation of union, the male and female in conjunction, but they could also be considered as multi-motifs consisting of two typical symbols respectively representing male and female principles.

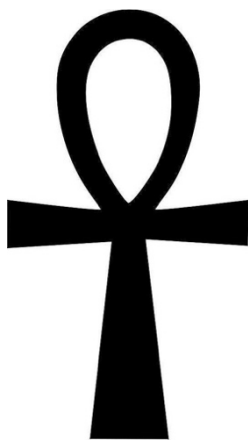


Figure 4-55

The ankh symbols

Source from: Allen, J. (2014). *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, Third Edition. Cambridge University Press, p.30.

Graphically, the rose cross symbol is similar to the images of the alchemical rose shown in the *Ripley Scroll* (1588), but indeed different. According to Walker, in the rose cross symbol, the rose

does not have the function of representing union individually, but only when it is associated with the cross. As analysed previously, the individual alchemical rose symbol represents conjunction when it uses red and white colours. This means, the alchemical rose contains its independent representation of the union, the conjunction of male and female principles. Therefore, in the vulva figure, I did not choose the traditional five-petal alchemical rose, instead, select the 7-petal rose with a stronger feminine connotation as the symbol to combine with the anatomical vulva, without abandoning its original coniunctio representation of the alchemical rose to further

emphasise femininity. Thus, the individualised and more autobiographical vulva figurer criticised the contemporary rose's stereotype of merely feminine representation of women and that the purely abstract form also may not be the best approach to express the agency of the vulva.

Photomontage is the main method involved in the *8/9* (2021) practice. In the following, I will examine how the female artist, Hannah Höch applied photomontage as an artistic expression from a particular female perspective and how their work affects my collage practice. Höch's *From the Ethnographic Museum* (1925-1930) series of photomontage works created between 1925 and 1930 extensively examines the expression of the female body. These works are based on pictures Höch took around 1930 which had been inspired by a trip to an ethnographic museum with her partner Til Brugman (Ades, 2014). In *Untitled*, (1930) (fig.4-56), for example, Höch combined the photograph depicting a torso of a non-Western female sculpture with a magazine cut piece of a beautiful female model characteristic of mainstream European media, and pasted a large, exaggerated eye to the woman's face. Another work in the same series, *Indian Dancer* (1930) (fig.4-57) displays a publicity still of the actress Marie Falconetti as Joan of Arc in Carl Theodor Dreyer's film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) (Makholm, 1997). It depicts a wooden dance mask from Cameroon covering the mouth and right eye of the actress, casting the pained expression of the martyr into the glamorous look of a magazine pinup girl. Joan's straw crown has been replaced and collaged by a silhouette of silverware, such as knives and spoons, turning the symbol of her martyrdom into a form of domestic servitude (Makholm, 1997).



Figure 4-56

Hannah Höch, *Untitled*, 1930

From an Ethnographic Museum

paper and collage drawing

48.3x32.1 cm

Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg



Figure 4-57

Hannah Höch, *Indian Dancer*, 1930

From an Ethnographic Museum

Cut-and-pasted printed paper and metallic foil on paper

10 1/8 x 8 7/8" (25.7 x 22.4 cm)

MoMA

Attaching contemporary photographs of female body parts, especially focused on the expression on the face, to the primitive sculptures, Höch combines the familiar with the unusual, specifically discuss the boundary between “the self” and “the other”. In

Höch's works, "the self" represents female agency, while 'the other' represents the value and denotations given to women by society or the others, as a norm, as a stereotype. In *Untitled* (1930), the enlarged eyes and the female sculptural body, which is deliberately cut into a perfect curve, emphasise that the female subject is materialised by mainstream perspectives, that is subject to the male gaze in traditional aesthetics. Höch work suggests that society treats women like these unknown sculptures: seeing them as exotic and erotic objects. She always questioned the status of the "New Woman" of the Weimar Republic, seeing women as a fragmented, constructed image that served society's specific goals, suppressing, and ignoring other possible personal choices and desires (Lavin, 1996). The definition of "New Woman" in the Weimar Republic was propaganda for political purposes because the equality between the genders was "only equal in principle," as "Weimar-era women's emancipation remained contradictory and incomplete" (Biro, 2009. p.204), for example, abortions were illegal for women. The stereotype of the "New Woman" as a young, unmarried, androgynous woman appeared across all media, portraying the character as a smoker with a sporty physique and masculine hairstyle (Gardner, 2004). As Maud Lavin (1996, p.128) commented on 'From an Ethnographic Museum (1925-1930)' series, "...while for Höch, it seems that the New Woman - her images, her possibilities, her everyday realities, and her stereotypes - was the self, as well as the other". In other words, for Höch, 'the self' including herself and the stereotype of "New Woman" during the Weimar Republic, 'the other' maintains the same position as 'the self' because it is all defined by others, especially the patriarchal.

The relationship between "the self" and "the other" revealed in Höch's work is also reflected in the representation of gender identity and uncanny female stereotypes. The cut-out wooden mask in *Indian Dancer* (1930) is a representation of a neutral gender while the household appliances symbolise the housewife. The hermaphroditic character is also presented on her other photomontages, for example, *Monument II, Vanity* (1926) (fig.4-58), features a head of ancient androgynous fetish attached to a male upper body and a naked female lower body.



Figure 4-58

Hannah Höch,
Monument II, Vanity,
1926

An Ethnographic
Museum

Photomontage

Germanisches National
Museum, Nürnberg

As Judith Butler
(1990, p.179)
argued in *Gender
Trouble*, gender
identity is not
essential but
performative,
created and
enforced by social
compulsion, "Drag
constitutes the
mundane way in
which genders
are appropriated,
theatricalised,

worn, and done; it

implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original". (1998, p.127)

The gender identity discussed in Höch's work is constructed through a series of performative posture, as Butler puts it, through which "the self" is expected to control, manipulate, and express the sense of identity that "the other" gives "the self".

However, the relationship and boundary between "the self" and "the other" is slightly different with the abjection concept discussed by Julia Kristeva. According to Maud Lavin, argued Höch connected Western and tribal subjects through montages of body parts, allowing her to contemplate the uncanny relationships between women commercialised as commodity fetishes and primitives commercialised as ethnographic fetishes (Gubar, 2000). As Kristeva elaborated abjection is "essentially different from 'uncanniness', more violent, too" and "nothing is familiar, not even a shadow of a memory" (1982, p. 5). Accordingly, by collaging primitive sculptures and both male and female body parts to create series of hermaphroditic figures, Höch provided uncanny sensation, familiar or foreign, between the female characteristics stereotype and the patriarchal power to evoke individuals thinking of the gender identity of the entitled New Women group by the masculine society. Dietmar Elger quoted Höch as stating in his book, *Dadaism* (2004), "I wish to blur the firm boundaries which we self-certain people tend to delineate around all we can achieve" (2004, p.42). Thus, Höch's provoke photomontage presents the arbitrariness of various canons of women, as well as an indictment of being recognised and identified by masculine social criticism and judgement.



Figure 4-59

Meichen Lu,
*SEE U in
BEIJING, 2020*

Photomontage

Digital version

My initial use of photomontage started with a discussion of my memory records, the relationship between realistic objects and graphic figures, starting in 2020. In the *SEE U in BEIJING* (2020) (fig.4-59), displays a graphic self-portrait figure accompanied by a classical head plaster sculpture and pasted coffee supplies and flower decorations with a raining window in the background. It narrates and records the farewell meeting with one of my friends who was planning to leave London and return to Beijing. These collaged items are selected from 3 photos recording different scenes I took at that day and pasted together via photoshop. For the audience, it supposes to offer an uncanniness sense of uncertainty that memories always bring. Uncanniness was first explored psychologically by Ernst Jentsch who defined uncanny as a product of intellectual uncertainty (Freud, 1919). Freud further expands the concept in fictional storytelling, He argued that one of the easiest and most successful approach to create the uncanny effect in narration is to make the reader uncertain about the real person or an automaton, “and to do it in such a way that his attention is not focused directly upon his uncertainty” (2004, p.136). The uncertainty of real person or an automaton in fiction storytelling could alternatively be compared to the graphic figures and realistic objects in my photomontage series. The graphic figures as the real person while the automaton is the pasted real items. However, the realistic objects are the domestic and familiar items for individuals, which are accessible in daily life thus, the scenario contrasting familiar and foreign images brings the intellectual uncertainty, the uncanniness.

In terms of narrative, photomontage is an approach to ascertain my memories, it reminds me of the occasion, the location, the person, and myself; as well as being a method to integrate and collect memories to ensure the authenticity of the autobiography. the depiction in *SEE U in BEIJING* (2020), will clearly remind me of memories of that day. The day was supposed to be sunny; we were sitting on the rooftop of Ladurée, Soho branch, enjoying macaron and vanilla milkshake, it was suddenly raining heavily, and we had to go indoors to sit down; I went to the toilet, wiped my wet hair, then took a selfie in front of the window (fig.4-60). The collaged classical head plaster sculpture and pasted coffee supplies and flower decorations

respectively represent the scene transition from outdoor to indoor. *Dairy Narratives* (2020) is an exercise practice I initially intend to record daily memories by applying the photomontage. Discussing the relationship of certainty and uncertainty sense of memories, providing the basic scenario of uncanniness reveals the ambiguous experience of familiar and foreign.



Figure 4-60

Ladurée, Soho, photo by Meichen Lu

In the diary work *8/9* (2021), photomontage is mainly applied to the incorporation of vulva figures with photographs of my body, focusing on challenging the female sexual objectification. Typically, [06/09/2021] (fig.4-61), [07/09/2021] (fig.4-62), and [18/09/2021] (fig.4-63) all display this combination, specifically the various vulva figures replaced my face in the original photo. To objectify is the transformation of something that is not an object into an object and to treat it as an object to use, manipulate, control, and understand through its physical properties (Calogero, 2012). As I also mentioned in the chapter 4 when reviewed and analysed the mainstream comics, philosopher Martha Nussbaum has specified seven qualities that represent common attitudes and treatments of handling objects and things that, when applied to a person, constitute objectification. It needs to be clarified that replace the face to

vulva figures is not a carnival of narcissistic voyeurism, it is to emphasise the subjectivity of female self-representation and women's agency.

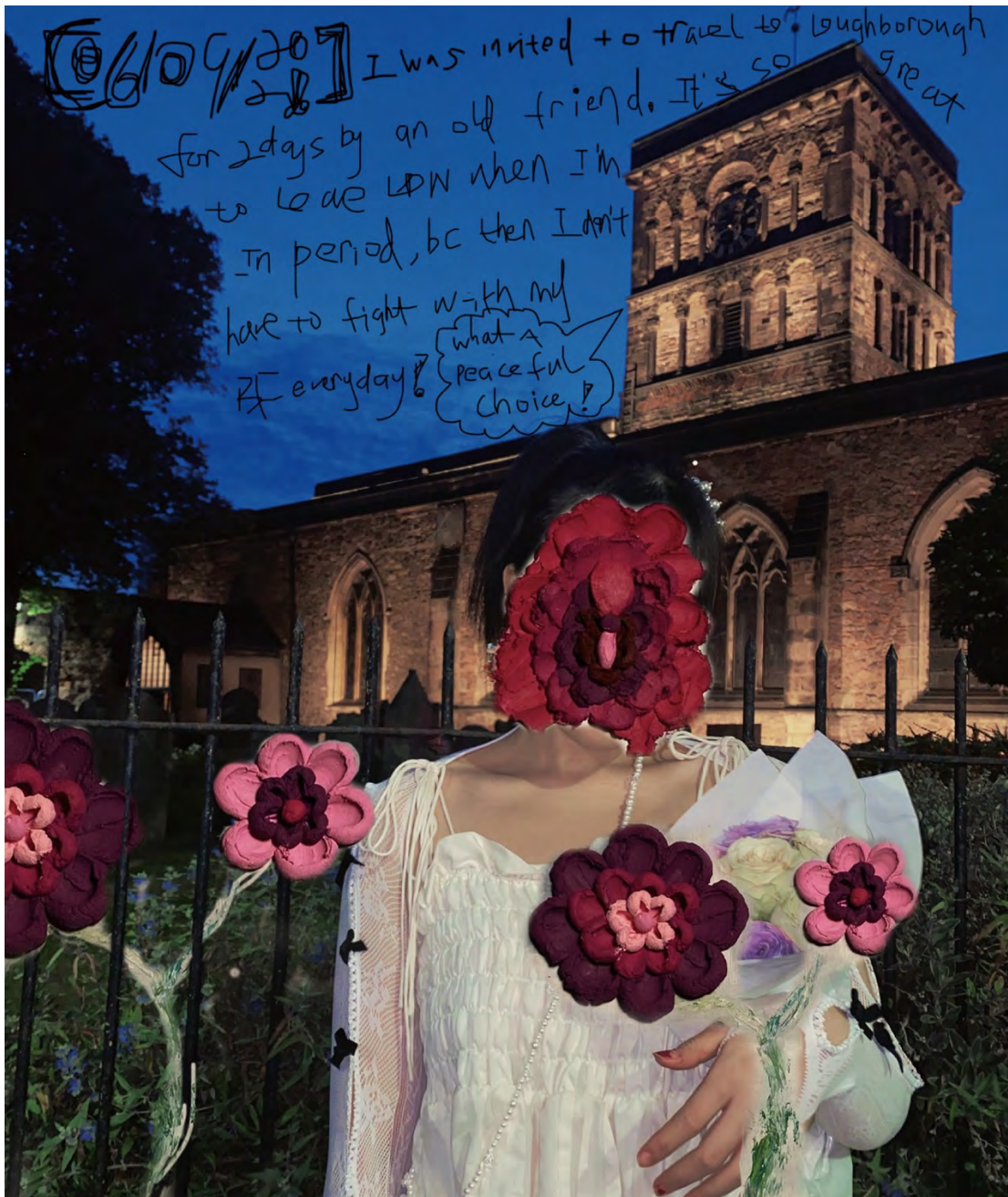


Figure 4-61

Meichen Lu, 8/9, 2021

06/09/2021

Digital version

410 x 350 mm



Figure 4-62

Meichen Lu, 8/9, 2021

07/09/2021

Digital version

410 x 350 mm



Figure 4-63

Meichen Lu, 8/9, 2021

18/09/2021

Digital version

410 x 350 mm

When sexual objectification occurs, it is out of the female individual's self-control, it means female is deprived of her agency and subjectivity by others. That further causes self-objectification which is defined as taking a third-person perspective on oneself, rather than a first-person perspective; for example, an objectified female is malleable, measurable, and controllable and places greater value on viewing and treating herself as a sexual object (Fredrickson and Robert, 1997). Therefore, fundamentally, objectification is the separation of the self and the body, leading to the loss of subjectivity to become merely an object, which is all caused by the other. In the diary entry for [07/09/2021] (fig.4-64), women who wear dresses like the one I

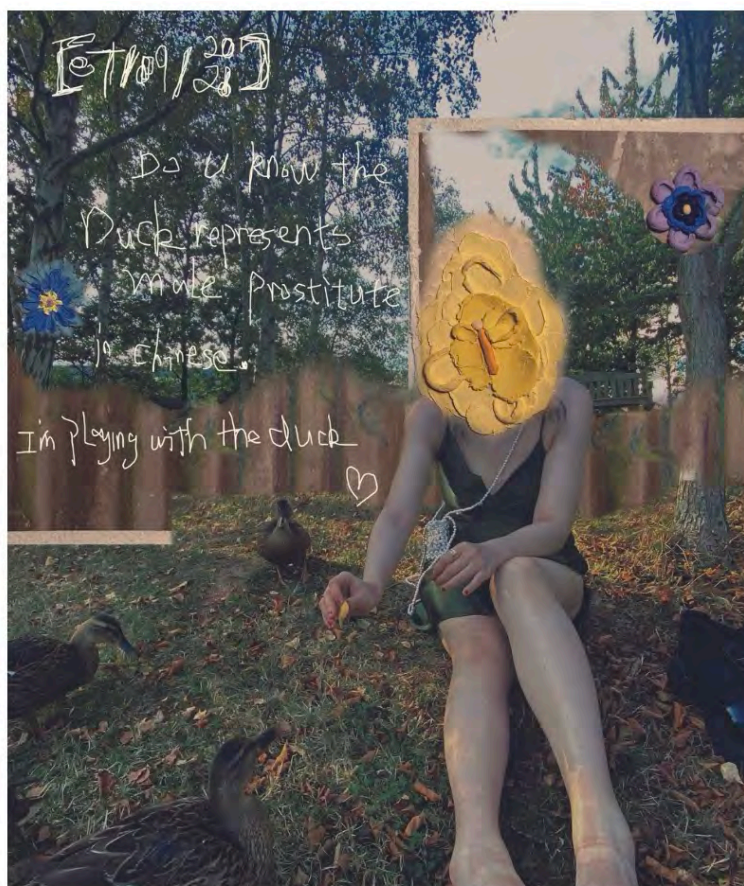


Figure 4-64
Meichen Lu, 8/9, 2021
07/09/2021
Digital version, 410x350mm

am wearing are easy to be targeted for sexually objectifying treatment. A large body of research has shown that in everyday life, women experience sexual objectification much more commonly than men (Calogero, 2012). The collaged vulva figure directly confronts the audience, is an antagonism to the “gazing or leering at women’s bodies, sexual comments about women’s bodies, whistling or honking the car horn at a female passerby...” (Calogero, 2012. p. 574), is also to evoke people suffering, or who

have suffered, objectification to take back control of the self and the body. The emphasis of the vulva figure as a self-representation is to confront the gaze.

The inclusion of my body and experiences in my work, particularly in challenging sexual objectification and exploring gender identity, positions my practice as an active site of resistance and self-definition. By replacing my face with vulva figures, I confront and subvert the sexual objectification of women, transforming it into an assertion of female agency and subjectivity. This act of reclamation and confrontation is a direct critique of the male gaze and societal expectations of women. My use of photomontage to document, interrogate, and express autobiographical experiences aligns with a broader tradition of feminist art that uses personal narratives to challenge and critique societal norms.

Moreover, the autobiographical element in my work underscores the importance of memory and its uncertainties in constructing identity. Just as Höch dissected and reassembled images to reveal the constructed nature of identities and societal roles, my photomontages use personal memories and experiences as both material and subject matter, exploring how they are constructed, preserved, and transformed over time. The emphasis on memory and its role in the formation of identity underscores the malleability of the self and the changeable nature of female bodies. This perspective critically engages with and contests patriarchal narratives, offering a layered view of women's lived experiences. It suggests that the self is not a static entity but is continually reshaped by memories, which in turn are influenced by the fluidity of the body. This approach challenges traditional narratives and simultaneously enriches our understanding of identity and the diverse experiences of women.

4.3.3 Autobiographical or The Bioautographical

Lisa Samuels connects the concept of the bioautography, to Carolee Schneemann's *Vulva's Morphia* (1992) where the vulva could be positioned as not just an anatomical feature but as an 'author' of its own story (Samuels, 2017). Between 8 September 2022 and 8 January 2023, the Barbican Art Gallery, London, held the first exhibition review the work of American artist Carolee Schneemann (1939-2019) since she died in 2019, *Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics*, to. The exhibition commemorates Schneemann's legacy as a radical, pioneering figure in feminist art—a nexus for contemporary discourse among artists and intellectuals (Barbican, 2022). The exhibition documents Schneemann's utilization of her body as an artistic medium—a radical act within the patriarchal paradigms that have historically suppressed women and marginalized their corporeal experiences. Works like *Blood Work Dairy* (1963) (fig.4-65) presenting her confrontation of social taboos around women's bodies inspired by her partner's discomfort at the sight of her menstrual fluid; *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1976) (fig.4-66) revealing her large-scale installation where she “hung naked from a harness suspended in the corner of a paper-lined stage set, creating gestural abstract marks with crayons as she swung back and forth in a trance-like state” (Alison, 2022, p.2); and a detailed record of her most powerful performance, *Interior Scroll* (1975 & 1977) (fig.4-67), which includes the two scrolls pulled out from Schneemann's vagina, serving as pointed critiques of misogyny, objectification, and societal taboos surrounding female sexuality.



Figure 4-65

Carolee Schneemann, *Blood Work Dairy*, 1963

Medium: Menstrual Blood on Tissue, Egg Yolk.

Size: Five 29x23" Panels.

Exhibition: Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics, 2022, Barbican Art Gallery, London

Photo by me



Figure 4-66

Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, 1976

Performance: 10 June 1976, Studiogalerie, Berlin

Exhibition: Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics, 2022, Barbican Art Gallery, London

Photo by Meichen Lu



Figure 4-67

Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975 & 1977

Performance: 29 August 1975

Performance location:
Women Here and Now,
East Hampton, New
York

Photograph by Anthony
McCall

Exhibition: Carolee
Schneemann: Body
Politics, 2022, Barbican
Art Gallery, London

As a performance artist, her practice was mainly inspired by her body; in the 1970s, she intentionally emphasized the presentation of genitalia and focused on its combination with female sexual symbolical and metaphorical representation. *Interior Scroll* suggested that the serpent symbol is both phallic and vulvic, while, in *Fresh Blood: A Dream Morphology* (1981-87), she used the simple “V” shape to represent the vagina (Schneemann, 2003). The bullhorn was also used to symbolise ovaries in both *Fresh Blood: A Dream Morphology* and *Vulva’s Morphia* (1992).



Figure 4-68
Carolee Schneemann, *Vulva's Morphia*, 1995
Medium: Mounted 36 panel photo grid with hand painting, text inserts on wood, and fans
Size: 96 x 90 in (243.8 x 228.6 cm).
Exhibition: Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics, 2022, Barbican Art Gallery, London
Photo by Meichen Lu

The major exhibition in the Barbican provided me with a comprehensive opportunity to review Schneemann's work in reality. Notably, the exhaustive depiction of *Vulva's Morphia* (fig.4-68) encompasses a series of 36 painted laser prints portraying images of the vulva. "Why Don't You Let Vulva Do the Talking" (Schneemann 2003, p.299) encapsulates the foundational motive behind this artwork.

Schneemann narrates the experiences of the vulva as it engages with seminal texts on theory, sexuality, and feminism. This work critically examines the impact of defining women's understanding of their anatomy and physiology through a predominantly male lens. It serves as a seminal point of intellectual and artistic inspiration, initially encouraging the construction of my doctoral research, which focuses on developing vulva characters as active, positive, subjective entities. Schneemann's work inaugurates a radical departure from conventional gendered representations by assigning agency and a narrative voice to the vulva. Her transformative art pieces become not merely depictions, but characterisations imbued with the capacity for commentary, critique, and dialogue. "Vulva deciphers Lacan and Baudrillard and discovers she is only a sign, a signification of the void, of absence, of what is not male... (she is given a pen for taking notes)". (Schneemann, 2003. p.299)

Using personifications of the vulva, Schneemann displays an approach in which various ideas attach themselves to female bodies and how feminists seek to change that discourse. She contends with the male-centric theoretical paradigms espoused by theorists like Lacan and Baudrillard, using the vulva as an agent to expose its objectification as a signifier of absence or lack. This audacious rendering aligns closely with my research topic, which posits the vulva as an anatomical feature and an autonomous figure capable of enacting its memoirs. This paradigm shift positions the vulva as an entity with agency and subjectivity rather than an object that is acted upon.

Visually, the text is juxtaposed with the portraits of different vulvas, emphasising transcultural and semiotic vulvar forms in landscapes, urban objects, abstract forms and religious iconography (Samuels, 2017). Schneemann's assembly of 36 painted laser prints of vulval images offers a kaleidoscopic representation of the vulva, not constrained by cultural or biological essentialism. The juxtaposition of text and image elevates the discourse surrounding these corporeal forms, connecting them to Schneemann's complex socio-cultural and theoretical matrices. The opened-mouth

shark image (image #5 in the first line of work) indicates the toothed vagina, which is also recognised by the folklore vagina dentata; the hand drawing a vulvic shape (image #13 in the third line of work) with crisscross lines displays the denial of vaginal orgasms. Across these gathered images, the vulva transcends the physical body by not operating within its normative biological constraints. These choices lend the vulva a textured layer of meaning and representation, allowing it to exist beyond its anatomical boundaries.

In the academic landscape of body and self-representation, Lisa Samuels' bioautography concept adds another critical layer of understanding to Carolee Schneemann's *Vulva's Morphia*. Through this novel theoretical lens, Samuels (2017) reconfigures and subverts the traditional idea of "autobiography", suggesting a rearrangement that gives precedence to "bio-life" over the literary self.

"Bioautography, then, means body life + focus on the accessible and inaccessible self + making as graphing" Samuels then declares, "The body life is both accessible and the perfect horizon of the inaccessible self, which is always interior, even--or precisely--to life writing's investigations" (2017, p.156-157). In other words, the idea of bioautography emphasises the body of the person writing herself. It regards that the personal body is always conceptual while accentuating the relationship between embodied existence and self-representation.

Bring the definition of bioautography to *Vulva's Morphia*, which imagining the character of the vulva as and with a language, puts the viewer in the position of thinking explicitly about where semiotics works regarding desire and sexual power. Specifically, the physical self-shot vulva photograph in the first image of *Vulva's Morphia* speaks to this intensely personal, biologically rooted narrative approach that Schneemann adopts. It's not just a work of art; it's a work of the body. It provides a new approach to reflect and review how artworks like *Vulva's Morphia* prioritise the bio-life in self-writing. Accordingly, Samuels elaborates, reading a bioautography like "*Vulva's Morphia*" becomes an exercise not only in understanding the text or art piece but also in fleshing out our physicality as viewers or readers (2017, p. 160-

161). It positions audiences at the boundary between the material and the abstract, allowing for a fuller, more embodied engagement with the work and the female agency.

In contrast autobiography, is a self-narrated account of one's life or a significant portion of it, and while it does include bodily experiences, its primary focus is often on the "mind" or "self", exploring thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and interpretations of events (Freeman, 2008, p.45-46). According to Lisa Given, autobiography is usually written by the individual it concerns, often in the first person while its structure is generally chronological, discussing major life events in a narrative form (2008, p.47). In essence, while autobiography captures the lived experiences, thoughts, and reflections of an individual, bioautography goes a step further by integrating the biological, often merging non-textual elements to emphasise the embodied nature of those experiences. Bioautography provides a new dimension to understanding life stories by acknowledging the body as a site of experience and meaning, rather than just a vessel that carries the "self".

In examining the work *8/9*, (2021), the project appears to manifest attributes of both autobiographical and bioautographical genres, thereby positioning it within a unique interdisciplinary framework. Initially, the narrative structure adheres to an autobiographical characteristic, elaborating a distinct period—August to September 2021—in my life. The work delineates significant life transitions, such as relocation and the termination of a relationship, and nuances of mental and emotional states experienced during this period. Furthermore, the project started with a case study on Julie Doucet's *365 Days* which is fundamentally autobiographical. While, on the bioautographical front, the project advances beyond the traditional boundaries of autobiography by incorporating a focused examination of the biological aspect of woman experiences.

According to Lisa Samuels's study on conventional autobiographical authors' "oeuvre", where the focus often rests on two dimensions: the works produced and the life experiences that shaped the artist, including their social, historical, and perhaps ideological context (2017, p.160). However, the concept of bioautography adds a critical third dimension: the corporeal existence of the author, "knowing the author as a body is another way to conceive the work, as a body doubling with the author's body (Samuels, 2017, p.160)".

Thus, in this framework, the "body" serves as both the subject matter and a contributing "author" of the work, blurring the lines between what is considered the content and the source of artistic creation. This dual role of the body—as both subject and object—challenges traditional ideas of authorship, artistic creation, and even the limits of autobiography. As I analyse in the previous section, I dedicate a substantial portion of the narrative to the detailed reobservation of my vulva shape, marking the changes that have occurred over a specified time period. *8/9* (2021) thus embodies corporeal concerns, adding a dimension often absent in conventional autobiographies. In *8/9* (2021) this means that physiological changes, bodily experiences, and even the very act of physical observation become part of the "text" that is being read or studied. The body, the vulva, in this sense, becomes both a source and a site in the narrative, thereby demonstrating women's agency in the bioautographical discourse.

As Samuels (2017, p.160-162) continually highlights, the bioautography affects audience interpretation of author's oeuvre becomes a biographical and bioautographical map, interwoven and inseparable. For example, it is as if each work in an oeuvre is a cell in the body of the oeuvre, and each cell is marked by the physiological and corporeal state of the author at the time of creation. Consequently, the body of the author doubles as the site of artistic creation and the source itself, inviting a more holistic or embodied form of reader engagement. It offers a lens through which one can explore not only the artistic output but the lived, bodily experience that contributed to it. *8/9* (2021) crucially and typically appears to act as a

nexus where autobiography and bioautography converge. It seeks to provide a holistic depiction of the author—both psychologically and physiologically—by employing a combination of text and graphic elements. The resultant narrative is thus cognitively and corporeally engaging. Moreover, the project investigates complex symbolism through the interplay between the anatomical vulva and flowers, challenging societal perceptions and understanding of female genitalia.

The applicability of both autobiographical and bioautographical approaches requires nuanced interpretation, particularly given the phenomenological framework that underpins this research. This phenomenological approach places primacy on 'lived experiences', thereby transcending the conventional boundaries that often delineate autobiographical and bioautographical studies. Within this ontological space, my thesis navigates multiple epistemological aspects, incorporating elements of autobiography, bioautography, and reflexivity. In other words, from my point of view to structure my memoirs, its crux lies not only in the retelling or anatomical exploration but initially in the experiential realm—how I, as an embodied entity, as a woman, or *éprouver* intimately experience the external world.

Thus, the intersectionality of these approaches allows for a more detailed, multidimensional understanding of female subjectivity. In this framework, the corporeal self is not merely an object to be analysed or a medium through which life events are processed; it becomes an ontologically significant entity, actively participating in the phenomenological unfolding of life events. Thus, the thesis endeavours to push the boundaries of what constitutes an authoring self by presenting the body, specifically the vulva, not just as a subject but as a site of agency. In summary, the academic value of *8/9* (2021) resides in its innovative blend of autobiographical and bioautographical surrounding the complexities of female identity, offering a comprehensive examination that spans the psychological, physiological, social, and biological spheres.

Chapter 5: Representing Lived Experience through Materiality

Throughout my practice, there has been a material shift from acrylic painting to more tactile and process-driven mediums. Early works, such as *Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality* (2020) and *Horror of The Little Dickhead* (2020), employed acrylic paint to explore autobiographical narratives through visual language and contrasting colour schemes. The transition to paper construction became evident in *Opus Magnum for a Girl*, which used a tri-layered paper structure within a metal frame to incorporate Chinese symbols, anatomical references, and themes of reproduction. Papercutting as a material reflects the cultural significance of symbols, as the xi symbol and the papercutting technique are closely linked within Chinese culture.

The development of the *8/9* (2021) diary project marked a move towards oil pastel, chosen for its ability to render genitalia anatomical details with greater precision while maintaining a textured quality between paint and plaster. This medium was particularly effective in works such as *Selected Vulva Shape* (2021) (work included in *8/9*), which documented variations in vulval anatomy. Oil pastels and an impasto technique were used in *3 in 1* (2020) to explore memory preservation, applying thick layers of paint to depict objects associated with personal experiences. The integration of collage and mixed media, as seen on *8/9* (2021), page 18/08/2021, combined photography with oil pastel to merge self-representation and flower imagery. The process drawing in *The Scroll* (2021-2023) introduced a performative element, recording live drawing, writing, and audience interactions as part of an ongoing autobiographical sequence. Further expanding the material scope, *Enclosed Heim* introduced sculptural installation through the painted wire, allowing for a three-dimensional exploration of vulval figures and rose motifs.

My exploration of materiality differs from a “high art” approach rooted in fine art practice. Considering my background, I majored in graphic communication and illustration and visual media, respectively. These experiences, combined with my personal engagement with different aspects of art practice, laid the foundation for my doctoral research, which is inherently interdisciplinary. The range of techniques and media I have employed—including watercolour, papercutting, oil painting, illustration, book design, textile work, and performative art—reflects the evolution of my research practice. My choice of medium is not about an exploration of the medium itself; rather, it serves as a response to my lived experiences. In other words, the medium reflects my present circumstances. I consider my selection of materials a phenomenological choice shaped by my perception and understanding of the world. This transfer of materiality encapsulates and mirrors my past experiences, offering insight into the essence of my autobiographical practice.

Drawing has emerged not merely as a formal technique, but as a conceptual and material strategy that underpins my artistic exploration of gender, embodiment, and domesticity. From wall-based illustrations to three-dimensional wire sculptures and performative drawing acts, drawing threads through each phase of my work as both gesture and inquiry, matter and method. In the *Secret Heim* (2022) exhibition, the *Menstruation Envy* project employed wall drawing as a direct critique. Within the metacomic narrative structure, drawing became a speculative device to materialise inequality, inviting viewers to visualise the asymmetries in how gendered bodies are interpreted and managed within culture. This drawing-based criticality was extended through performative drawing during the same exhibition, wherein I documented real-time audience reactions and interwove them with fragments of my self-reflection. These ephemeral and process-based gestures were not conceived as completed images but as traces of encounter and response. Here, drawing served as a live index of spatial engagement and embodied spectatorship. In the collaborative project *Enclosed Heim* (2022), wire, as discussed later in the context of Julio González’s “drawing in space”, allowed me to construct floating line-forms that occupy the viewer’s space without enclosing volume.

In *Familias Fantasy* (2022–2023), using red linear brushstrokes, I deliberately emphasised the anatomical resemblance between the rose petals and vaginal forms. These drawn lines function both as aesthetic articulations and symbolic intensifiers, guiding the viewer’s eye along the folds, openings, and contours of the hybrid structure. I reintroduce the act of drawing into the sculptural object, not as a preliminary sketch, but as a layered gesture that reinforces the tension between abstraction and bodily reference. The red lines act as traces of embodiment, inscribing the material with affective resonance while reasserting the certainty and visibility of the female form within the domestic-symbolic field.

Drawing across my practice functions as more than a visual medium—it becomes a mode of thinking, a phenomenological practice, and a symbolic intervention. Whether on walls, on paper, in space, or through sculptural form, it allows me to navigate the tensions between visibility and invisibility, abstraction and embodiment. Drawing is not what precedes form—it is the form, the process, and the position from which I think.

5.1 Exhibition Overview: *Secret Heim*, 2022

Secret Heim (2020) (fig.5-1) was a self-initiated interdisciplinary exhibition, integrating the scholarly and creative progress of third-year doctoral candidates, where I exhibited work alongside Lihong Liu from Chelsea College, orchestrated under the discerning curatorial vision of Mengwei Li, a theory-based PhD candidate from Central Saint Martins. This exhibition included a rich media tapestry, encompassing paintings, wall drawings, sketches, sculptural forms, graphic narratives, personal diaries, and a dynamic live performance.



Figure 5-1

Exhibition overview, “*Secret Heim*, 2022”

Triangle space, Chelsea College of Arts

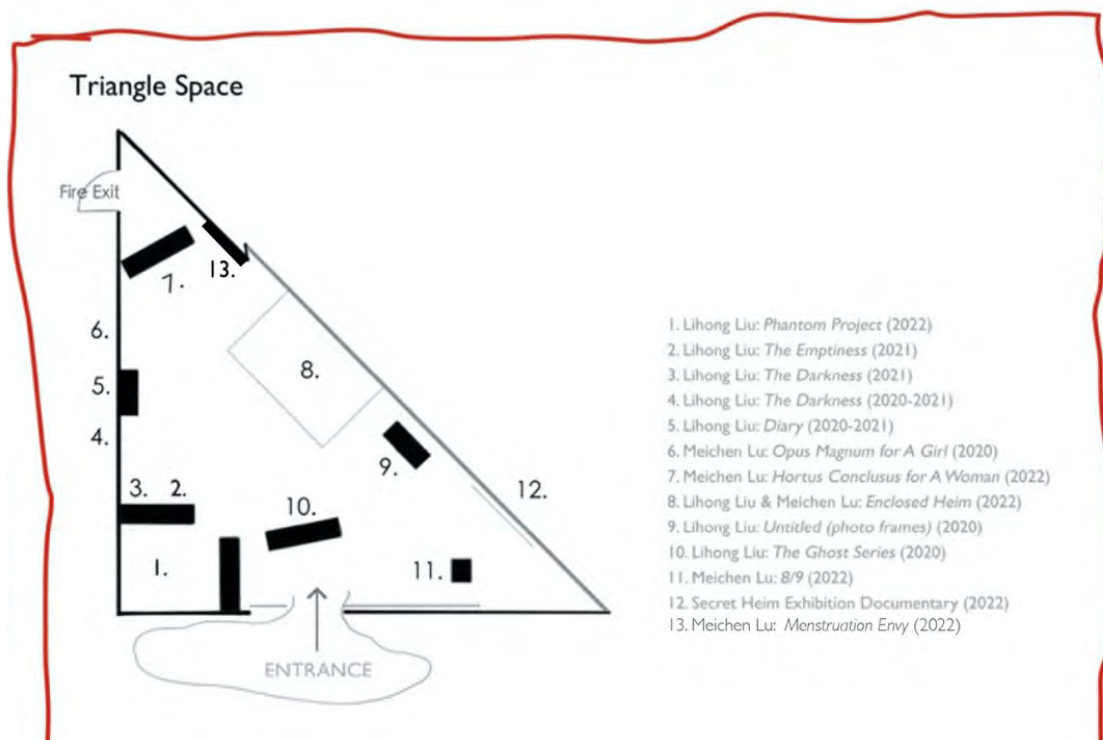


Figure 5-2

"Secret Heim 2022" Curatorial map by the curator, Mengwei Li

Hosted between 8th and 13th February 2022 at the Triangle Space within Chelsea College of Arts, a detailed curatorial map offered attendees a structured overview of the showcased works (fig.5-2). While *Secret Heim* is fundamentally a student-led exhibition, its conception and realisation have been bolstered by the support of affiliated academic institutions and PhD supervisors. The curated archive²⁹ features exhibition catalogues, a dedicated website, documentary footage, transcripts of artist dialogues, and recordings of the performative drawing act.

Through the lens of my practice, the exhibition *Secret Heim* contains the "Discovery Series" a multifaceted exploration of menstruation, considering its physiological, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions. The "Discovery Series" commenced with *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020), where I channelled the mystique and vulnerability of my inaugural menstrual experience at the age of twelve. This piece engages with a nebulous representation of genitalia, encapsulating the initial

²⁹ Archive access via: <https://www.mmeichenlu.com/secreth>

impressions of a young girl grappling with limited knowledge about her evolving anatomy.

This aspect of my work in the exhibition culminated in *Menstruation Envy* (2022), a provocative piece that imagines male genitalia endowed with the capacity for menstruation, which provides a critical retort to Freud's theory of penis envy. This concept is initially amplified through Gloria Steinem's satirical essay *If Men Could Menstruate* (1978), while the creative expression finds its roots in the works of pioneering Feminist Underground Comix artists like Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Julie Doucet, who audaciously sketched masculinised fantasies. Augmenting the menstruation trilogy, the diary endeavour *8/9* (2021) offers invaluable context to the spectators. It not only serves as a bridge between Julie Doucet's influence and my "Discovery Series" but also accentuates the autobiographical essence that underscores my practice.

5.2 *Enclosed Heim*, 2022: A Collaborative Project





Figure 5-3

Lihong Liu & Meichen Lu, *Enclosed Heim*, 2022

Wire, size variable

"*Secret Heim*"

Triangle space, Chelsea College of Arts

A major shift in terms of the use of materials was the new work specially created for the exhibition, *Enclosed Heim* (2022) (fig.5-3). Drawing inspiration from Freud's notion of the womb as humanity's primal domicile, the collaborative sculptural endeavour *Enclosed Heim*, co-created with Lihong Liu, amalgamates the emblematic imagery of a rose with the female vulva. This synthesis eloquently explores interwoven themes of home, the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, and the quintessence of femininity.

In the context of *Enclosed Heim*, the material journey from conception to installation is one of planning and adaptability, influenced by technical constraints and collaborative dynamics. A detailed project plan was formulated before accessing the metal workshop at Chelsea College of Arts. Gas welding rods of varying thicknesses

were used to create the genitalia forms and differentiate the vulva from the rose (fig.5-4). This decision required both technical precision and conceptual clarity.

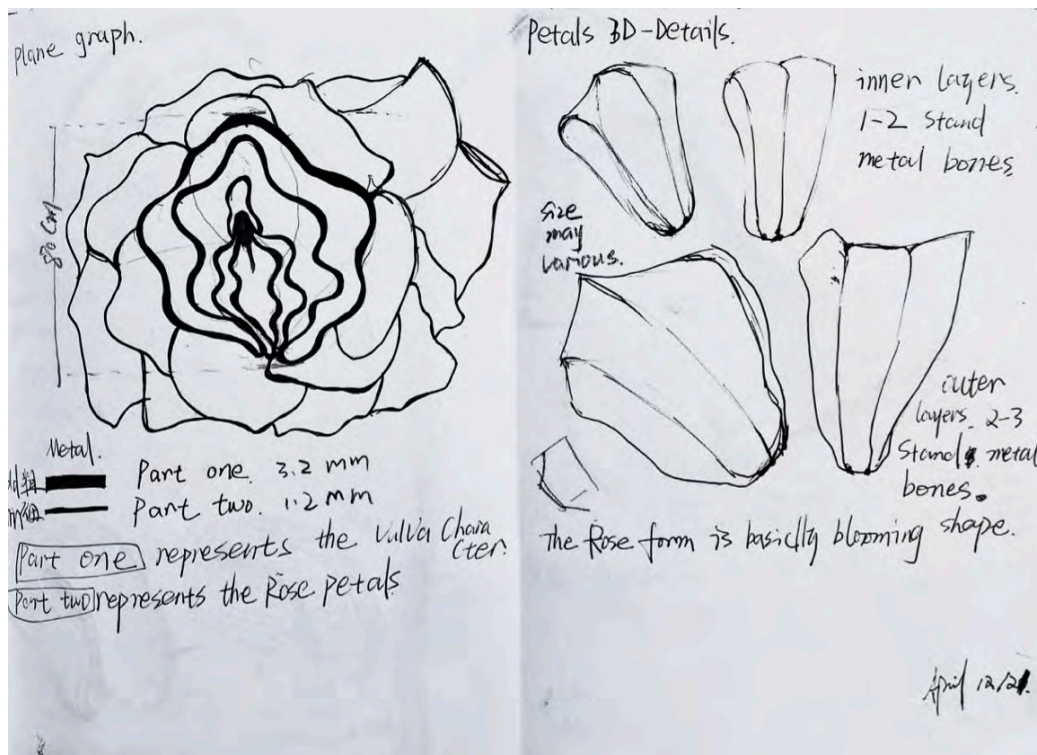


Figure 5-4

Meichen Lu, sketches, 2021

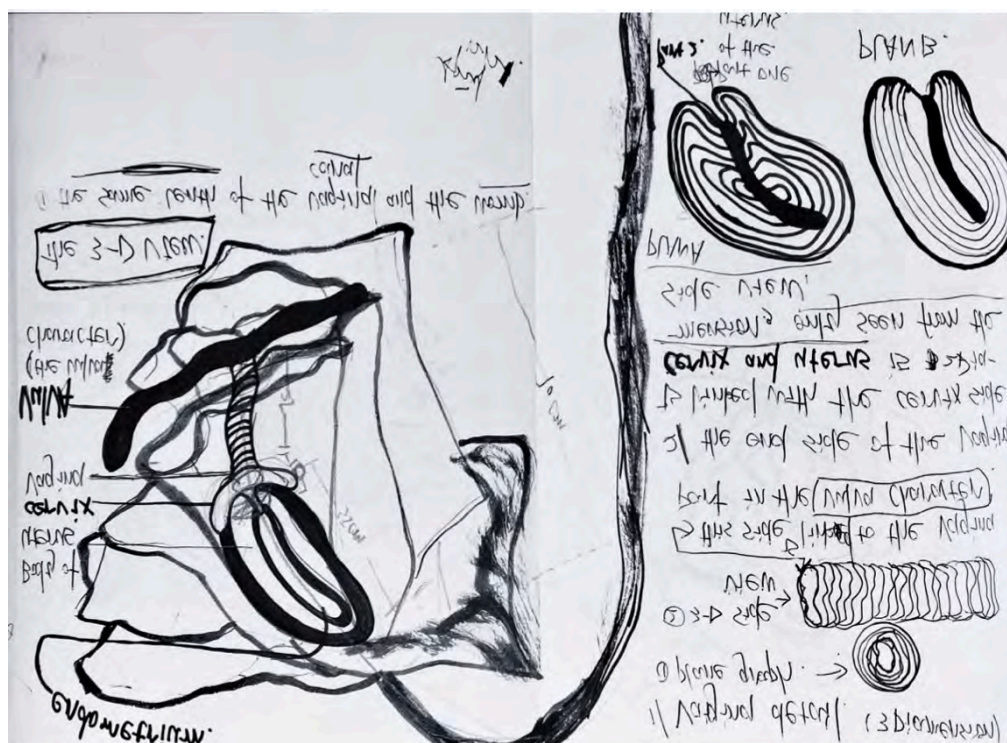


Figure 5-5

Meichen Lu, sketches, 2021

The original vision of anatomically detailed genitalia had to be reconciled with the practicalities of using new material and the skills required, leading to a compromise that retained both abstract and anatomical elements. This was not mere abstraction for its own sake but a deliberate choice to maintain the integrity of the work's representational core (fig.5-5). Due to time constraints and technical realities, a more feasible arrangement replaced the initial concept of guiding viewers through a garden-like installation. The reduction from thirty-six to twenty sculptures necessitated a shift in the installation plan. Despite these changes, the sculptures were strategically placed to confront the viewer with a dominant viewpoint, interrogating conventional perceptions of female genitalia and eliciting a sense of the uncanny. Finalised under stringent deadlines, the installation was designed to immerse viewers, enabling interaction with the sculptures from multiple vantage points and perspectives, thus enhancing the overall impact and engagement with the artwork.

The collaboration between Liu and myself transcended a mere technical division of labour; it embodied a reciprocal educational exchange. This partnership facilitated a deepened understanding of female anatomy on Liu's part, which in turn informed and enriched the sculptural techniques I employed (fig.5-6). This synergistic approach enhanced our skill sets and ensured a more informed and nuanced application of our respective expertise, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary knowledge in the creative process.



Figure 5-6

Meichen Lu, welding in progress.

The conceptual underpinnings of the project are intrinsically linked to the material aspects of the artistic creation.

The project's

approach to material expression, especially with the incorporation of wire, goes beyond mere physical alteration of the intimate depiction of female genitalia. It transforms into a pursuit that blurs the distinctions between the physical and the conceptual realms. This evolution of wire from a fundamental structural component to a conduit for deep conceptual exploration signifies a journey towards rendering the unheimlich aspects of female anatomy into a tangible entity. Through this process, the wire becomes a tool for shaping form while exploring and materialising the complex interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar, thereby solidifying abstract concepts into specific and individualised forms.

Julio González, who worked with direct-metal sculpture, radically redefined sculptural tradition by liberating the line from the surface of the page and projecting it into three-dimensional space. In the early twentieth century, particularly through his collaboration with Pablo Picasso, González developed a sculptural technique in which metal rods, wires, and welded forms traced lines in the air much as a pencil would on paper (Krauss 1977; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2002). His works, such as *Woman Combing Her Hair* (1936), reveal an understanding of sculpture not as mass or volume but as the delineation of form through negative space, gesture, and movement.

In his own words, González described his aim as “to project and design in space with the help of new methods, to utilise this space, and to construct with it, as though one were dealing with a newly acquired material” (González, quoted in Krauss, 1977, p. 132). Crucially, González articulated a new sculptural approach: “to draw in space”, where matter and void merge inseparably “like body and spirit” (Reina Sofía 2002, p.1). His innovative sculpture privileged lightness, transparency, and gestural movement over solidity and enclosure. Sculpture, for González, became a kind of spatial drawing, an inscription of thought and emotion through linear constructions in air.

This conceptual and material rethinking resonates closely with my practice in *Enclosed Heim* (2023). By employing wire to construct vulva-character and rose forms, I similarly engage a spatial language that blurs the distinction between drawing and sculpture. The wire lines do not enclose dense volume but articulate bodily presence through openness, fragility, and extension into the surrounding environment. In this way, *Enclosed Heim* performs a phenomenology of space: inviting the viewer not to observe an isolated object but to move around and through the delicate structures, encountering the work as a lived, bodily experience.

González’s emphasis on the expressive force of line, as capable of conveying psychic and emotional states, finds echoes in my own material engagement. In *Enclosed Heim*, the wire line becomes a formal and symbolic strategy: it traces the contours of the *unheimlich*—those aspects of the female body and subjectivity that remain marginalised, misunderstood, or suppressed within dominant visual economies. The work challenges the historical erasure of feminine embodiment and agency by “drawing” intimate, once-invisible forms into spatial visibility.

While González’s metal sculptures foregrounded spatial liberation as a formal innovation, *Enclosed Heim* reactivates the method toward a feminist phenomenological inquiry. Here, wire does not simply define form—it becomes a tool

for reclaiming space, for inscribing a mode of women becoming. As Schaffeld (2019, p.13) suggests, materiality functions not merely as a physical property but as a pathway to knowledge. In this context, the wire emerges as an epistemological device: articulating bodily behaviours, sensory habits, and symbolic resistances in open, spatial form.

It means, while drawing in space originated as a modernist sculptural breakthrough, in *Enclosed Heim* it becomes a strategy of self-symbolisation and spatial empowerment: a feminist rearticulation of bodies and forms historically marginalised within the phallogentric order.

5.2.1 Home and Femininity

The genesis of *Enclosed Heim* is anchored in a rigorous academic desire to explore the nexus between femininity and notions of home, as explored by both Liu and myself within the *Secret Heim* exhibition. This installation emerges from an interdisciplinary synthesis of flower motifs and the nuanced representation of my vulva anatomy, facilitated by the malleable wire medium.

Liu's research and practice focus on the continuity and familiarity of home, which investigates the interplay of *déjà vu* and the *unheimlich*, exploring their manifestation as "an artistic strategy of affect" (Liu, 2023). Her theoretical context draws from Freud's (1919) and Royle's (2003) insights on the *unheimlich*, while her work is based on the juxtaposition of the familiar and unfamiliar to examine the continuity of home (Liu, 2023). Accordingly, in the context of Lihong's work, Freudian theory supports her examination of displacement, especially when one is away from their home or familiar surroundings. While Freudian theory has been immensely influential in the field of psychoanalysis, its interpretation from a feminist perspective often presents a critical divergence. As for my perspective, I continue to critique Freudian theories, arguing that they perpetuate patriarchal norms and tend to be androcentric, particularly his ideas about female sexuality, development, and so-called "penis envy, (1905)". As my work *Menstruation Envy* (2022), also shown in this exhibition, criticises the concept of Freudian penis envy connects to feminist concerns and criticism, following the ideas of psychoanalyst Clara Thompson (1943) who reformulated penis envy theory as a sociological response to the subordination of women under patriarchy. While incorporating the concept of womb envy coined by Karen Horney (1967) with Julia Kristeva's (1941) discussion of menstrual blood as the ritually impure, this work shows *Menstruation Envy* as the desire of the male to consolidate patrilineal dominance in patriarchal society that has parallels with the

psychosocial consequence of womb envy. In analysing the conceptual underpinnings of Liu's research in relation to my own feminist critiques, a complex symbiosis and conflict emerge, particularly within the Freudian theoretical context.

In Liu's PhD thesis (2023), she notes that Freud believed female genitals are the entrance to the Heim of all human beings, the womb, the location where everyone previously lived, even though this may cause males an uncanny feeling. This demonstrates the strong relationship between the uncanny and the location that all human beings call *heim* (home), whether it is the original female genitalia or the later physical home. Thus, for Liu, following Freud's emphasis of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) is something Heimlich, home-like, and familiar where a sense of home, as a kind of original familiarity, is the underlying source of the uncanny to a certain degree. Critically, Freudian considerations of the relationship between the *unheimlich* and female genital indeed serves as a beneficial component in providing a theoretical background for both the *Secret Heim* exhibition, and the sculptural work *Enclosed Heim*.

My perspective, rooted in a feminist critique, questions the very foundation upon which Freudian theories stand, challenging its patriarchal inclinations, especially around the constructs of female sexuality, which could be found in similarities when I consider the context of *unheimlich*. In the preceding chapter, I dissected the male gaze, a construct for which Laura Mulvey is renowned in cinematic discourse; however, she further explores the notion of the *unheimlich* within a feminist film theoretical framework in her book, *Death 24x a Second* (2006). For Mulvey, the "*Heimlich*" is the double for the "*unheimlich*", and Mulvey sees that "*Heimlich*" in its dual form is a space of enclosure, "the home encloses and thus gives comfort while the secret is enclosed and thus hidden" (2006, p. 96); it is the repression of something that was "once familiar", but now is a source of horror (Keane, 2012, p.35). Mulvey's emphasis on the "*Heimlich*" (or the familiar) as both an enclosed comforting space and a space of repression mirrors Freud's duality. Still, she places it in the context of gender dynamics.

Accordingly, the *unheimlich* is rooted in the repression of the maternal figure, and the woman's role in symbolic structures. Thus, the female form, and especially the maternal figure, can become a site of uncanny feelings because it is both familiar (as the original site of human being) and repressed in a patriarchal symbolic order.

In the extensive canon of feminist theory, female theorists such as Beauvoir, Kristeva, Mulvey, Creed, and Friedan have elucidated the dichotomous perception of women as a site of both comfort (familiar) and horror (unfamiliar). Within patriarchal paradigms, women are often relegated to the position as the 'Other' meanwhile their bodies symbolise immanence and subordination (Beauvoir, 1953); women are inherently mysterious, irrational, and hard to understand, they are both deeply familiar (as mothers, sisters, lovers) but also rendered as unknowable, unpredictable entities (Friedan, 2010). Women are central to the horror film, female figures are the “blackness of extinction”, the “dark continent”, the prevailing lack, the abject nothingness (Creed 1993, p.28). The woman's body, according to Julia Kristeva, particularly the maternal form, transcends mere uncanniness; it represents the primordial site of the 'abject', originating from the child's inaugural act of separation from the mother, a process foundational to the formation of abjection. Consequently, from the feminist vantage point, although Freud provides the foundational framework for the *unheimlich*, his theories still being male-centric and not fully capturing the female experience. Therefore, I suggest that the patriarchal tradition itself contributes to the uncanny (*unheimlich*) nature of the female form, making the familiar (the maternal, the feminine) into something repressed and, therefore, eerie.

In essence, while Liu and I navigate distinct trajectories in our exploration of Freudian theory, our works intersect at the juncture of the *unheimlich*, revealing the dualities of home, femininity, and the profound complexities they entail in both individual and collective consciousness.

5.2.2 The Flower

Flowers perform as another pivotal trope for our collaboration. *Enclosed Heim* (2022) is a combination of the enclosed garden (*Hortus Conclusus*) and the German word *Heim* (home). From a symbolic perspective, the flower element in the enclosed garden is not clearly defined as representing a certain species of flower. According to my research, it has been argued that the enclosed garden was declared identical with the Virgin Mary and Christian iconography often depicts the enclosed garden with three key elements, the tree of life, fountains, and flowers (Walker, 1988). The flower object in our practice is defined as representing roses because of the daily choices of the two female art practitioners, which becomes an essential element and linkage of the project.

In Liu's exploration of dwelling space, she accentuates the significance of quotidian domestic objects—ranging from photo frames to hairdryers—in anchoring an individual's sense of self and familiarity, particularly when moving to a new place. To create a sense of familiarity in an unfamiliar environment that could be found in her previous practice, *Untitled (photo frames)* (2020) (fig.5-7), which explores the concepts of home, absence, and presence, alluding to her deep emotional attachment to her family/home. Liu's research intertwines with the assertions of Imogen Racz (2015), emphasising the enduring presence and evolving significance of certain objects in an individual's lifespan. These artifacts accrue varied values and roles, serving as touchstones across shifting temporal and spatial contexts. Toby Israel (2003) amplifies the discourse, positing that despite the transitory nature of modern society, individuals, in their perennial migrations, invariably carry these personal relics. Such practices underscore a deep-seated human desire for continuity, bridging disparate temporal epochs of one's past and anticipated future.



Figure 5-7

Lihong Liu,
*Untitled (photo
frames)*, 2020

Medium: plaster,
glass wax

Size variable,
largest 26.5 x 21
x 12 cm

Exhibition:
“Anchor”, Arthill
gallery, London
W14 9NU

Existing in close proximity to Lihong Liu, owing to our shared living quarters, I have observed a consistent pattern in her behaviour — a periodic inclination towards purchasing flowers, with a marked preference for diverse, vibrantly-hued roses. Despite the prominence of inorganic materials in her previous artworks (household object such as bed, mirrors, toothbrush, cups, etc.), Liu acknowledges the significance of flowers, especially roses, as integral to her daily domestic sphere. During our discussions, Liu talked about her early childhood, where she was exposed to a home environment where fresh flowers were a staple, placed by her mother at different locations within their residence. This familial ritual has indelibly shaped Liu's conceptualisation of home. For Liu, flowers, with their ephemeral beauty, bridge the temporal divide between past memories and present experiences, underscoring notions of continuity and a comforting familiarity inherent to one's perception of 'home'. Accordingly, this perhaps hints at an intersection of transient organic beauty with the permanence of inorganic domesticity in Liu's practice.

Femininity and sexuality are central my practice and research. As explored previously flowers have long stood as a symbolic representation of femininity within various cultural narratives, often embodying beauty, resilience, and grace. While stereotypes can often be reductionist and limiting, the association between women

and flowers can be embraced as a positive affirmation of the multifaceted beauty and strength inherent in both. Just as flowers, in all their diverse forms, remain radiant and enduring, so too do women continually blossom and persevere, regardless of the challenges they face. Thus, flowers for me, are not as an objectifying stereotype, but an empowering celebration of the enduring beauty and resilience of womanhood.

While Liu sees flowers as emblematic of continuity and familiarity, I perceive them in terms of eternity, or rather, I am driven by a desire to make them eternal. For instance, I choose to preserve their beauty by turning them into dried arrangements and handcrafting vases from clay for those bouquets I wish to treasure as forever (fig.5-8). This personal choice of mine is more than just about preserving flowers; it is my habitual behaviour on permanence in the face of transience. Through these acts, I experience with the ephemerality of living and death, existence and beauty, striving to encapsulate memories, love, and emotions into tangible, enduring forms. For me, this is not just an artistic experiment but a profound affective journey, an approach to hold onto moments of significance amidst the inevitability of change.



Figure 5-8
Meichen Lu, *I'll plant it in the earth, if ever our paths diverge*, 2020
Medium: Dried a bunch of flowers, clay, acrylics.

Flowers, thus, act as a connective ligature in this joint endeavour. From a methodological vantage point, the construction of skeletal frameworks in *Enclosed Heim* seamlessly melds Lihong's predilection for expansive installations with my intentions to transition the bidimensional vulva-character into a three-dimensional realm. My contribution draws from a detailed observation of my vulva variations and different flower shapes, as chronicled in the daily notations of

the diary project 8/9 (2021). It helps me to routinely scrutinise diverse flowers from various vantage points - at home, in gardens, and in flower markets. An epiphany struck when I discerned a compelling resemblance between the vulva, especially the contours of the labia minora and labia majora, and the overhead view of blooming rose's petals. My proposition, stemming from these observations, is to position the vulva character centrally within a sculpture, encapsulated by aggressively unfurling rose petals and a pronounced stamen. This arrangement would present the vulva to spectators from both top and bottom perspectives, urging them to draw parallels between the burgeoning rose petals and the unabashedly conspicuous vulva, thus fostering a more discerning appreciation of both. This venture culminates in the accentuation of the complex genital anatomy through linear sculptural design, while its approach sought to manifest the divergent conceptualisations of femininity and domesticity as held by the two contributing artists.

Many feminist artists have used symbolic imagery to comment on gender roles and power (Peggy & Reckitt 2001). British artist Sarah Lucas plays with ideas of food and female sexuality. Since the early 1990s, she has been using food as a substitute for male and female genitalia. In her photographic self-portrait, *Chicken Knickers* (1997), she uses a chicken to replace her vulva. An uncooked chicken is pinned on the centre of the big white shorts worn by the artist (fig.5-9).



Figure 5-9

Sarah Lucas, *Chicken Knicker*, 1997

Medium: photograph, colour, on paper

Size: Image: 426 × 426 mm; Frame: 452 × 452 × 25 mm

The position of the hole on the chicken is almost the same as the position of the hidden vagina in the photograph. This is a visual image with powerful connotations; the position of the chicken implies a suggestive intimacy and (for the viewer) disturbing nudity and vulnerability and is almost erotic (Rees, 2013). As a viewer, from a symbolic perspective, chicken (or hen) is a derogative and insulting symbol for women in a Chinese context. The meaning of chicken is a typical and popular folk term for a prostitute because chicken and prostitute have the same pronunciation in Chinese; besides, its sexual characteristics (the main functions of chickens are mating and laying eggs) are similar to the definition of the prostitute. Based on my Chinese background, when I review *Chicken Knickers*, the chicken is not only a substitute for the vulva but also a symbol of the characteristics and personality behind the representation. A woman or a prostitute? The vulnerable nudity represented by the chicken indicates a sexual invitation from the female body and to be freely enjoyed by the viewer.

Controversially, artists use substitutes and symbols to represent the vulva because of their similar shapes or identities. The contemporary artist Loie Hollowell creates abstract biomorphic paintings that suggest sexuality. In *From the Beginning* (2017), Hollowell employs the mandorla shape to represent vulva imagery (fig.5-10), which is often compared with the Modernist artist Georgia O'Keeffe's painting of enlarging flowers, such *Red Canna* (1924), which is widely interpreted as representing female genitalia (fig.5-11). Hollowell's work is inspired by O'Keeffe's vulvic flower shape and Chicago's central-core imagery. However, she insisted her creative progress is directly related to physical interactions between her own and her husband's bodies. Hollowell has created a personal lexicon of symbolic abstract forms, the almond shapes, also the mandorla in her paintings, represent the vagina, while wavy ogee shapes, drawn from Gothic and Islamic architecture, signify female breasts.



Figure 5-10

Loie Hollowell, *From the Beginning*, 2017

Medium: Oil, Acrylic



Figure 5-11

Georgia O'Keeffe, *Red Canna*, 1924

Medium: Oil Painting



Figure 5-12

Loie Hollowell, *TBD*, 2017

Medium: Oil, Acrylic

The green concentric circles in the *TBD* (2017) (fig.5-12) and the lingam symbols always represent the phallic principle. Shaded passages between these forms indicated thighs or cleavage.

Hollowell insisted her thinking of her practice is more abstract and personal; she intends to express the

variety of intimacy in relationships and provide a visually explosive representation instead of a sensual connection for the most conservative viewer (Fernandez, 2017). Hollowell's artistic expression distils her landscapes into minimalist forms, moving towards symbolic representations that showcase her distinctive aesthetic approach and geometric configurations. However, I think there are limitations in using symbols in an abstract composition when applied to the representation of genitalia. In the previous vulva figures, I explicitly focused on the portrayal of female genitalia with authentic women's lived experiences.

Sharp has noted that, in contemporary society, many girls and women have fundamental misunderstandings about the appearance of their genitals. They request labiaplasty to create a smooth genital surface, just like a Barbie doll, or to create a standard shape of vulva copied from internet pornography (Sharp, 2018). There is a massive variety in labia size, shape, and colour, and there is undoubtedly no one usual way for them to look. British artist Jamie McCartney's artwork *The Great Wall of Vagina* (2008) (fig.5-13) demonstrates that there is no standard shape

for vulvas. However, women's excessive anxiety about their bodies and misinterpretation of the vulva can cause irreversible damage to the body. It is essential to establish a positive understanding of the appearance of vaginas for women. Thus, as a woman and as a practitioner, observing my genitalia without shame and misunderstanding is a vital act to explore my own female body and psychological state. In visual arts, the abstract tradition is not merely a stylistic choice but a highly codified and specialised medium for conveying complex ideas and emotions (Rommens, 2019).



Figure 5-13

Jamie McCartney, *The Great Wall of Vagina*, 2008

Medium: multiple materials, sculpture

Through my exploration, I critically assess the effectiveness of these symbols in capturing and conveying the complexity, diversity, and lived experiences associated with genitalia. For instance, my body of work addresses the constraints of abstract depiction in accurately communicating the nuanced realities of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, it explores the challenges artists face in striking a balance between abstraction and representation, aiming to portray the female genitalia as both inclusive and deeply resonant.

Besides focusing on symbols, *Enclosed Heim* also uses materials to show a mix of realism and artistic representation (fig.5-14). The welded vulva figures and rose sculptures combine natural forms with abstract artistic expression. A similar approach can be seen in Helen Chadwick's work (fig.5-15). While working at the Banff Centre in Canada, Chadwick and her partner, David Notary, created *Piss Flowers* (1991-1992), a series of sculptures made by urinating in snow (Jupiter Artland 2016). The sculptures appear phallic at first, suggesting male authorship, but they were shaped by Chadwick, who squatted close to the ground to create them (Sarafianos 2005). Once cast in bronze and painted, these forms challenge ideas about gender by reversing expectations. The work plays with permanence and fluidity, breaking down fixed ideas about masculinity and femininity (Sarafianos 2005, p.3). Combining urine and floral shapes questions traditional gender symbols, encouraging a rethinking of artistic identity and gender expression.





Figure 5-14

Lihong Liu & Meichen Lu, *Enclosed Heim*, 2022

Wire, size variable

Outdoor view at Chelsea College of Arts campus



Figure 5-15

Helen Chadwick, *Piss Flowers* (1991–2)

Bronze

Resource: <https://www.jupiterartland.org/art/helen-chadwick-piss-flowers/> [accessed: 14th May, 2025]

Both *Enclosed Heim* and *Piss Flowers* show how feminist art can challenge traditional ideas about gender by reimagining symbols in new ways. Chadwick saw *Piss Flowers* as a way to explore gender beyond fixed categories. Instead of being fully male or female, the work suggests something in between. The use of flowers moves away from seeing the body as a passive object and instead highlights it as an active and living form (Cartwright, 1995). Chadwick believed that changing how people view the female body required a new way of seeing—one that is fluid, adaptable, and free from fixed meanings (Cartwright 1995, p.82).

The material choices in *Enclosed Heim* connect with Chadwick's approach. Here, the body is not just a subject but also a tool to question and redefine ideas about gender. This method challenges traditional views and highlights how feminist art can reshape gender identity through materials. *Piss Flowers* was known for giving raw materials an "abject role" to disrupt traditional patriarchal norms (Sarafianos 2005, p.3). A similar strategy is used in *Enclosed Heim*, where bold wire materials emphasise the vulva. The contrast between these detailed anatomical shapes and the abstract rose petals reflects Chadwick's interest in gender roles and structural oppositions. Chadwick also explored the balance between material permanence and conceptual change. Her casts of urine in snow show physical and symbolic ideas—combining warmth and cold, male and female, and lasting form with temporary action. (Sarafianos 2005)

This exploration of *Enclosed Heim* alongside *Piss Flowers* highlights how feminist artists use materiality and symbolism to challenge traditional representations of gender and the body. Through the fusion of biological realism and abstract artistic forms, both works disrupt conventional associations of femininity and masculinity, questioning long-standing cultural narratives. By reinterpreting symbols like the vulva

and the rose, *Enclosed Heim* continues this artistic dialogue, pushing the boundaries of how gender and sexuality are visually and conceptually understood in contemporary feminist art.

Naomi Wolf's critical examination of beauty standards in *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (1991) can be fruitfully discussed alongside the *Enclosed Heim* and its symbolic use of the rose. Wolf's analysis explores how societal beauty norms are not merely aesthetic benchmarks but are deeply embedded in power structures that seek to control and define women's bodies and identities (2002, p. 9-20). She argues that these standards act as a mechanism of social control, "the beauty myth is not about women at all; it is about men's institutions and institutional power" (Wolf 2002, p.13). Following the advancements achieved by second wave feminism movement, the beauty myth was refined and utilised as a means to limit women's power across various aspects of their personal lives. In contemporary generations, Wolf (2002 p.15) declares this myth functions by redirecting women's energies towards the pursuit of an unachievable beauty standard, thereby detracting from their pursuit of other forms of empowerment.

Enclosed Heim, with its integration of the vulva and the rose, serves as a visual commentary on the beauty myth. The artwork challenges traditional symbols of femininity—the rose, often associated with beauty, purity, and romance—by juxtaposing it with the vulva, a part of female anatomy that is frequently subject to censorship and taboo. This juxtaposition invites audiences to reconsider the natural beauty of the female body against the backdrop of culturally constructed beauty ideals. It prompts a re-evaluation of what is deemed beautiful or acceptable in society and encourages a critique of the ways in which women's bodies are objectified and commodified. Discussing *Enclosed Heim* in the context of Wolf's critique highlights how art practices can question and subvert the beauty myth. The artwork not only reflects on the pressures and constraints imposed by societal beauty standards but also offers a space for imagining alternative ways of seeing

and valuing women's bodies. It aligns with Wolf's call for a feminist response to challenge and dismantle restrictive beauty norms, "if we are to free ourselves from the dead weight that has once again been made out of femaleness, it is not ballots or lobbyists or placards that women will need first; it is a new way to see". (Naomi Wolf 2002, p.19)

In this way, *Enclosed Heim* navigates the complex terrain of beauty standards, femininity, and the representation of women's bodies, offering complementary perspectives on these intertwined issues. Together, feminist theoretical insights and the artwork's symbolic use of the rose offer a rich basis for discussion about beauty standards, gender representation, and the potential for art to critique and reshape societal norms.

5.3 *Familias Fantasy*, 2022-2023

“Must I always know how to cook?

Must strength and independence be conditions of love?

Why is the seat facing the television not mine?

Dose staying at home make me invisible?

Am I meant to remain here, day after day?

For how long must I stay—

A lifetime?

Is this so-called happiness?

Am I happy?”

Meichen Lu, *dairy* 13.10.2022

Familias Fantasy (2022–2023) stems from my reflection on the period of cohabitation, from June 2022 to November 2023, with my partner³⁰. His views on domestic roles often aligned with broader social constructions of women within heterosexual relationships. He often told me about his expectations for marriage and his ideal wife, “I hope my wife can cook very well. When I come home from work, all I want is a hot meal made by her. I can’t cook by myself—honestly, I just can’t learn it. Also, I hate doing housework; how could that be my responsibility? I know some men do these things, but I’m not that kind of person.”

³⁰ We entered a romantic relationship on 28 January 2022 and formally ended it on 30 April 2024.

I attempted to respond using my understanding as a feminist researcher. However, to him, Beauvoir's theory was nonsense; philosophy held little value compared to science, which he found far more compelling. At the time, I was in the writing phase of my PhD, spending most of my days at home reading and developing a theoretical framework that combined philosophy, phenomenology, and lived female experience to explore the female body.

From his perspective, my staying at home—without attending work or university physically—was an ideal opportunity for me to cook for him. He viewed my academic work as passive, assuming that since I was merely writing, I should be able to manage my time easily and have food ready before he returned from work. We argued frequently over domestic responsibilities. In my work journal (fig.5-16), I recorded several agreements we made regarding household chores, including who would take out the rubbish, wash the dishes, empty the vase water, etc. Every task was to be divided strictly: 50% each. Despite this, he continued to feel that he was carrying an unfair burden—one he believed traditionally belonged to women. His misunderstanding of women was not difficult to comprehend. With the advent of agriculture in prehistorical culture, social attributes changed from matrilineal to patrilineal where documents plenty of images depicting male figures hunted, invented tools, and discovered fire; while women are presented as background fillers to reflect the cultural achievements of men (Wiber, 1997). He is no different from thousands of so-called traditional men shaped by patriarchal society.

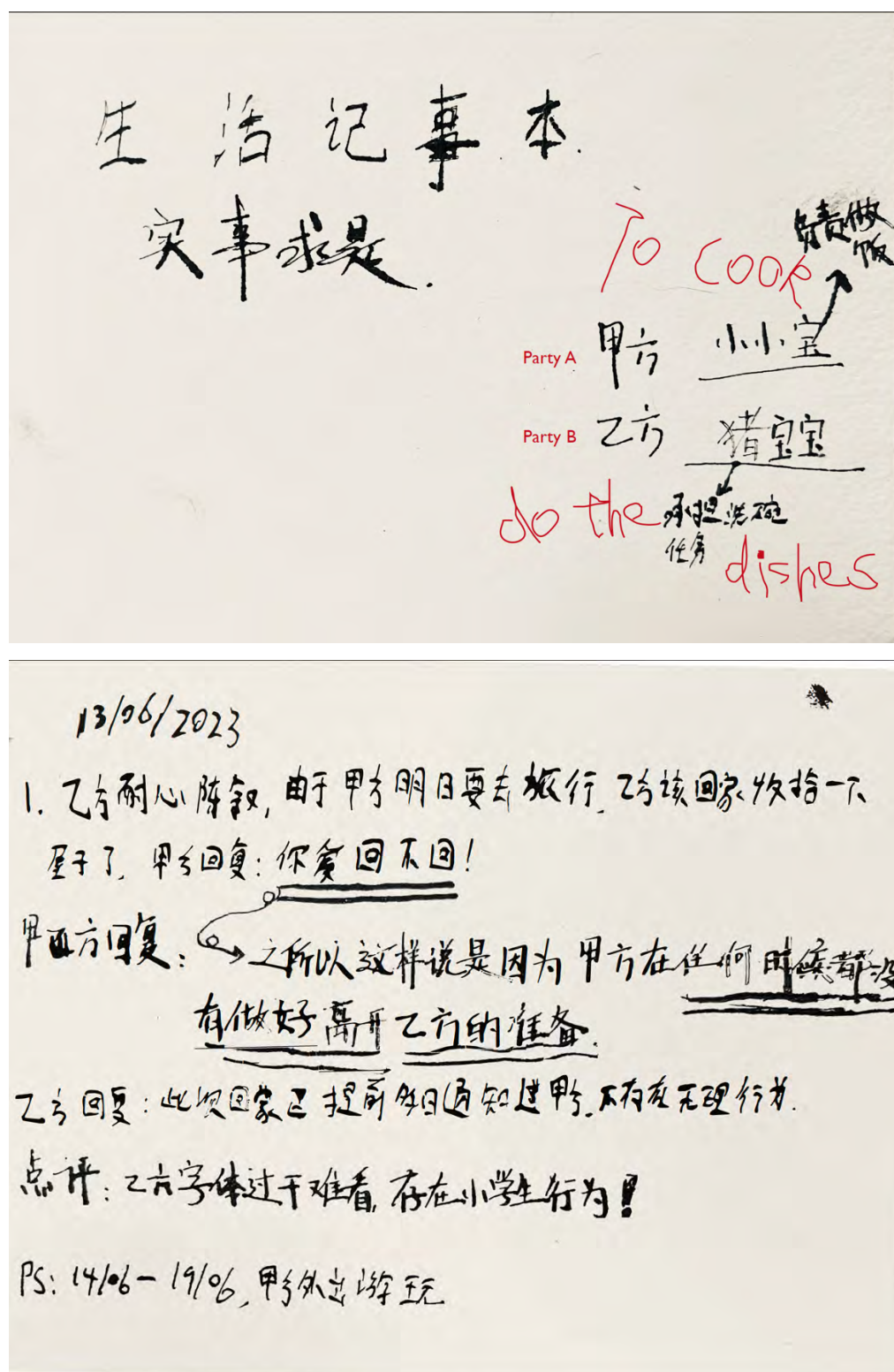


Figure 5-16

Meichen Lu, Work journey records (2021)

However, as someone who lived with him and shared an intimate relationship, I found the experience deeply distressing. I see every rule and expectation as a form of constraint. I can cook, and I am good at it, but I cannot do it under someone else's instruction. I refuse to accept the privileges he assigned to himself as a man within an intimate relationship. Although I was the one paying the rent for the flat, I still felt stifled within that space. Marx identified the foundation of human exploitation as the exploitation of women by men, arguing that the most fundamental form of exploitation is rooted in the gendered division of labour. I agree with him, especially after experiencing this cohabitation. Irigaray, in her analysis of Hegel's reveal of women and love, argues that a woman's love operates as a system of labour, "woman's love is defined as familial and civil duty" (1998, p.22). This self-effacement within domestic roles becomes a woman's civic obligation, compelling her to conform to the forms and norms of male desire.

Loretta Cormier and Sharyn Jones examine the cultural construction of masculinity through the lens of anthropography in *The Domesticated Penis* (2015). Drawing on ethnographic examples, the authors explore how male identity and superiority are shaped across different societies, particularly within the domestic sphere, with attention to phenomena such as penis cults that emerged in many of the world's cultures, including those of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, who carried phallic amulets.

Penis charms to evoke masculine fertility, power, and domestication (Rykvert, 2011; Cormier and Jones, 2015), that always elaborates "the phallus is a symbol of male power and dominance" (Cormier and Jones, 2015, p.8). According to archaeological evidence, small phallic sculptures have been used as household worship items in archaic Roman culture (Koloski-Ostrow, 1997). Phallic home decor transferred strong masculine sensations through anatomical sex differences, highlighting the oppression of female agency powerlessness under patriarchy, in which "the phallus is interpreted as the ultimate symbol of control" (Koloski-Ostrow, 1997, 257). Thus, the worship of the phallus is an expulsion of the female existence, it erases and

neglects the value of maternity. This merely emphasises the agency of the penis causing female anatomical characteristics to lose their subjectivity, supporting a culture of gender stereotypes and denying her reproductive abilities. From mythology to archaic prehistory to 19th-century Freudian discourse, “the entire world has the phallus as its foundation who possesses the distinctive sign is the supreme being” (Daniélou, 1995, p.13). Thus, in the context of patriarchy, the patrilineal principle denies acknowledging maternal power, which reflects the neglect of femaleness, womanhood, and maternity, corresponding to the worship of parturition, childbirth, and fertility. As the scholar Clifford Howard (1989, p.5) claimed religions from the world have a common origin, phallism, the worship of the natural reproductive capacity represented by the penis.

I must do something. As a response to my experience of cohabitation, I developed *Familias Fantasy* (2022–2023) (fig.5-17). During which I became increasingly aware of how domestic space can reflect and reinforce patriarchal values. *Familias Fantasy* was first displayed as part of *An Intimate Process of Strangeness* (2023), a group show held at the Lucky Pot Art Community. Installed in the gallery’s toilet and living room space, the work engages directly with the politics of home and intimacy. The work consists of six paintings and eight sculptures inspired by everyday domestic objects, including candle holders, vases, table lamps, decorative garlands, birdcages, etc. Each piece within The *Familias Fantasy* carries individual titles, as each represents a specific moment or event that occurred during my period of cohabitation. These works function as material records of lived experience, reflecting the emotional, psychological, and domestic dynamics of that time. It includes: *I Am the Vulva from Rose* (2022), *Drizzling* (2022), *Birdcage* (2022), *To Gain Privileges* (2022), *For GAZE Exclusively* (2022), *Hydra* (2022), *Am I Powered?* (2022), *Flower Basket-Ball* (2022), *Never Ever Blossom* (2022), *Kooking 1* (2023), *Kooking 2* (2023), *Grave* (2023), *Ambiguous Progress* (2023), and *Walking Her* (2023).



Figure 5-17

Meichen Lu, *Familias Fantasy*, (2022-2023)

Installation, Multiple mediums

Size variable

Exhibition “*Unfolding Narratives 3*” London College of Communication

The symbol application in this practice alludes to my previous methods, as I discussed in the *Opus Magnum for a Girl* section. The recurring long-way motifs function as a phallic emblem, employed across both two- and three-dimensional works, such as *Walking Her* (2023) (fig.5-18) and *Ambiguous Progress* (2023) (fig.5-19). Its formal repetition visualises male dominance in the domestic realm. For example, the use of sculptural birdcages (fig.5-20) references the traditional Chinese leisure activity of walking the bird, typically undertaken by older men during periods when women are occupied with domestic responsibilities. This juxtaposition underscores the gendered division of visibility and labour, where the male figure enjoys mobility and leisure, while the female remains confined and unseen.



Figure 5-18

Meichen Lu, *Walking Her*, 2023

Medium: Clay, oil, acrylic.

Exhibition: "An Intimate Process of Strangeness"

LuckuPot, 34 Grove Park Road, SE94QA



Figure 5-19

Meichen Lu, *Ambiguous Progress*, 2023

Medium: Clay, oil, acrylic.

The vulva-rose figure responds to this imbalance by reasserting female subjectivity. Rooted in symbolic theory and anatomical observation, the rose is recontextualised not as a passive emblem of

beauty, but as a marker of female presence. These symbols are not intended to indulge in voyeuristic pleasure or essentialism, but instead to foreground the agency of the woman artist as both subject and creator. The vulva figures in the work disrupt passive consumption by confronting viewers with the female body as self-represented, challenging both the objectifying gaze and domestic invisibility.



Figure 5-20

Meichen Lu, *Birdcage*, 2022

Medium: Clay, acrylic, dried flower.

Specifically, *To Gain Privileges* (2022) (fig.5-21) is a candle-holder sculpture shaped like an upright penis, intersecting with a vulva-rose figure at its centre. The work stems from my partner's belief that the penis is the only active sexual organ. According to his view, every sexual encounter for a woman constitutes an act of being penetrated, framed as a form of invasion. Within his logic, a woman's value was tied to her sexual history and reducing the number of romantic or sexual relationships was seen as a way to preserve chastity.



Figure 5-21

Meichen Lu, *To Gain Privileges*, 2022

Medium: Clay, candle, acrylic.

Exhibition "*Unfolding Narratives 3*", London College of Communication

I create the phallic form of the candle structure to reference the conjunction between masculine symbolic dominance and domesticity. As discussed by Cormier and Jones (2015), phallic-shaped objects such as candles and pillars function as symbols of masculine power and domestication, emblematising a persistent patriarchal structure

within the household. By incorporating the vulva figure into this structure, I aim to establish a symbolic counterbalance to masculine dominance. This conjunction of male and female symbolism reflects the theory of union present in various symbolic systems, such as the lingam-yoni, the lotus and pinecone, and eggs and darts, similar to what I applied in my previous practice. These symbols allude to a more reciprocal representation of gendered power, challenging the idea of singular phallic authority. In placing the vulva centrally within the phallic axis, the work proposes a rethinking of domestic and sexual symbolism—one that considers the potential for balance, rather than dominance, within gendered spatial and symbolic arrangements.

Materiality in *Familias Fantasy* is central to its critical function. On the one hand, domestic materials—candles, dried flowers, textiles, and lamps—are selected for their historical and symbolic association with femininity and domesticity. Through artistic reconfiguration, these objects are transformed into agents of critique, revealing the contradictions within traditional gendered spaces. On the other hand, while creating the vulva figures, I use clay—a firmer, more solidifying material—to shape the vulva forms. The material choices in *Familias Fantasy* are deeply rooted in the conceptual developments first explored during the collaborative project *Enclosed Heim* (2022). In *Enclosed Heim*, the combination of rose and vulva figures allowed an initial exploration of the interrelationship between organic life forms and symbolic representations of femininity. However, due to the collaborative nature of the project, I found myself constrained in fully articulating my personal perspectives on the vulva figure, particularly regarding its phenomenological and feminist dimensions. Seeking a medium that would allow me greater autonomy over form and meaning, I turned to clay as the primary material for sculpting the vulva-rose figures. Unlike wire, which implies openness, transparency, and structural fragility, clay offers solidity, tactility, and the ability to embody resistance. Through this transition, I sought to assert the presence and resilience of the feminine figure within the domestic space—a counter-symbol to the traditional expectations that frame women as passive caretakers within the home.

As I have consistently emphasised, both the symbols application and changes of materials within my work serve as reflections of my state of being in the world. Within an imbalanced domestic dynamic, I find myself striving to resist and push back. The vulva figures, as visual representations—or responses—to my self-image, embody a sense of hardness and confrontation, mirroring my internal resistance to these unequal conditions.

In this respect, the work shares conceptual lineage with Louise Bourgeois's *CELLS* (1991–2010), which deploy materiality to confront and complicate notions of the “home” as a site of memory, trauma, and power. For example. In *Cell XXV (The View of the World of the Jealous Wife)* (2000) (fig.5-22), Louise Bourgeois constructs a spatial enclosure using a circular metal cage, within which a tightly choreographed set of symbolic elements is staged. At the core of this cell hangs a headless mannequin dressed in a striking blue dress—an object that simultaneously evokes feminine presence and absence, visibility and erasure. Beneath it lie two symmetrically placed white orbs, whose rounded and smooth surfaces subtly echo testicular or phallic forms. Their deliberate symmetry and groundedness—juxtaposed against the suspended dress—create a visual tension that hints at gendered binaries, desire, and power imbalance.



Figure 5-22

Louise Bourgeois, *Cell XXV (The View of the World of the Jealous Wife)*, 2000

Exhibition: Louise Bourgeois: The Woven Child (9 February – 15 May 2022)

Location: Southbank Centre, London

Photography by Meichen Lu

The dress, elevated in space and deprived of a head or limbs, becomes a signifier of a gendered body stripped of agency. The lack of human features depersonalises the figure, reinforcing the cell's psychological atmosphere of jealousy and surveillance, echoing the title. The two orbs on the floor function both as spatial anchors and symbolic counterparts, evoking the latent presence of masculinity and reproductive power. In this sense, the configuration invokes a quiet but potent phallic metaphor, enacted not through direct representation but through spatial suggestion.

Materially, Bourgeois contrasts soft and hard, elevated and grounded, inside and outside. The dress, once intimate and bodily, is now part of a theatrical display, hung

in a cold metallic cage. The fencing serves both as a physical division and a psychological metaphor, separating the viewer from the intimate interior of the installation while suggesting themes of control, restriction, and voyeurism. The circular form of the cage heightens this sense of enclosure and endless psychological looping, often associated with jealousy and aggression. Curator Okwui Enwezor notes that Bourgeois used the concept of the “Cell” to explore the dual meaning of the term, evoking both its biological connotation and the idea of a prison cell as home (2015, pp. 12-16). Enwezor considers that these works are not traditional sculptures in the conventional sense; rather, they construct psychological environments that resist emotional distance from audiences (2015, p.15).

Unlike the steel and mannequins of Bourgeois’s *Cell*, *Familias Fantasy* responds to a similar domestic and gendered matrix not through restriction but through symbolic reassertion. Using materials historically aligned with femininity—pink netting, dried flowers, candleholders, vases—my installation reclaims the decorative and the sentimental as tools of critique. However, these choices are not made solely due to their association with traditional feminine symbolism. Rather, they are grounded in a phenomenological engagement with women's lived experience, reflecting my own embodied preferences, habits, and sensory inclinations as a woman. As discussed in the previous section on *Enclosed Heim* (2022), I have a personal practice of drying flowers, a ritualistic act rooted in my everyday life. Following Merleau-Ponty’s notion of habitual behaviour, such gestures are not merely aesthetic or symbolic but stem from the intimate repetition of being-in-the-world.

Similarly, I frequently choose to light candles at home instead of switching on electric lights—an act not guided by visual representation, but by a sensory logic of warmth, ritual, and care. In this sense, my use of pinks, lace, flowers, and candlelight is not an ironic citation of gender codes, but an authentic articulation of selfhood—a material expression of becoming woman, becoming myself. These objects are simultaneously autobiographical and political, intimate and critical.

A central concern in Luce Irigaray's critique of women's subordination is the claim that "woman" remains unsymbolised. In her words, "woman" is marked by an absence of "linguistic, social, semiotic, structural, cultural, iconic, theoretical, mythical, [and] religious" representation (Irigaray, 1985b). Irigaray identified "[The phallogocentric] economy of representation" argues that this systemic lack of symbolisation stems from the phallogocentric structure of meaning-making, in which male subjects determine and regulate the value of signs. (1985b, p.22)

Finding "woman," as Irigaray contends, requires reading between signs and meanings as they circulate within the phallogocentric economy of representation. "Woman" is not absent per se but positioned as a blind spot—a presence structured through absence, a figure of lack rather than plenitude (Irigaray 2002, p.227). my practice response to this systemic omission by re-symbolising the feminine through phenomenological engagement. Rather than seeking visibility within existing visual languages, I construct alternative symbolic grammars rooted in lived experience.

The vulva-rose figures, for example, are not a return to essentialism but a deliberate self-symbolising gesture—an attempt to insert a positive, autonomous representation of female presence into a symbolic field historically defined by male authority. In works such as *For GAZE Exclusively* (2022) and *Never Ever Blossom* (2022), I use sculptural techniques to insert vulva figures into traditionally feminine domestic structures, such as a flower ring and vase. These choices are not symbolic appropriations from a distance; they emerge from a phenomenological relationship to material that echoes my lived practices as a woman—drying flowers, lighting candles, arranging soft textures in interior space.

By integrating cooking materials historically associated with feminine domesticity, I challenge their passive aesthetic status. For instance, in *Kooking 1* and *Kooking 2*

(2023) (fig.5-23), kitchen utensils and the act of cooking are no longer positioned as functions of domestic service, but rather as objects of critique and reflection. The phrases “Good girls can all cook” and “If only you cooked as well as you paint” are direct quotations from my cohabiting partner, whose comments on my perceived domestic inadequacy reflected deeply ingrained gender expectations.



Figure 5-23

Meichen Lu, *The Familias Fantasy*, 2022-2023

Kooking1, 2003

Kooking 2, 2003

Ambiguous Progress, 2023

Exhibition: "An Intimate Process of Strangeness"

Location: LuckuPot, 34 Grove Park Road, SE94QA

In *Kooking 1*, the composition presents a chopping board on which a rolling pin and a vulva-figure are placed. The cylindrical form of the rolling pin symbolises the presence of the masculine principle—its implied function as an instrument of flattening or pressing becomes a metaphor for control and dominance. The vulva figure lies passively beside it, unengaged in any active cooking process, evoking a

silent confrontation between the female body and the expectations imposed upon it. This image stands as a visual rebuttal to the inscription below: “Good girls can all cook,” turning the statement into an ironic indictment of gendered domestic norms.

Kooking 2 further intensifies this critique. Here, the vulva-figure is shown submerged in a boiling pot—its flesh enveloped in bubbling, chaotic heat. A rolling pin looms in the top left corner, again symbolising the repressive force of the masculine principle. The accompanying text, “If only you cooked as well as you paint,” sharpens the critique into a pointed articulation of unequal labour expectations. The image transforms the kitchen into a site of symbolic violence, wherein the female figure is both the subject of judgment and the object of sacrifice. The boiling pot becomes a metaphor for domestic containment, and the vulva-body, suspended in heat, captures the affective weight of my frustration, resistance, and exhaustion in response to these remarks.

Through the integration of symbolic form, direct language, and domestic imagery, *Kooking 1* and *Kooking 2* articulate a personal yet widely resonant feminist critique of gendered labour, of expectation, and the structural inequity embedded in intimate relationships. The repetition of kitchen tools—rendered non-functional and recontextualised—echoes Martha Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975)³¹, in which the artist methodically names and gestures toward culinary implements in an emotionless performance that undermines the didactic structure of televised domesticity. Rosler’s work exposes the ideological burden borne by objects associated with female labour, revealing the emotional suppression and gendered control underlying the seeming neutrality of domestic space (Rosler, 2011). Similarly, my revealing of these lived experiences resists the naturalisation of gendered labour and exposes the quiet, accumulative violence of heteronormative expectations. I do not reject domesticity altogether; rather, I disrupt its normative structure and assumed neutrality, revealing how its tools, gestures, and even intimate relationships

³¹ [Video] Available at: <https://www.eai.org/titles/semiotics-of-the-kitchen>

are saturated with historically conditioned inequalities. My aim is not to abandon the domestic, but to reclaim the freedom to engage with it on my own terms. As Luce Irigaray writes in, *I Love to You* (1996), a truly ethical relation between woman and man cannot be based on possession, command, or obligation. Love, in her formulation, is not transitive—I love you—but intransitive: I love to you (1996, pp.109-113). The "to" signals an encounter that preserves the other's irreducibility, a non-consumptive gesture of attentiveness, respect, and coexistence (Irigaray 1996, p.110).

Within the space of *Familias Fantasy*, I reframe domestic actions and objects not as imposed tasks but as sites of expressive autonomy. The vulva-rose figure, the painting, the lace decorations, the constructed environments—these are not decorative or servile; they are manifestations of my individuality. I can cook, clean, and decorate, but only if I choose to—as acts of freedom, not as gendered obligations. The difference lies in free will. As Irigaray argues, when the other becomes a “direct object”, subjected to command or seduction, their alterity is lost; the relationship collapses into possession, into you belong to me (1996, pp.110-111). But in saying I love to you, one maintains a relational space defined by reciprocity, respect, and mutual transformation.

Any material is potentially changeable, stretchable, and reconfigurable. The materials I use do not represent me—I do not stand behind them. Rather, I am these materials. My body, my mind, and my experiences are inscribed into them. Through my artistic process, I do not seek to express a fixed identity but to trace a series of embodied transformations. My practice, therefore, is not about what materials symbolise, but about how they carry the shifting weight of my becoming.

I resist the tendency to reduce my material practice to being either “drawing-based” or “symbolically driven”. Drawing, for me, is not simply a medium or a category—it is a habitual mode of becoming, a phenomenological articulation of self. My use of

linear strokes, my sculpting of clay, my incorporation of dried flowers and domestic objects—all these gestures are not abstracted conceptual strategies, but bodily extensions of lived experience. The symbols I employ, such as the vulva-rose, the tree of vulva, or the 囍 (xi) character, are not imposed from theory; they are born out of internal reflection and relational encounter.

The feminine in *Familias Fantasy* is not simply deciphered through symbols or materials; it is constructed, insisted upon, and lived through artistic form. Where Irigaray finds “woman” excluded from representation, my work stages an insistence on presence. It does not merely seek visibility within the existing patriarchal symbolic order but disrupts and remakes that order through autobiographical interventions and phenomenological symbol-making. While steel conventionally symbolises hardness, strength, and even masculinity, I argue that pink and lace can equally embody forms of resilience and strength.

These reconfigurations do not seek to speak for all women, but to open a symbolic space in which the feminine can speak as itself, in its plurality and its resistance. Through these material and symbolic decisions, my practice contributes to what Irigaray envisions as a new symbol—one grounded not in what woman lacks, but in what she makes, inhabits, and becomes.

This chapter has explored the evolving role of materiality within my practice, tracing a shift from two-dimensional illustration to multi-medium, spatial, and performative approaches. Through the exhibition *Secret Heim* (2022), and works such as *Enclosed Heim* (2022), and *Familias Fantasy* (2022–2023), I have demonstrated how material choices—whether oil pastel, wire, flowers or drawing brushstroke—are not only technical decisions but embodied responses shaped by lived experience. Each project reflects a phenomenological engagement with medium: a practice of thinking through materials that reveals, rather than represents, the tensions between domesticity, gender, and the body.

Drawing has emerged as a recurring method and conceptual frame, moving across surfaces and dimensions to capture ephemeral gestures, affective intensities, and spatial encounters. In both flat and sculptural forms, drawing acts as an index of lived experience and a tool for feminist resistance—interrupting symbolic norms and asserting visibility for forms of embodiment often silenced or marginalised.

This chapter ultimately affirms materiality as a site of meaning-making within autobiographical feminist art. The drawing, the fragmented memories, and the performative all operate as ways of translating subjective experience into visual language. Through this shifting material practice, I assert that the selection and transformation of materials can function not merely as artistic strategy, but as a political and personal methodology—one that inscribes female agency and self-empowerment into the very fabric of artistic production.

Chapter 6: Drawing on the Wall and the Performative Drawing Act

This chapter examines two aspects of drawing within my practice: wall drawing and the performative drawing act. Although they may not appear inherently connected, both developed from the same unexpected artistic event. In 2020, while creating *Horror of The Little Dickhead* on the wall at the London College of Communication, I suddenly realised that I had become part of a ‘live show’. Since the work was executed directly on the exhibition wall and the display space was an open gallery corridor, my process was inadvertently framed as a staged act. This context meant that I was also unintentionally performing while constructing a narrative.

During the drawing process, an interesting phenomenon occurred. Most passersby would read the texts loudly when visiting my works. It annoyed me a lot when I silently wrote my secret, especially the “big secret” of my story, which has an intimate nature. The juxtaposition of my internal dialogue with external commentary became a source of emotional turmoil. This forced me to seek refuge in music, a tactic to disconnect from the external, albeit momentarily. Then, three male students stood around me, and one of the boys showed strong interest in my story. I did not finish the whole story, “Oops I forgot I’m in China and I don’t have a VPN”, is what I was writing at that time (fig.6-1). After a while, he read that and said, “Oh, it’s just some Chinese stuff, puff! Let’s go!”. Then they left.

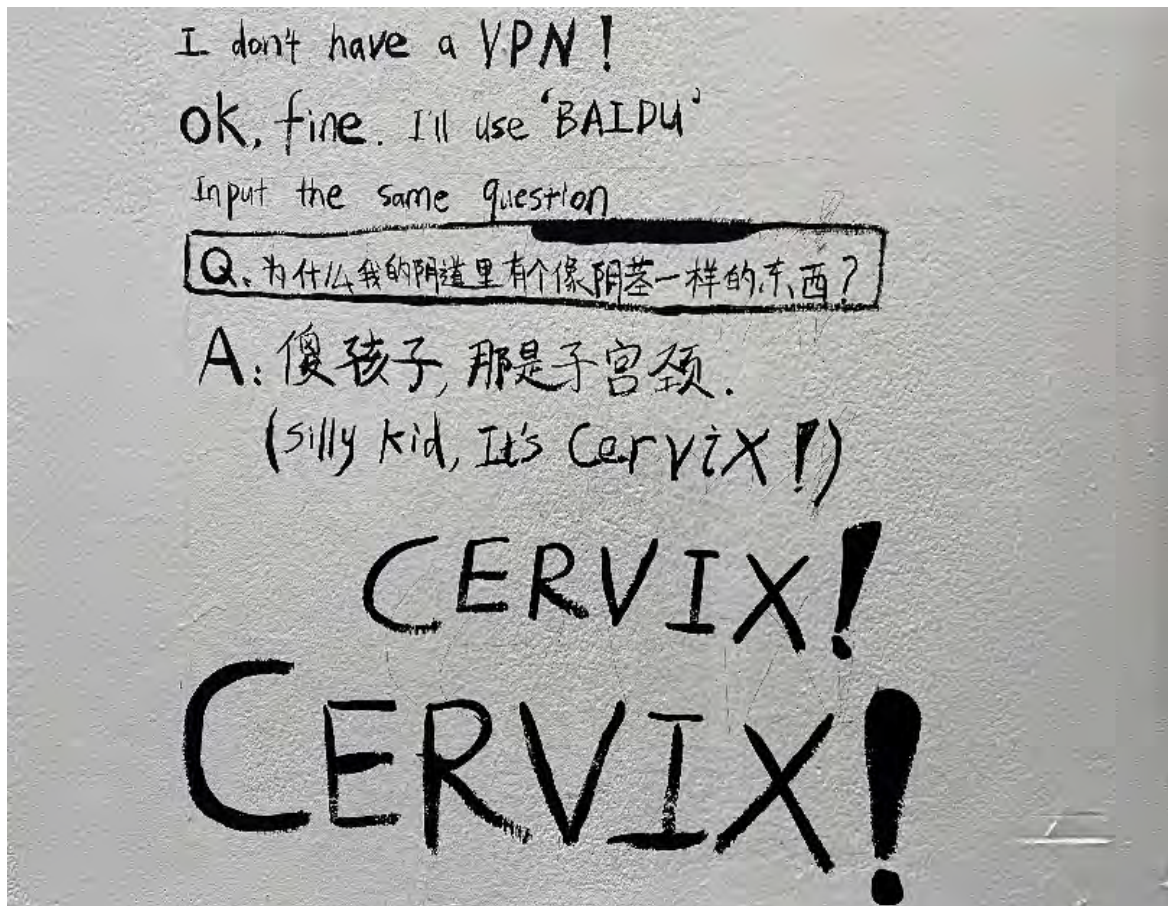


Figure 6-1

Meichen Lu, Chinese sentences in *Horror of The Little Dickhead*, 2020

Medium: Acrylic on the wall

The boy's comment made me acutely aware of Sartre's concept of the gaze, the dynamic relationship between subject and object. When the Other looks at me, I am inevitably situated within "the look" (Sartre, 1943), resulting in feelings of vulnerability and alienation. It also reinforces that art, regardless of medium, does not exist in isolation but within social contexts, shaped by personal experiences, aspirations, and encounters with cultural and sexual stereotypes and perceptions. I needed to engage with this reality. Building on this insight, I decided to develop the act of drawing as an independent section within my autobiographical project—The Performative Drawing Act—to explore my subjectivity through different situations and environments. This evolved into *The Scroll* (2021–2023), an exploration that

integrates live art creation, drawing as action, and audience participation as a real-time reaction to feminist body politics.

The *Horror of The Little Dickhead* explores how comics can transition from 2D to a three-dimensional gallery context. It serves as an initial experiment in expanding graphic narratives beyond the flat page into social milieu forms. Building on this, *Menstruation Envy* (2022) (fig.6-2) further investigated comics as an artistic form that exists within the context of art exhibitions in a gallery-based format rather than solely as a two-dimensional reading experience. This chapter explores the intersection between wall drawing, performative drawing act, and autobiographical graphic narratives within exhibition contexts.

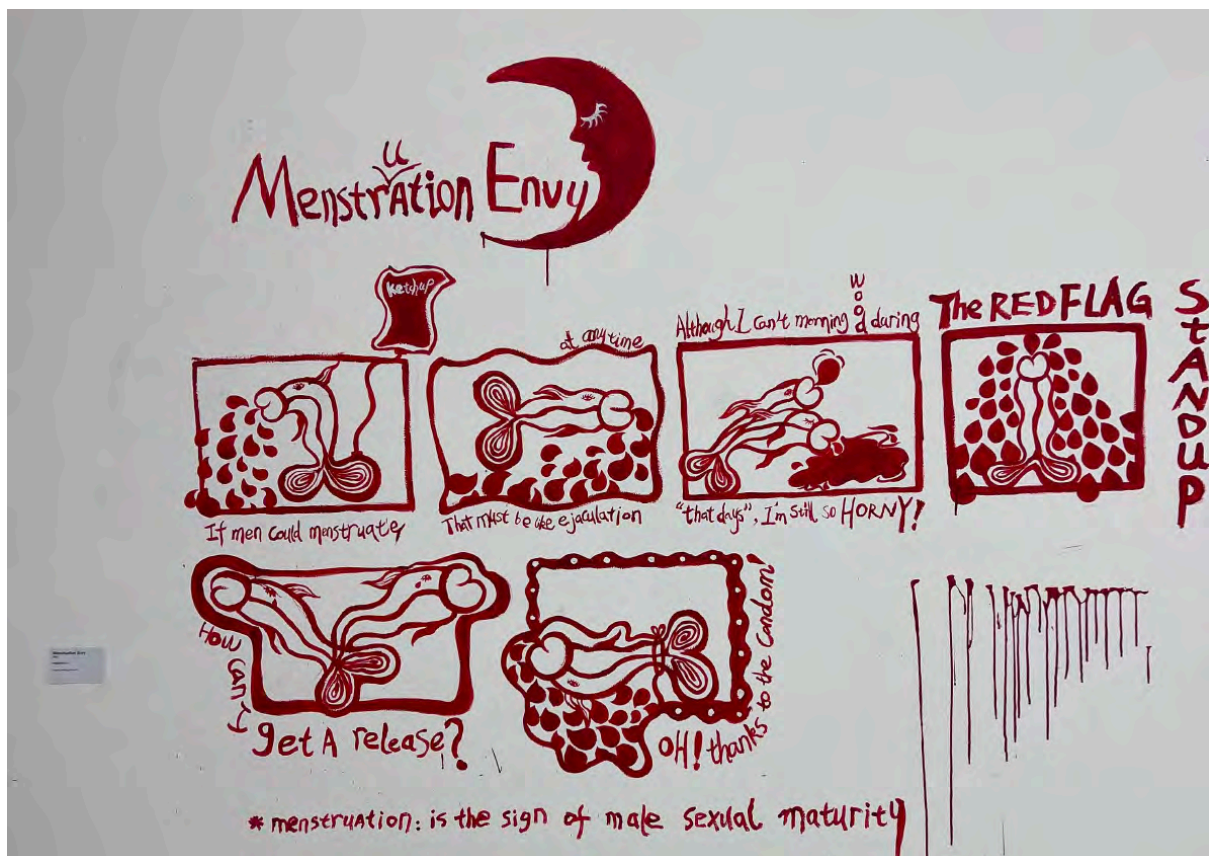


Figure 6-2

Meichen Lu, *Menstruation Envy*, 2022

Acrylic on the wall

"Secret Heim"

Triangle space, Chelsea College of Arts

6.1 *Menstruation Envy*, 2022

In this section, through a feminist critical lens, I particularly examine the concept of womb envy and its feminist reinterpretations as a theoretical framework for my work, *Menstruation Envy* (2022). By weaving the psychoanalytic framework of Clara Thompson and Karen Horney with Julia Kristeva's analysis of menstrual symbolism, the chapter positions *Menstruation Envy* as a symbol for the patriarchal desire to assert dominance and control over female reproductive autonomy (Thompson 1943; Horney 1967; Kristeva 1982; Turkel 2004). Focusing on menstruation, a biological process often stigmatised or hidden in society (Beauvoir 1953; Secomb 2007), the work confronts the viewer with a topic typically considered private and laden with cultural taboos. This choice of subject matter is a feminist act, as it questions and challenges social constructs surrounding gender and bodily autonomy.

Further, *Menstruation Envy* extends the use of comics beyond entertainment or traditional storytelling into social commentary and activism. The chapter underscores the capacity of metacomics to serve as a potent curation approach for feminist activism, enriching visual discourse and expanding the museum's role as a site for critical engagement with gender dynamics. The aim is to dissolve the boundaries traditionally separating comics from fine art by integrating them directly onto gallery walls by adopting a metacomics curation strategy. This approach positions comics as a legitimate artistic medium and harnesses their narrative power to advance feminist activism and enrich visual discourse.

6.1.1 *Menstruation Envy*, an Approach to Domination

Menstruation Envy presents male genitals as the main character in a story where they are also capable of menstruation to consider issues of sexual equality. It is narrative within the realm of speculative fiction, as it explores the hypothetical scenario of men experience menstruation. When I first read Gloria Steinem's satirical article *If Men Could Menstruate* (1978), I posed a question to my then-boyfriend: had he ever imagined what it would be like to experience periods? His initial confusion and speechlessness gave way to several questions: 1) How would urination work? Would blood and urine be expelled simultaneously? 2) What would happen during sexual intercourse if ejaculation involved blood? 3) Most perplexingly, he wondered about the biological source of the blood, considering the absence of a uterus – could it possibly originate from the testicles? Ultimately, he concluded decisively, 'No, I don't want menstruation.'

For men's fantasies of menstrual experiences, arguably, their attention and imagination is drawn to the physiological discomforts associated with menstruation. However, this overlooks the societal taboos, stereotypes, and negative stigmas attached to menstruation in women, which could similarly impact men. This thought experiment underscores how societal attitudes and perceptions are heavily influenced by gender. When constructing the narrative framework of *Menstruation Envy*, my primary objective was to respond to my then boyfriend's queries about menstruation satirically. If associated with masculinity, menstruation might be perceived differently; it could be convenient, perhaps even celebrated. Through this

imaginative lens, I aim to challenge societal norms surrounding menstruation, historically associated primarily with cisgender women. By inviting men into this conceptual space, I seek to disrupt conventional understandings and highlight the significance of bodily experiences as sites of gendered power dynamics.

In the following, I analyse the concept of penis envy connected to feminist concerns and criticism, especially the psychoanalyst Clara Thompson reformulated notion of penis envy as a sociological response to the subordination of women under patriarchy. Incorporating the concept of womb envy coined by Karen Horney with Julia Kristeva's discussion of menstrual blood as the ritually impure, this clarifies *Menstruation Envy* as the desire of men to consolidate patrilineal dominance in patriarchal society that has parallels with the psychosocial consequence of womb envy. Reviewing Judy Chicago's menstrual artwork, *Red Flag*, (1971) reveals that the direct exposure of female body can be an approach to reduce female self-objectification caused by patrilineal denial of her biological function, such as menstruation and reproductive ability.

In 1905, Freud theorised the term penis envy for the transition stage of girls becoming adult women regarding their psychosexual development (Bayne, 2011). For Freud if a girl intends to reach her maturity, she must experience the stage of penis envy. Freud (1962, p.61) believed that in a girl's childhood, when she sees a boy's genitals that are different from her, she would consider it as a biological lack. The eagerness of completing her body, and the jealousy at this lack, "which is so important in its consequences, to be boys themselves" (ibid, p. 61). The term carries more than just symbolic meaning for Freud; it refers to the options of becoming a "normal" woman, developing neurosis, undergoing a character shift described as masculine, or adopting a personality that seeks to deny any sense of lack. (Thompson, 1943). Separating penis envy into two single words, penis and the envy, Clara Thompson argued the tendency of women's envy from the sociology aspect. Envy could be generally understood as an emotion that arises when one person lacks another person's good qualities, achievements, or possessions, either desiring

it or wishing that the other person lacks it too (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Thompson described it as “a characteristic of a competitive culture that implies comparisons to one's disadvantages...The penis firstly is the biological male genitalia, then, under the penis envy discourse and the patriarchal culture, it represents the dominant of power in the competition between men and women” (1943, p.124). That competitive attitude toward the opposite sexes creates a situation where masculine agency desires power over the other. In patriarchal culture and society, it is obvious that limited opportunities will be offered to women, and the limitations “placed on her development and independence give a real basis for envy of the male” (Thompson, 1943, p. 125) instead of any of the neurotic tendencies mentioned by Freud.

Penis envy occurs when a woman believes that a man wants to dominate her or destroy her subjectivity, and she desires to do the same to him because she wants to be in the same position and be equal to him. The penis is the symbolic representation of female desire of equality and the approach to gain the same privilege as male, as “a sword for conquering and destruction” (Thompson, 1943, p. 124). As Turkel also argues the concept of penis envy may arise from men's desire to become the envied gender to emphasise the uniqueness of their masculine privilege, rather than women's desire to be masculine (2004, p. 44). According to Freud's theorisation this provides an explanation for women's feelings of inadequacy by attributing it to apparently irreparable biological causes, which actually provides a reasonable excuse for male aggression against female agency.

Rethinking the sexual difference between male and female, envy may also exist for the male group when considering the biological distinction from the female, for example, the lack of menstruation, womb, pregnancy, vulva, breastfeeding, etc. Karen Horney, the Neo-Freudian psychiatrist, proposed the concept of womb envy that refers to men's envy of women's roles in nurturing and sustaining life, she considered that womb envy is a cultural, psychosocial predisposition, not an innate psychological trait of men (Horney, 1967).

It has been argued that womb envy may be the most primordial envy, and therefore more ancient and fundamental than female envy of man, as Zilboorg insisted “I am inclined to think that it is not penis-envy on the part of woman, but woman-envy on the part of man, that is psychogenetically older and therefore more fundamental” (1944, p. 275). Also, men could experience womb envy more frequently and powerfully than women experience penis envy, because the masculine group wants show their superiority and dominance over the other group (Horney, 1926). Therefore, the envy of the woman is originally less than that of the man; on the other hand, womb envy occurs when men feel they have no dominancy and priority in society. For the male group, the loss of power over the female will lead to male envy, and the loss of control includes the overall control both male and female subjectivity. Therefore, womb envy is indeed the desire of men to dominate the patriarchal principle; in the long struggle between a free female character and men who envied her and wished to deprive her of her original rights (Zilboorg, 1944). This is seen from a sociological aspect by Thompson, in which penis envy arises when women’s individual sovereignty is threatened. The inequality appears between the penis envy and womb envy, the opposite sexes where women want the right to speak for her own subjectivity not to have power over the other, while men always seek to become dominant. Indeed, even under the contextualisation of envy, male still have privilege.

Menstruation, as the crucial development for reproduction, it is also a lack for the male, with the womb. Disgust towards menstrual blood is rooted in ancient cultures and rituals is misguided considering that menstrual blood is not actually a contaminant (Roberts, 2020). Kristeva (1982, pp. 71–77) explains purification as a practice aimed at protecting the body’s boundaries from polluting substances—most notably menstrual blood—which, in her view, carries symbolic value as a threat to patriarchal power and its need to secure and control the body. It is because menstruation represents the generative power, that “patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing” (Kristeva, 1941, p.77). Accordingly, the male envy of the womb, menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth are originally homologous, arising from the

absence of reproductive power. The patrilineal power negatively denies the existence of the other, via purification, to oppose excessive matriarchy. The male desire to control others stems from the fear of female reproductive power, which creates envy, leading the male group to consolidate his dominance in the patriarchal society by eliminating female privileges while depriving her subjectivity.

Menstruation Envy (2022) creates a scenario of male privilege through a rational narrative, depicting an imaginary story of the physiological responses that may arise if men could menstruate. There are no intense radical comments to directly criticise this aspect of patriarchy, such as "religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation ('men struation') as proof that only men could serve in the Army", and "Your husband's blood is as sacred as that of Jesus—and so sexy, too!" (Steinem, 2019, p.152). However, it takes a satirical approach by pointing out that men could enjoy intercourse during their period without any restrictions, while for women, having intercourse during menstruation is always a complex issue that is difficult to achieve. Physiologically, female sexual feelings change during the menstrual cycle due to high levels of estrogen and androgens. It will lead to a relative increase in having an interest in sexual activities before and during the female ovulation period and a relative decrease in sexual interest before and during her menstruation. (Levay & Baldwin, 2015).

Further, men do not even need to worry about sanitary supplies, without consideration of the sweltering feeling brought by sanitary pads in summer, the helplessness and embarrassment when using tampons for the first time, and the technical problems of applying menstrual cups. Condoms could solve all problems for male group due to the convenience of having external genitalia. Women are not discussed in this work to draw direct comparisons with men; rather, the focus is on how those who first learn about menstruation may come to perceive men as privileged or physically advantaged in relation to women.

In *Menstruation Envy* (2022), it is provocatively asserted that "menstruation is the sign of male sexual maturity", a notion underscored by a footnote accompanying a wall drawing (fig.6-3). This conceptual framing of male menstruation seeks to challenge traditional perceptions of menstruation as primarily a female phenomenon, signifying fertility and marking the onset of female puberty (Levay & Baldwin, 2015). Contrary to being viewed as ritually impure or polluting, *Menstruation Envy* confronts the stigmatisation associated with menstrual blood, which Kristeva (1941, p. 71) interprets as emblematic of the perceived threat emanating from within one's identity (social or sexual), unsettling the dynamics between genders within societal constructs. Through this lens, *Menstruation Envy* critiques the entrenched prioritisation of male groups under all conditions, presenting a juxtaposition between the hypothetical scenario of male menstruation and the reality of female menstruation. This serves to interrogate the dichotomy between the immutable masculine principle and the fluidity of the female body within the framework of a patriarchal society.

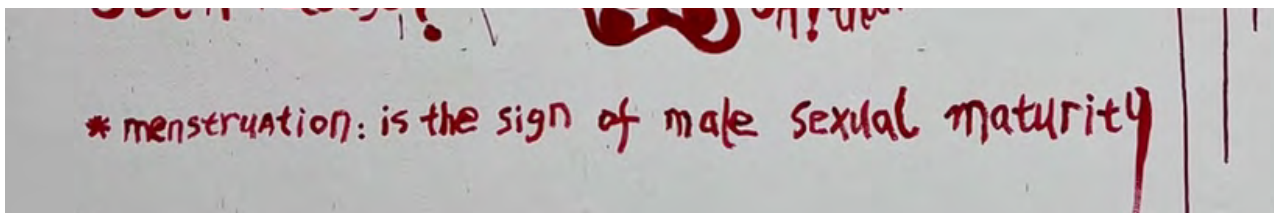


Figure 6-3

Meichen Lu, *Menstruation Envy*, 2022

Acrylic on the wall

"Secret Heim", Triangle space, Chelsea College of Arts

In the progress of preparing for the opening of the installation and performance space *Womanhouse*³² in the early 1970s, Judy Chicago was suddenly considering the absence of menstruation in art and culture: "One day, as I was walking down the steps of the house, it occurred to me that there was no reference to menstruation

³² *Womanhouse* (January 30 – February 28, 1972) was a feminist art installation and performance space organised by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, co-founders of the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) Feminist Art Program which I have mentioned in the previous chapter 3

anywhere in the environment” (Chicago, 1975, p. 113). Following a conversation about menstruation with her female friends, Chicago decided “to do a menstruation lithograph, called *Red Flag*” (1975, p. 135). *Red Flag* (1971) (fig.6-4) depicts a woman pulling a bloody tampon from her vagina with her hands, just like most women's routines during their period, describing the daily practice with no reference to a specific identified female character. The angle of the lens displaying the *red flag* provides clearer insight into female genitalia in that males could more easily examine their genitals which is more difficult for females. In the summaries of the era, writers Delaney, Lupton, and Toth describe menstruation as a strong taboo in 1960s North America that young girls and boys should follow the procedure of ‘menstrual etiquette’ defined by the historian Julie-Marie Rostvik, to keep the topic private, stay clean, and always use sanitary pads (Røstvik, 2019). Chicago’s directness and the strength of the menstrual image breaks conventional rules and principles toward taboo stereotypes around menstruation revealing the hidden anatomical information of the female body as well as the absence of menstruation images in art and literature realm (Levin, 2007).



Figure 6-4

Judy Chicago, *Red Flag*, 1971

Dimensions: 20 x 24" paper / 16 x 20" plate
Medium: photolithograph

Chicago’s *Red Flag* (1971) presents a striking public revelation of a female physiological state—menstrual blood on a tampon

being withdrawn from a vulva. This act can be seen as a counteraction to the internalised mechanisms of female self-objectification. While it remains uncertain whether the body in the image is Chicago's own³³, this ambiguity itself reinforces the work's challenge to normative representations of the female body. Given the strong cultural taboos surrounding menstruation, individuals are often discouraged from acknowledging it, even among women. Objectification theory has shown that women with higher levels of self-objectification experience greater difficulty in disclosing their menstrual status (Johnston-Robledo, 2003). As Roberts (2020, p. 57) notes, the exposure of what is culturally constructed as a 'disgusting' bodily reality destabilises the psychic defences that support self-objectification, disrupting the internalised pressure to conform to sanitised, socially acceptable images of femininity.

In 1997 Fredrickson and Roberts elucidated the correlation between objectification theory and menstrual blood. Building upon this, Roberts argues that the socially idealised female body, meant for sexual objectification, is typically perceived as hygienic and sanitised, devoid of "creaturely" attributes like body hair, genitals, or bodily fluids such as mucus or blood (Roberts, 2020, p.56). This culture of sexual objectification, which promotes viewing oneself from a third-person perspective, often leads to dissatisfaction among women regarding their bodies (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997, pp.180-182).

It is crucial to acknowledge that women are the primary targets of objectification within a patriarchal framework. Goldenberg and Roberts (2004, 2011) assert that sexual objectification and self-objectification serve to alienate women from their biological functions, such as childbirth and breastfeeding, since these functions pose a threat to male patriarchal dominance, aligning with analyses of male envy towards female reproductive capabilities. Under patriarchal norms, women are pressured to

³³ It remains uncertain whether the tampon and vulva depicted in *Red Flag* (1971) are Judy Chicago's own. As noted by Ara Osterweil, "it is never explicitly stated that it is Chicago's body, hand, or blood" (Osterweil, 2019, p. 344), and the image's power derives in part from this ambiguity. See Ara Osterweil, "Red Flag, Censorship, and the Aesthetics of Failure," *Oxford Art Journal*, 42(3), 2019, pp. 335–355. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcz023>

self-objectify, resulting in feelings of disgust and shame towards their reproductive functions, including menstruation (Roberts, 2020, p.56). Consequently, patriarchal principles resist the maternal power over paternity by promoting sexuality and self-objectification, effectively challenging women's intrinsic biological strength, particularly their fertility. The concept of Menstruation Envy highlights a lack of understanding and empathy towards women's experiences and demonstrates how deeply ingrained cultural and societal norms influence perceptions of biological processes.

6.1.2 Phallocentrism and its Symbolic Representation

Using the dolphin symbol to represent the penis in *Menstruation Envy*, from purely a graphic perspective is consistent with the application of the elephant trunk in my earlier work *Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality* (2020). Round, oval, and three-way motifs always represent feminine principle while long and four-way motifs belong to the phallus. Since the pillar, the typical cylinder symbol as same as the shape of anatomical male genitalia³⁴ it "is the phallic emblems of many gods and heroes, such as Shiva and Great Lingam" (Walker, 1988, p.27). Neptune, the Roman male sea-God, identical with the god Poseidon of Greece myth, was the representative of the mighty ocean, which emblems the teeming womb of fertility. However, the symbol of Neptune is the phallic trident, or rather Trisool, or "giver of life" of Shiva Neptune, as a typical male god, has the phallic symbolism but standing for female fertility (Jennings 1890, p.9). His hosts (an archaic military term for an army) consisted of dolphins and innumerable sea-nymphs and monsters, therefore, the dolphin as a highly symbolic fish often represents Neptune himself, "although it probably first rose in importance from a mere punning on the words *delphis* a dolphin, and *delphus* the womb, and occasionally the pudenda (female genitalia)" (Jennings, 1890, p.9). As Walker also noted the name of dolphin comes from Greek

³⁴ The similar application of symbol within male genitalia could be found in "*Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality* (2020)".

delphinos that means the womb, is a totem of Demeter, the Mistress of the Sea, while the serpent is her representation (1988, p.372).

The dolphin, originally a feminine word and the representation of womb, is also an emblem of the male god and therefore contains both phallic and vulvic principles. Indeed, it is similar to the serpent symbol analysed in the previous chapter where Schneemann applied to the *Interior Scroll*, (1977) claiming its neglected matriliney. It is possible to find other examples where male god worship focuses on generative power. For example, the Greek god Priapus, was a minor fertility deity, his specific characteristics shows a perpetual erection found on various forms of devotional objects to represent maternal joys, fertility, and virility (Cormier and Jones, 2015).

Penis charms were used to evokes masculine fertility, power, and domestication (Rykvert, 2011; Cormier and Jones, 2015), where “the phallus is a symbol of male power and dominance” (Cormier and Jones, 2015, p.8). According to archaeological evidence, small phallic sculptures were used as household worship items in archaic Roman culture (Koloski-Ostrow, 1997). The phallic home decor symbolised maleness oppression to female agency further displaying her powerlessness under the patriarchy, in which “the phallus is interpreted as the ultimate symbol of control” (Koloski-Ostrow, 1997, 257). The worship of the phallus is an expulsion of female existence, it erases and neglects the value of maternity. Moreover, merely emphasises the agency of the penis causing female anatomical characteristics lose their subjectivity, denying her reproductive abilities. Accordingly, from symbolism and mythology to archaic prehistory to 19th century Freudian discourse “the entire world has the phallus as its foundation who possesses the distinctive sign is the supreme being” (Daniélou, 1995, p.13). In the context of patriarchy, the patrilineal principle denies maternal power, which reflects a neglect of femaleness, womanhood, and the maternity, corresponding to the worship of parturition, childbirth, and the fertility. As the scholar Clifford Howard claimed religions from the world have a common origin,

phallism, the worship of the natural reproductive capacity represented by the penis. That, the absence of female discourse (1989, p.5).

The phallic dolphin characters applied to the *Menstruation Envy*, (2022) as a sign of phallus worship which, in fact, expresses the role of delphinos (womb), and indicating the basis of womb-envy on the part of man. This reappropriation challenges the conventional phallocentric focus in art and society, suggesting a deeper, often overlooked connection between male symbols of power and the envy of female reproductive capabilities. The choice to juxtapose the dolphin—a symbol laden with feminine connotations—with the phallus highlights the complexities and contradictions inherent in gendered symbolism.

In essence, the analysis of the phallic dolphin characters in *Menstruation Envy* (2022) reveals a sophisticated critique of gender symbolism, the dynamics of envy, and the societal valuation of reproductive capabilities. By examining the role of patriarchal structures, I illuminate how symbols and cultural practices contribute to the perpetuation of gendered power imbalances. This critical engagement seeks to question and destabilise the entrenched norms of patriarchal dominance. Additionally, my investigation into feminist art and discourse, with a particular focus on issues such as menstruation, underscores the potential of symbolic representation as a powerful tool for feminist activism aimed at empowerment and equality. The act of reclaiming stigmatised symbols exemplifies the capacity for art and symbolism to effect societal and cultural transformation.

6.2 Comics as Art³⁵: Directly Drawing on The Wall in a Gallery Context

This section reviews the display of original comic arts in museums and galleries since 1930 and how comics have been recognised as art with its unique aesthetics. It is crucial for my practice, particularly in relation to *Menstruation Envy*, because it allows me to critically engage with how comics are framed, valued, and contextualised within institutional spaces. *Comic Art in Museums*, (2020) by the art historian Kim Munson is an anthology of essays and interviews reviewing the trends and controversies of displaying comic art in museums. Drawing on Munson's work I will provide a comparative analysis of the following *Comics and Narrative Figuration* (1967), at the Museum of Decorative Arts; *Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making* (2007) held at MoMA; *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK* (2014) hosted by the British Library, London and *Out of Sequence: Underrepresented Voices in American Comics* (2008) at the Krannert Art Museum on the campus of the University of Illinois. By comparing the distinctive display methods presented in these exhibitions, I will discuss the multimodality aspects of presenting sequential art in a gallery and museum context while confirming the concept of comics as a medium of artistic expression.

Discussing *Menstruation Envy* (2022), and my earlier work *Horror of The Little Dickhead* (2020) I explore the issue of directly drawing feminist graphic narrative concepts on the wall as an experimental approach to displaying comic formats in gallery contexts. Highlighting comics as a significant approach to gallery display instead of merely acting as an inspiration to achieve and complete fine art forms.

³⁵ Note: A version of this chapter was previously published as:

Lu, M. (2024). "Comics as Art Practice: Directly Drawing on the Wall in a Museological Context". In K. B. Fägersten, A. Nordenstam & M. W. Victorin (Eds.) *Comics, Activism, Feminisms* (pp. 114–126). London: Routledge. This chapter has been revised and expanded for the purpose of this thesis.

The struggle for comics to gain recognition as a legitimate art discipline resembles the historical battle for female agency within patriarchal dominance. Both subjects share the experience of being expelled, degraded, and marginalised: for the latter, it is the masculine principle, and for the former, it is the realm of high art. As Molotiu (2007, p. 25) noted, original comic art is often relegated to a field that has traditionally been marginalised in the American and European fine art worlds, encompassing museums, galleries, and art education. The cartoonist and comic scholar Damian Duffy notes that the conflict between fine art and comics stems from distinct methods of meaning making that the two disciplines intend to express, because there is “the difference in the intended audience of comics and museum art, as intimated by the traditional dichotomies of low and high culture, of commercial and fine art” (2009b, p.281). He further notes that Valerie Cassel, the curator of VMFA³⁶, distinguishes the difference between comics as communicative and fine art as contemplative (Duffy, 2009b). In other words, because comics conceptually, and functionally, require the audience to participate and complete closure, they pay more attention to interacting with audiences through sequential narrative, while fine arts generally do not require this kind of understanding from audiences.

Consequently, comics are often regarded as belonging to a lower level of artistic expression. This perception particularly applies to comic strips featured in daily newspapers, often edited for general readership and dismissed as mere "kids' stuff" (Kitchen 2017). Moreover, comics are stereotypically viewed as an explicitly narrative medium (Duffy 2009b, p.281), in contrast with fine art, which, especially from the modernist era onwards, highly valued abstraction. As noted, when discussing the gutter whereas comics are completing by the audience's imagination, “for the comic to work, it must be understandable” (Laaniste 2002, 81). However, fine

³⁶ Valerie Cassel Oliver is curator of modern and contemporary art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA). Previously she was senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) in Texas. She curated the exhibition "Splat Boom Pow! The Influence of Cartoons in Contemporary Art" in 2003 at CAMH. Duffy cited Cassel's argument that shows in her essay, 'Between a Bedrock and a Nuclear Power Plant, (2003, p.16-29)' which is a chapter of the exhibition catalogue.

art, exhibited in the white cube milieu, is meant to be isolated from the public and “inspected at a distance standing on a hardwood floor” (Duffy 2009b, p. 281).

Museum directors and curators attempts to eliminate the conflict between comics and fine art can be seen from a series of exhibitions with comic concepts shown in the 20th century in America, although some of the results were less than satisfactory. The earliest exhibitions of comic art began in the United States in 1930s. However, the exhibition methods were quite simplistic, usually hanging the original unframed comic art on the wall displaying it for a one-to-two-week period only (Munson, 2020). It was a very short-lived and low-budget presentation approach distinct from the fine art display methods at that time. However, the exhibition *Comics and Narrative Figuration*³⁷ held in 1967 at the Museum of Decorative Arts (a part of the Louvre) in Paris, “renewed interest in displaying original comic art in museums and galleries” (Munson, 2020, p.113).

To raise public awareness and acceptance of comics and to achieve recognition of comics as an art form in the fine art museum context, by deploying resources and techniques specific to it, Pierre Couperie as the vice president of the *Société civile d'étude et de recherche des littératures dessinées* (SOCERLID)³⁸, organised *Comics and Narrative Figuration* in 1967 (Sausverd, 2014). The promotional poster designed for *Comics and Narrative Figuration (1967)*, it concentrated on expressing the content of the show and key characteristics of comic concepts, as distinct from the fine art exhibitions presented in the Museum of Decorative Arts in the 1960s. The endeavour to incorporate comics into esteemed institutions, exemplified by the Museum of Decorative Arts, faced considerable obstacles. Notably, “the board of trustees was hesitant to admit comics into a wing of the Louvre”, reflecting a reluctance rooted in traditional art hierarchies (Sausverd, 2014, p.107). SOCERLID contacted the art critic G  rald Gassiot-Talabot to collaborate, as including

³⁷ French: Bande dessin  e et figuration narrative

³⁸ Society for the Study and Research into Drawn Literatures

contemporary fine art practice ensured the exhibition was accepted by the board of trustees (Sausverd, 2014). The curators sacrificed some of the rooms in the museum so that they were no longer available as space for comics, and instead they were enhanced with a section of comics-related paintings by Gassiot-Talabot, who theorised and collected works from young fine artists of the 1960s (Sausverd, 2014). The originally exhibition proposal contained 3 parts of comic content emphasising different aspects of its concept; the removed first part was intended to highlight figurative narrative arts from a historical aspect.

The exhibition method of *Comics and Narrative Figuration* did not include any original comic art or actual comics. To make a direct comparison with the fine art paintings selected by Gassiot-Talabot, “it displayed Ektachromes (Kodak picture films) and photographic enlargements, mounted in various ways” (Sausverd, 2014, p.109). Utilising enlargement as the primary exhibition approach was not only intended to maintain dimensional unity between comics and paintings, in addition the aim was to transform comics into a format akin to fine art to direct individual attention towards the underlying concept of the comic. As the catalogue from *Comics and Narrative Figuration* (1967) noted, due to the variety of paper quality, page size, and clarity of original comic works, using photographic enlargement freed comics from its press format and provided visual unity (Sausverd 2014). A comparable strategy was seen in the work of Roy Lichtenstein, who similarly appropriated comic imagery through the process of enlargement and painterly translation. However, while Lichtenstein’s approach often involved isolating and recontextualising comic fragments to comment on mass culture and authorship, *Comics and Narrative Figuration* sought to preserve narrative structure and thematic complexity, positioning comics as an autonomous art form rather than merely pop cultural source material.

Although Roy Lichtenstein’s work was not included in the *Comics and Narrative Figuration* exhibition, his practice offers a valuable point of contrast. The curators excluded American Pop artists like Lichtenstein, whose iconic canvases such as

Whaam! (1963) and *Drowning Girl* (1963) recontextualised comic panels through painterly enlargement and aesthetic flattening. In contrast, *Comics and Narrative Figuration* sought to preserve the narrative and thematic integrity of comic forms by enlarging photographic reproductions rather than transforming them into individualised artworks. This curatorial choice reflects a distinct ideological stance—one that foregrounds political engagement over commodification—and affirms the exhibition's aim to establish comics as an autonomous narrative art form, rather than merely treating them as sources for pop-cultural appropriation. Pierre Couperie clarified that the intention of the exhibiting approaches used in the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* was to expand the field of comics to be taken seriously as a form of figurative narrative art (1968),

This point was reinforced in Gassiot-Talabot's essay

"...exhibitions of and writings on narrative figuration have simply attempted to establish the sociological substantiation of what was neither a new pictorial trend nor a school established on a philosophical or political basis, but simply a method of expression, implying both a reference to temporal dimension in the elaboration of the canvas, and an evolution of the process by which the spectator interprets this same canvas". (Gassiot-Talabot, 1968, p. 229)

Through exhibited comics in *Comics and Narrative Figuration* (1967), Couperie intended to establish a comic as a legitimate form of art from an art historian and curator's perspective. Couperie attempted to express the authentic nature of comics in a sociological context, and to provide a primarily paradigmatic example of comics existence in the social milieu of museum display. The display maintained the linkage of time and space that exists in comics, to include the audiences' participation in completing the internal unified rhythm in the work that is coincident with the dedicated idea that, "work to expose and explore the internal plurality of comics—what comics do" (La Cour 2019, p. 855).

To explore what comics exactly do, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, twice made comics-themed exhibitions, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (1990) and *Comics Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making* (2007) and both were controversially criticised. The former, curated by Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik intended to, in the words of its press release, “address the relationship between modern art and popular and commercial culture” (Green & Munson 2020, p. 223). The latter, organised by Roxana Marcoci insisted that the exhibition was “bridging the rift between abstract form and social consciousness in ways that are critical and playful in tandem” (MoMA, 2007). However, 13 featured international artists in the *Comics Abstraction* applied parts of comic elements as a springboard to achieve their own artworks, which did not essentially express any fundamentals of comic concepts. For example, Philippe Parreno’s *Speech Bubbles*, (1997) (fig.6-5) used many unmarked white helium balloons crowded in one corner of the gallery, creating an installation that reflects the speech bubbles in the shape of comics word balloons. As MoMA official press declared the artwork refers to Andy Warhol’s *Silver Cloud* (1966) (fig.6-6) representing both the act of speaking and its absence (MoMA, 2007).



Figure 6-5

Philippe Parreno, *Speech Bubbles*, 1997

“Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making, 2007”

Museum of Modern Art



Figure 6-6
Andy Warhol, *Silver Clouds* [Warhol
Museum Series], 1966

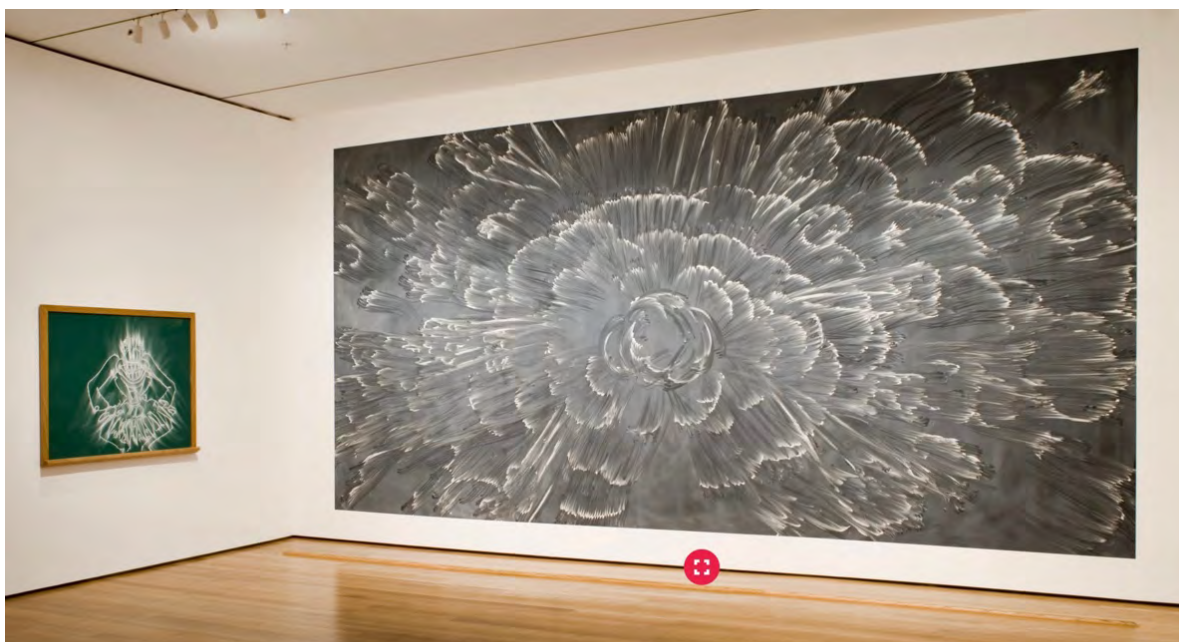


Figure 6-7

Gary Simmons, *boom*, 1996/2003

“Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making, 2007”

Museum of Modern Art

Another example from this exhibition, Gary Simmons' *Crazy Conductor* (1993) (fig.6-7), while reflecting elements commonly found in comics, such as characters engaged in conflict and dramatic “boom” explosions, diverges significantly from the conventional comic format. This piece is an abstract representation, focusing more on the thematic essence of comics rather than sequential storytelling. Simmons' work, described as “Boombastic” in his study, develops the relationship between entertainment and violence, specifically how cartoons often serve as an early introduction to deriving pleasure from violent acts, particularly for children (Marcoci 2007). Unlike comics, which typically involve a sequence of panels to narrate a story, *Crazy Conductor* captures a moment or concept in a more abstract, non-linear form. It lacks the narrative progression and panel-to-panel transitions that define comic art. Simmons' work incorporates elements reminiscent of comics, however, its abstract nature and thematic focus set it apart from the traditional comic genre.

Comics have unique sequential principles within its grammatical and aesthetic traditions, and speech balloons, sound effects, icons, etc. could be seen as parts of

comic special characteristics. However, these characteristics cannot be regarded as and equal to the overall concepts used in comics. Many definitions of comics contain two significant characteristics are “cartooning and sequence” (Duffy, 2009a) which cannot be separated. Piekos Nate and Tom Orzechowski (2021) analysed the grammar of comics in detail and identified more than 11 graphical types used to express speech balloon, such as joining balloon-to balloon, joining balloon with connectors, whispering, thought bubble, double outline balloons, etc. However, the visual element in Philippe Parreno’s *Speech Bubbles* (1997) presented merely the most simple and typical style of speech balloon that lacks the diversity of expression in comic forms. The same issues exist in *Crazy Conductor* (1993), the *BOOM* as a sound effect in comics would be represented by both graphics and texts, when spaces constraint in comic panels, but Simmons applies boom as an outlined hollow word to replace the graphical explosion (Nate 2007). Simmons applied the boom as an artistic approach to explore the theme of explosion and his critique of war and violence which has no direct relevance to comics concepts. Thus, the artworks exhibited in *Comics Abstraction* claim to explore the meaning of comic concepts while only applying parts of comics characteristics as inspiration to achieve fine art concepts. As Bart Beaty notes “with these kinds of shows the gatekeeping function of the museum is very much on display, with comics allowed entry only once they have been appropriated, deconstructed, and abstracted by artists working in a fine arts tradition” (2012, p.190).

Nuance is required to display comics so that it demonstrates their internal essence as comics. The exhibition *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK* hosted by the British Library from 2 May to 19 August 2014, London curated by John Harris Dunning and Paul Gravett, featuring more than 200 comics, including original scripts and sketches, artefacts and rarities, with plenty of loans from individual artists and collectors (Rose 2014; La Cour 2019). For example, the layout of the exceptionally rare Medieval bible manuscript, *A Paupers’ Bible: The Apocalypse (circa 1470)* (fig.6-8), depicting the confliction between angels and demons, was contrasted with the layout used in contemporary comic book. It is hard to criticise the curators’

organisation of the comic collections from archaic to contemporary, and the framework for designing the exhibition for a widely general public, nevertheless, it emphasised the sociological value, such as the educational value and influential of comics as documents and artifacts, instead of as art in their own right (La Cour 2019).



Figure 6-8

A Paupers' Bible: The Apocalypse, circa 1470

"Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK"

The British library, London

Resource: http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/comics_unmasked_art_and_anarchy_in_the_uk, accessed on 25th October 2022

Dunning and Gravett adopted various common tropes to exhibit the work, the most typical approaches including encasing comics in glass display cases similar to traditional display methods for archaic book collections at the British Library. In addition, they zoomed in on specific details of comic panels then printed and framed them to hanging on the wall, or digitally projected then onto the exhibition walls. The former approach emulated the display methods for historical valued books stored in permanent collections in the British Library. From my visiting experiences³⁹ of specialist collections in the British Library, such as medieval bookbinding and archaic illuminated manuscripts, they are typically placed in glass containers with wooden or metal shelves holding the book. The specific trained librarians can only turn and touch them while visitors cannot directly touch them. Using this exhibition method indicates the worth of comics relative to precious literary works preserved by officially reputable libraries and handled only by experts that “speaks to the on-going debate within and outside of comics scholarship over where comics stand to both literature and art” (La Cour 2019, p.845). Furthermore, the cultural analyst Erin La Cour notes the problems with the exhibiting approaches applied to *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK* (2014) pointing to the “specialist collections” presentation approach highlighting comics as mostly sociological artefacts, “the exhibition positions comics as telling of a broader social milieu, not of the historical position and agency of comics as a medium in their own right” (ibid, p.845). She further claims that Dunning as the co-curator, positioning comics as mere parts of the discourse surrounding art and anarchy in the UK, with little exploration of comics intrinsic voice as an art form (2019, p.855).

The approach taken display the enlarged comic artworks in *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK*. (2014) is completely different from display methods used in *Comics and Narrative Figuration* (1967). As La Cour notes that they decontextualised specific parts of comic panels and pages by zooming in on details, destroying the integrity of comics internal context stating that “it also harkens back to

³⁹ Attend to the British Library open days for PhD students in 2019, the first-year study period.

pop art's use and abuse of comics, which at once sensationalise and rationalise comics in a manner suited to the high art requirements of 'the white cube'" (2019, p.845). In contrast Couperie's display principles for *Comics and Narrative Figuration*, (1967), was to enlarge entire comic pages without destroying its internal plurality. By displaying only photographic enlargements, Pierre Couperie contributed to "the educational aim of attracting the public's attention to comics images that it would habitually read without seeing" (2014, p.107). Couperie applied fine art discourse to exhibit comics, highlighting the photographic sharpness of individual comic pages to released comics from the small format while still focusing attention on comics as comics, as an art worthy of exhibition on its own terms.

Extracting images from comic pages or spreads needs to consider the interaction between the panel and the gutter and the audiences reading experience of comics. La Cour's comments on *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK*, (2014) note that the exhibition method neither allows audiences to get involved in comics panel to panel aesthetics, nor considers time and space within the walls of a museum or cultural institution (2019, p.844-855). Further, she argues the exhibiting strategy does not consider how to "under-score the discourse on original and copy as it relates to art versus commodity object—in short, how we can exhibit the affective qualities of comics" (La Cour 2019, p. 845).

To effectively highlight comics as comics instead of another discipline, is essentially to send the single panel back to its whole content, with gutters, highlighting closure. Closure as discussed in chapter 3 provides individuals a space to transform separate panels into a unified rhythm. As Douglas Wolk (2007, p.131) defines one of the panel's most important functions is to enable "pregnant moments" between spaces where readers contribute by giving birth to meaning. Exhibiting comics through only displaying decontextualised panels indeed eliminates and minimalizes the existence of the gutter as one of indispensably significant parts of comics the as same as panels.

The exhibition *Out of Sequence: Underrepresented Voices in American Comics* (2008) (fig.6-9) curated by Damian Duffy and John Jennings in the East Gallery of KAM (Krannert Art Museum) on the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, brought innovative interpretations of comics exhibiting approaches from curatorial perspectives. The exhibition showcased 214 comic pieces by 65 artists from fifteen diverse demographics, including "both genders and many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds" (Duffy 2009a, p. 2). As in *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK* (2014), the sheer amount of work displayed, underscores the diversity of comics. However, Dunning and Gravett intend to emphasise that comics are not only childhood nostalgia but also a powerful adult medium that could especially "reflect and impact on society". Erin La Cour criticises it as it "does little to establish the importance of comics on their own terms"; and for the comics medium "is neither clearly defined nor seriously established without its ties to the social milieu and other media forms" (2019, p. 844-845). In contrast Damian Duffy and John Jennings focused on applying curatorial design to sequential art to "explicate potentials for sequential art in museums" (Duffy 2009a, p.1).



Figure 6-9

Curatorial exhibition overview

"Out of Sequence: Underrepresented Voices in American Comics, (2008)"

Duffy and Jennings are both curators and comic creators, leading them to focus predominantly on curatorial design principles in sequential art as their default position (Duffy 2009a). According to Duffy (2009a, p.1-11), the innovative experiment of employing a metacomics narrative to hang comics on the wall reflects the curators' intention to elucidate the unique potential of comics within their form. In other words, the unique curation strategy means using the comics format to present comics, structuring and designing the entire collection of comic pieces from *Out of Sequence* as if they were new comic pages.

The overall arrangement of one of the gallery walls (see fig.6-9) demonstrates a tighter layout than traditional approaches to presenting fine art paintings in museums, signifying the closer white gap equivalent to the gutter in comics. The overview layout of the works on the wall echoes the page designs in comics, with each artwork becoming a panel on the wall page, further extending the concept of the “white cube” of the gallery to become the white “gutter” space of the comics page (Duffy 2009a). Conceptually, each wall in the gallery is designed to resemble unfinished original work files displayed on digital applications such as Adobe Photoshop or InDesign, reflecting the authentic status when comic artists edit their works in progress. Duffy (2009b, p.281) asserts that gallery and/or installation comics serve as a bridge between the historically distinct realms of sequential and fine art. Duffy and Jennings utilise sequential images, the interplay of text and image, and other fundamental elements of sequential art to craft pieces expressly for exhibition in a museum setting, such as the employment of bleeding lines and registration marks to reveal the process of comics creation. This curatorial choice aims to emphasise the consideration of comics artists in locating the margins of the final printed page to “reinforce the conception of the walls as pages and the pieces on the walls as panels” (Duffy 2009a, p.6).

To be clarify, *metacomics*⁴⁰, primarily refers to a style of metafictional comics in which characters become aware that they exist within a comic (Cook, 2017). In his extensive analysis of the term, Roy T. Cook (2017, p.256-267) explains that metacomics belongs to the broader category of metafiction. Specifically, characters in metacomics can utilise the structures of comics to drive the plot as active participants in the creation process. Deadpool in the Marvel Universe is an antihero who consistently breaks the fourth wall, directly addressing the audience and the writer (Priest, 1999). In metacomics, characters can employ the structures of the medium as co-creators to shape the narrative. Duffy and Jennings applied “metapictures” (Mitchell 1994, p.71), to the specific museological context, such as the exhibition *Out of Sequence*, where the curators act as creators of gallery-based spatial comics while the displayed artworks function as content and characters, essentially creating a comic about comics while exhibiting comics as comics. As Cook (2017, p.264) clarifies, the strength of metacomics lies in its ability to allow creators to focus on and comment on the nature of storytelling and the essentials of comic narratives. In essence, metacomics enables creators to construct stories with effects that would not be achievable within more straightforward, non-metafictional narrative strategies. Therefore, the initial innovation by the curators in strategically creating a spatial experience and employing curatorial technology serves to bridge the gap between comics artists and audiences within the museological context. By shedding light on the procedures of comic production, the exhibition offers viewers an opportunity to gain awareness of or even participate in the comic creation process within the context of authorship. Comics scholar Anastasia Salter describes *Out of Sequence* as an exhibition that “pushes museums in the opposite direction, using comics as a way of transforming the museum space” (2017, p.354). It provides an interactive approach that intertwines the narrative form of comics with curatorial design, emphasising the potential of sequential art within the museological context.

⁴⁰ Further, he also provides a third taxonomy based on the research of Thomas Inge (1995, p.11–12) and Matthew Jones (2005, p.270–286) including six types of metafiction (Roy T Cook 2012, p.175).

Hence, the hybrid potential between museums and comics is effectively explored through the metacomics exhibiting method. It brings comics and museums full circle, suggesting that comics could find a space in the context of museology via curatorial transformations. Although the trajectory of comics into museum and gallery spaces experienced (and is still experiencing) various difficulties and dilemmas, Michael D. Picone suggests there are similarities and formal relationships between the conceptual arrangement of comics' sequential contents and fine arts displayed in museums with curatorial juxtaposition: "...the comic art author has the advantage of being able to create from scratch the appropriate panels for the sequence, whereas the museum curator must piece together "panels" created by others in order to arrive at an appropriate sequence for an exhibit . . . [but] in both cases the overriding aim is the same: to create something that is readable and communicative, which means, of necessity, that both constitute art-based sequential narratives". (Picone, 2013, p. 48)

Picone's hypothesis regarding the reciprocal relationship between art museums and experimental comic arts, where comic art can be likened to a paper museum, offers a thought-provoking perspective on the interplay between these two domains. Arguably, reflecting upon most comic exhibitions, it is notable that they were predominantly organised by individuals who identify as art historians and museum curators. However, the involvement of comic artists like Duffy and Jennings as curators in the Out of Sequence exhibition signifies the evolving role of comic artists within the museological context.

By adopting Picone's discourse on the dynamic between comics and museums, one can conceptualise the significant position comics artists occupy when engaging with comics as an artistic form within this social milieu. Given their inherent proficiency in constructing sequential narratives, comics artists possess a natural aptitude for harnessing the spatial context of the white cube gallery and utilising it as a canvas for their creative expression. This artist-centric perspective enables them to transform the gallery space into pages, where each artwork becomes a panel, ultimately shaping a cohesive and immersive sequential narrative. In doing so,

comics artists contribute a distinct artistic voice that challenges traditional notions of the gallery space and expands the possibilities for comics within the realm of museology.



Figure 6-10

Meichen Lu, *Menstruation Envy*, 2022

Acrylic on the wall

“*Secret Heim*” Triangle space, Chelsea College of Arts

As I introduced in Chapter 5, *Menstruation Envy* (fig.6-10) was first displayed in the student-led PhD duo exhibition *Secret Heim* (2022). The atmosphere of the research-based exhibition afforded me scholarly opportunities to develop and explore the limitations of comic display methods. Building upon the theoretical foundations of metacomics exhibiting, *Menstruation Envy* is a form of narrative exploration that bridges the gap between art and comics within the white cube gallery milieu. This piece is a direct engagement with the metacomics curation

approach, where the wall becomes a canvas, and I double as both creator and curator, manipulating the gallery space as one might arrange the panels of a comic book. In *Menstruation Envy*, the artwork becomes a character within a larger narrative that is acutely aware of its existence within the comic form and actively engages with its audience. Initially, I incorporate elements typical of comics, such as sequence and the combination of text and image, which guide the viewer through a story. The use of metanarrative is apparent, as the artwork reflects upon its creation and the wider realm of storytelling. This is accomplished by highlighting its structure; the images and captions are self-referential, with the text serving as commentary that accompanies the evolving depictions of the characters across the various panels. This approach is consistent with the definition of metacomics, which frequently disrupts the fourth wall to engage directly with the audience or to offer commentary on the nature of the content being presented. Such interaction introduces a dimension of self-reflection and encourages the viewer to contemplate the deeper implications of the scenarios portrayed, extending beyond their immediate appearance.

Through this self-aware commentary, *Menstruation Envy* invites viewers to ponder the construction of gendered experiences and the ways in which they are narrated and perceived in society. The practice becomes a dialogic space where the audience is encouraged to interrogate their own perceptions and the cultural narratives that shape them. Cook's analysis posits that comics have the capacity to employ their structural components to introspectively examine their own narrative methods. *Menstruation Envy* exemplifies the concept by using the comic form as a medium for both storytelling and a critical examination of the storytelling process itself. The symbolic character depicted serves as everyone, intentionally unspecified, to prompt a scenario exploring the question, if men could menstruate, what then could happen? For me, this question does not contain definitive answers; rather, the artwork represents an ongoing platform for dialogue and inquiry.

In *Menstruation Envy*, the use of the gutter moves beyond a mere structural separation between panels and becomes a performative space that shapes both narrative and meaning. While the work draws on the visual language of metacomics—embracing sequentiality, image-text interplay, and metanarrative reflection—it deliberately breaks from conventional comics grammar by rejecting standardised speech bubbles and rigid gutter intervals. This aligns with my discussion of the "gutterance" in chapter 5, which allows the gutter to function as an expressive site, not just a neutral blank.

A striking example appears in the first panel, where the ketchup bottle (fig.6-11), symbolising menstrual blood, is positioned high above the panel frame, suspended within the gutter space. This placement visually references the Chinese euphemism “天癸水至” (Tian Gui Shui Zhi), which I also explore in *Opus Magnum for a Girl*. By locating the ketchup in the gutter—visually “above” the narrative scene—it enacts the idea of blood arriving from the sky, while simultaneously satirising male misunderstandings of menstruation. The gesture draws attention to the periodicity of menstruation but critiques the cultural tendency to erase or trivialise women’s embodied experiences.



Figure 6-11

Meichen Lu, *Menstruation Envy*, 2022 Acrylic on the wall

Detailed

"Secret Heim"

Triangle space, Chelsea College of Arts

In line with the metacomics approach, the work self-consciously uses the wall as a performative surface, collapsing the boundary between panel, gutter, and gallery space. The ketchup in the gutter does not merely serve as decoration; it becomes part of the narrative infrastructure, interrupting the viewer's linear reading path and calling attention to the sociocultural layers embedded in the visual symbols. By doing so, *Menstruation Envy* turns the gutter into an active conceptual agent, one that extends meaning, disrupts normative comics syntax, and invites critical reflection on both form and content.

In the development of my comic panel, I have purposefully integrated Brandl's concept of iconosequentiality to bolster feminist narrative aspects of the piece. The integration of feminist activist art, particularly through the textual phrase "THE RED FLAG STANDUP" (fig.6-12), was a strategic choice aimed at evoking Judy Chicago's influential menstrual artwork, *Red Flag* (1971). This reference extends beyond mere aesthetics, representing a deliberate connection to the substantial heritage of feminist artists who have confronted menstrual taboos. Such alignment with the critical discourse of *Menstruation Envy* has added considerable depth to the narrative of my work.



Figure 6-12

Meichen Lu, *Menstruation Envy*, 2022

panel 4

Acrylic on the wall

"*Secret Heim*", Triangle space, Chelsea College of Arts

Regarding iconosequentiality, the comic panels offer a dual reading experience: as a cohesive image and as a sequence of interconnected parts (Brandl 2013). The collective imagery communicates a theme centred around *Menstruation Envy*, underpinned by both the textual narrative and visual references to feminist artistry. As readers progress through the individual panels, they are drawn into the narrative development, encountering various visual elements that underscore the overarching theme. The employment of iconic imagery, for instance, the allusions to "Red Flag", acts as an efficient medium for conveying complex ideas and emotions. Thereby,

Menstruation Envy links the viewer to a wider feminist and cultural discourses through a phenomenological experience of the comic medium.

In essence, while the metacomics curation strategy pertains to how comic artworks are displayed and the narrative experience they provide within an exhibition context, iconosequentiality relates to the intrinsic properties of comic artwork and how viewers visually and narratively process it. Both approaches offer a means to elevate the comic form beyond traditional expectations but from distinct vantage points—one from the perspective of exhibition design and the other from the art form's composition and viewer interaction. The employment of these two concepts mirrors the aspirations of *Menstruation Envy* to move beyond traditional comic formats.

Pennina Barnett (1995, p.76–85) underscores the most effective strategies for feminists in curatorship and criticism that actively challenge and destabilise traditional patriarchal frameworks. The essence of Barnett's argument is encapsulated in her reference to Janet Wolff's “deconstructive or destabilising strategies”, which aims to “create space for women – not merely within the singular fixed category of ‘woman’ – to articulate their diverse experience” (Barnett 1995, p.80). It means we need to acknowledge the lived experiences of real women. In creating *Menstruation Envy*, these theories are put into practice. Initially, its contents subvert traditional gender roles by imagining a world where men experience menstruation, challenging the societal perceptions and values that are typically associated with this female process. In the context of metacomics, the creating and curating process becomes an activist gesture. As co-curator assuming the multiple roles of woman and creator, I craft a wall-based comic within the gallery space. The artworks displayed perform a dual function: they serve as both narrative content and characters within the overarching meta-narrative. This method establishes a multi-layered critique—comic as an art practice addressing the theme of menstruation—hereby challenging the ideological confines traditionally imposed by male-centric perspectives in the art world.

Theoretically, the exploration of menstruation and womb envy develops the psychosociocultural dynamics of gender relations. This theoretical framework critically analyses how societal constructs influence perceptions of gender, reproduction, and power. It uncovers the underlying dynamics of envy and control that shape societal attitudes towards female reproductive capabilities. This theoretical understanding provides a critical lens through which to view and interpret gender relations and their manifestation in societal attitudes and practices.

Practically, *Menstruation Envy* manifests this theoretical exploration within the realms of comics and feminist activism, particularly in the context of museums and galleries. This fusion of domains perpetuates the vital effort to challenge and dismantle menstrual taboos and stereotypes, fostering significant dialogues around the rejection of menstrual stigma. The innovative method of drawing directly onto gallery walls in a metacomics curation approach reinforces the artwork's dedication to feminist ideology. It integrates comic aesthetics into the broader tradition of fine art. Therefore, the theory underpinning *Menstruation Envy* and its practical manifestation in *Menstruation Envy* are intrinsically linked. The work represents a form of feminist comics activism and cultural reclamation, leveraging gallery spaces to challenge and reframe traditional narratives and perceptions.

6.3 The performative drawing act

The performative drawing act is the vital way I interact with my audience. As part of developing an autobiographical narrative sequence, the recording, drawing, and writing generated in the gallery space incorporates audience responses and attitudes to the display of female genitalia. It first emerged on 30th April 2021, inspired by my experiences when I was drawing *Horror of The Little Dickhead* on the wall at LCC. It was inspired by John Miers' article *Event review of 'Markings: Festival of Illustration and Performance' at Central St Martins, 8th - 9th July 2016*, which focused on a festival that highlighted the role of depictive and narrative art forms in performance. Miers discusses the importance of depictive seeing in generating and communicating knowledge, exploring the embodied and performative aspects of drawing (2017, p.68-83). Miers provides several images, which captures a series of drawings and texts, and can be analysed through the lens of performative act theory in drawing, as discussed by scholars like Birgitta Hosea (2010) and James Faure Walker (2014). Miers posits that drawing can be conceptualised as a performative act, a physical record of the artist's engagement in the creative process (2017, p.68). Additionally, contemporary drawing extends into an 'expanded field', which encompasses a wider scope of practices and challenges our traditional understanding of drawing as a discipline (Walker 2014; Miers 2017).

In my practice, the act of performative drawing initially addresses feminist body politics, focusing on the battle against the objectification of the female body. Additionally, my approach highlights the role of the practitioner as an observer. My methodology is different to the frameworks proposed by Miers where “conceptualising illustrative drawing as performance highlights its operation as an expression of embodied knowledge” (2017, p.70). Instead, I aim to explore the concept or action of the gaze through my habitual body behaviours. In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre suggests that the awareness of being observed by another causes a person to also see themselves as an object in the observer's world

(1943, p.252). Integrating Sartre's discussion of the gaze (the look) offers a complex examination of how individuals perceive themselves in relation to others. This realisation fundamentally shifts their experience of self and their surroundings. Through performative drawing, I aim to accentuate women's agency and use it as a means to elicit audience reactions, which in turn aids in my own self-reflection and development.

This focus transforms a straightforward artistic demonstration into a more reflective and interactive experience. While I draw or create art in a public setting, my primary objective extends beyond the mere presentation of the work. It involves actively observing and analysing how viewers interact with and respond to feminist art discourses, especially regarding themes and symbolism that may be misinterpreted or viewed differently by audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds.



Figure 6-12

Meichen Lu, *The performative drawing act*
28012023

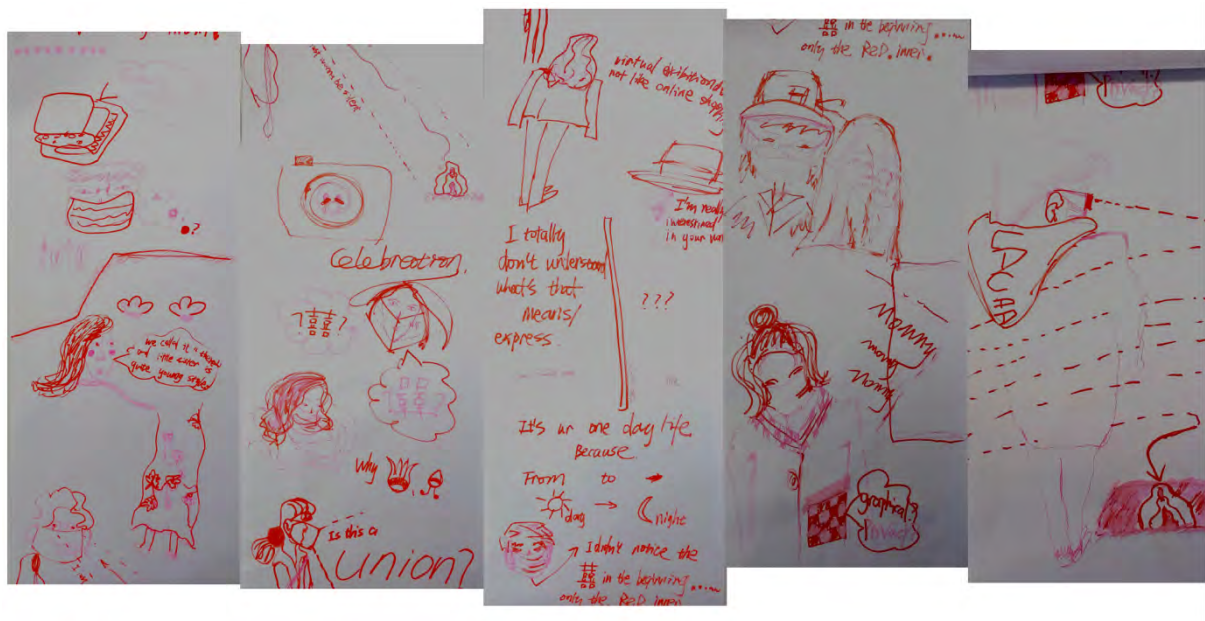
Size variable

Exhibition “An Intimate Process of Strangeness”

Location: 34 Grove Park Road,
SE94QA

The Scroll (2021–2023) (fig.6-12) emerged as the documentation of a performative drawing act that extended over 20 metres in length. Created across multiple public settings—including the anchor group show, the Lucky Pot Art Community group show, the *Secret Heim* exhibition, and the *An Intimate Process of Strangeness* show, etc, the work evolved into a multilayered record of interaction, reflection, and artistic

In my practice, the scroll acts as both a medium and a symbolic meaning: it embodies temporality, individuality, vulnerability, and narrative unfolding, while simultaneously signalling an intentional engagement with feminist art history. Unlike a static gallery piece, the scroll functions as a living document of artistic process and social encounter. The presence of audience reactions—captured as both text and drawing on the scroll—further dissolves the boundary between artist and viewer, turning the work into a live site of negotiation around feminist meaning-making.



Exhibition: "Anchor" Arthill gallery, London W14 9NU

The Scroll (2021–2023) functions as an evolving autobiographical and phenomenological document, unfolding across different exhibition contexts and capturing transient personal and social moments. For example, in the section dated 01/05/2021 (fig.6-13), the scroll visually connects to symbols used in *Opus Magnum of a Girl*, such as the 囍 (double happiness) character, lotus, and pinecone motifs—elements that are culturally and personally charged within my symbolic vocabulary. In each site-specific presentation, the scroll records audience reactions, my self-reflections and immediate sensory impressions, thereby transforming the act of drawing into a live, situated inquiry.

Sections such as those from 08/02/2022 document my reflections on the *Secret Heim* exhibition (fig.6-14), including an unexpected encounter with a former partner, adding layers of intimate narration. The drawings—ranging from wireframe vulva-rose forms to portraits of visitors or everyday objects like shoes and flowers—are interspersed with handwritten English and Chinese texts that shift between diaristic confession and spontaneous commentary. The use of red and pink markers, colours historically associated with femininity and often burdened with connotations of passivity or softness, is deliberately reconfigured in my work. Rather than reinforcing stereotypes, I mobilise these colours as active and vibrant agents, aligned with the energetic tone of the drawings and the assertive use of symbols. Much like my use of household materials in *Familias Fantasy*, the deployment of traditionally feminine elements here is not an acceptance of passivity, but a conscious and self-empowered artistic choice.

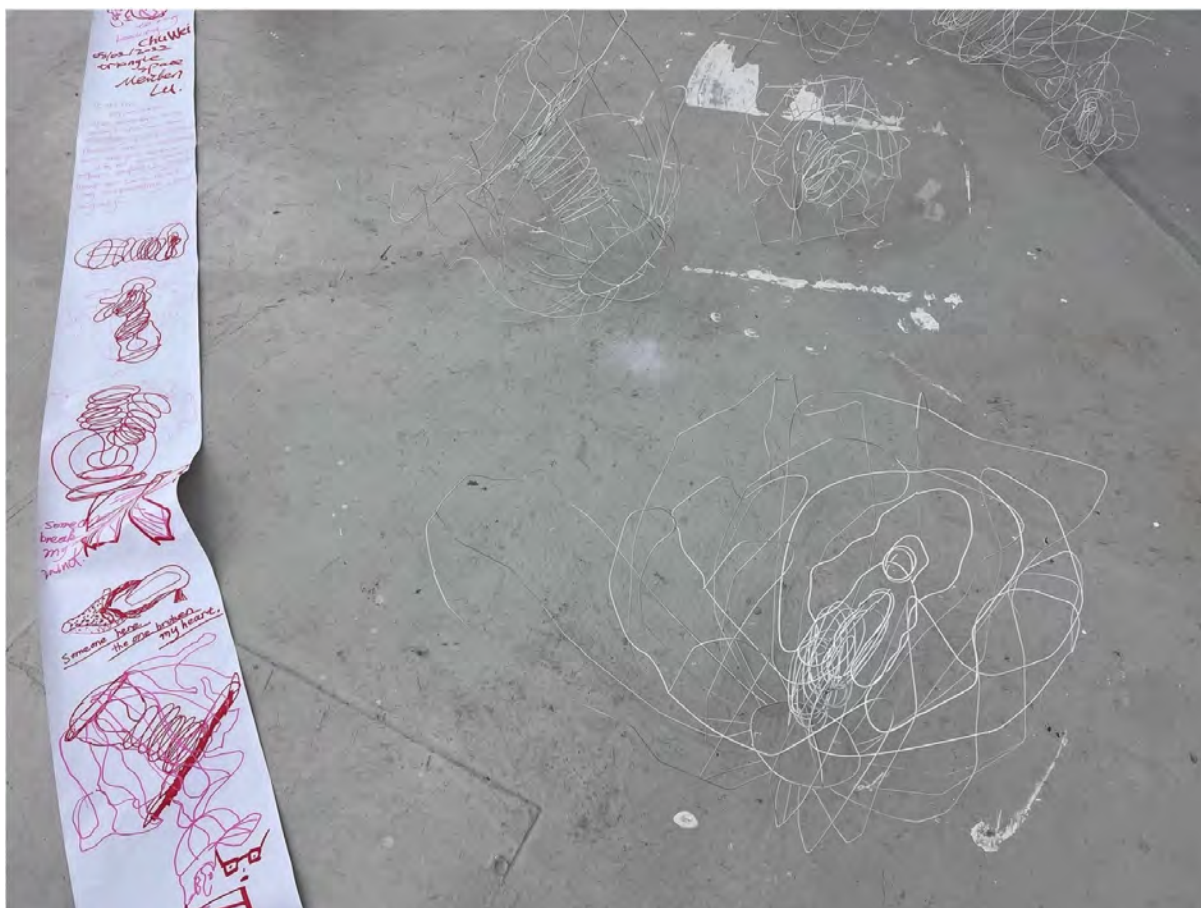


Figure 6-14

Meichen Lu, *The Scroll*, 2021-2023

Lihong Liu, Meichen Lu, *Enclosed Heim*, 2022

"Secret Heim"

Triangle space, Chelsea College of Arts

Materially, the scroll's performative nature invites both embodied and imaginative engagement. The serpentine unfolding references the feminine, the body, and the cyclical, while also inviting the audience into a shared space of interpretation. This practice foregrounds the scroll both as an artwork and a method of relational encounter, self-reflection, and the continuous negotiation of meaning between artist, audience, and space. In my exploration of performative drawing art, I find that making eye contact with the audience is the sole method through which I establish a direct connection with them. This aspect of my practice resonates with Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the gaze, or "the look", which focus on the transformative impact of realising that others are observing one (1943, p.252-302). When Sartre argued that

one “cannot be an object for an object”, he highlighted the special status of human beings as subjects rather than objects (ibid, p.253). A subject is a conscious, perceiving entity, while an object exists independently of consciousness and can be perceived or acted upon (Sartre, 1943). In Sartre's view, human beings are fundamentally subjects because they possess consciousness and the ability to perceive the world around them.

Sartre further exemplifies the complex essences of how individuals perceive themselves in relation to others. He elucidated the notion of the Other as a relative existence, which “cannot under any circumstances aim at a solitary, extra-mundane consciousness”; thus, “‘Being-seen-by-the-Other’ in the truth of “seeing-the-Other” (ibid, p.253). That means when another person's gaze is directed at us, we become aware of ourselves in a way similar to how we are aware of inanimate objects in our environment. This awareness does not mean that we literally become inanimate objects; instead, it means that we become conscious of ourselves as objects in the other person's subjective world. This is a significant shift because, as subjects, we are accustomed to perceiving the world from our perspective, not being perceived as part of someone else's world.

Sartrean exploration of "the look" reveals a vital aspect of the human experience: the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity. Accordingly, we are subjects who perceive and make sense of the world, but we can also become objects of others' perceptions. This dual role challenges our understanding of ourselves and underscores the complexity of human interaction. The awareness that we can be seen and objectified by others introduces a fundamental ambiguity in our existence – we are subjects, yet we can also be perceived as objects, which can lead to feelings of vulnerability, self-consciousness, and alienation.

This theory can be applied to understand the dynamics between the artist and the audience in the context of performative drawing acts. During my drawing, the

physical distance between myself and the audience inadvertently created a dynamic of observation and awareness. For a certain purpose, I confirm my gaze as intentionally, instead of secretly, observing. As I engaged in eye contact with the audience, we entered the realm of the look. The audiences, initially absorbed in viewing the artwork and my actions, become aware of being watched, transitioning from subjective beings to objectivation in my universe. This mutual awareness, created through the gaze, set the stage for a unique form of interaction. As mentioned in the practice overview section, some audiences responded fearlessly to my gaze, maintaining prolonged eye contact, a silent form of communication. Conversely, those who avoided my gaze perhaps experienced the alienation and self-consciousness that Sartre described, feeling objectified or uncomfortable under scrutiny.

I realised the interaction demonstrates the power of the gaze as a tool in performance drawing art. It highlights my role in observing and being observed, self and the other, further revealing the dynamic relationship between me and the audience. By utilising the gaze, I transformed the passive act of observation into an active and reflective engagement, fostering a deeper interaction with the audience and prompting them to consider their role and presence within the gallery milieus.

The changeable nature of my performative drawing acts has been instrumental in developing my practice, particularly in practically engaging feminist thinking. This evolution has reshaped my interaction with viewers and guided my thematic focus towards a deeper exploration of the male gaze. In January 2023, when I participated in *An Intimate Process of Strangeness* (2023), at Lucky Pot art community, London, I turned the performative drawing acts to an emphasis on observing and drawing male genitalia based on my own fantasy (fig.6-15). The diverse reactions of the audience propelled me to focus on the implications of gaze and objectification, particularly when it comes to depictions of the imagined male genitalia. By directing my gaze towards male audience members, I flipped the script on traditional power dynamics

associated with the male gaze, placing the male form under scrutiny and artistic exploration.



Figure 6-15

Meichen Lu, *The performative drawing act*, 28012023

Exhibition "An Intimate Process of Strangeness"

Location: 34 Grove Park Road, SE94QA

Adopting the Sartrean gaze theory to my dynamic relationship with audiences while combining it with definitions of the male gaze, highlights how visual representation can be a form of control and how the act of observing can become an act of imposing identity and value upon the observed.

I vividly recall being asked about the role men play in my research. On the one hand, men, particularly those I have interacted with, have been instrumental in helping me understand male-female relationships and in my journey towards self-discovery. Therefore, I cannot deny men's significant role in my research.

On the other hand, male audiences have never been a primary focus or consideration in my study. I am not interested in what men think, how they view my work, or whether my work has a positive or negative impact on them. Fundamentally, my research on female themes aims to encourage more direct and bolder self-expression among women through my detailed study of myself as a woman. The process of conducting my research and depicting my lived experiences as a woman acts as a direct challenge to the social norms of a patriarchal society.

Likewise, shifting the focus of observation in performative drawing acts to male audiences is not intended to seek their feedback for reflection. I have never deliberately focused on the responses of male audiences to my work. Instead, in exhibition spaces, I, as the proactive observer, employ an assertive approach to gaze at male audiences, effectively reducing them to mere genitalia.

This raises another intriguing issue: the dynamics of gender power can lead to entirely different outcomes depending on who initiates the action. It implies that as a woman when I subject men to a sexual gaze, the objectified men may not feel violated; instead, they might enjoy it as a sexual advance from the woman. This is

because, in a patriarchal society, women have been eternally defined as the other. In such a context, the existence of the self and the other is not equivalent; the self belongs to the absolute male authority. Therefore, even if two sexes experience the same event of sexual gazing, men may not have the same experience as women due to deep-rooted gender inequality and societal conditioning.

Such an approach allows me to gather real-time feedback and insights, which are instrumental in deepening my understanding of how my work is perceived and interpreted. This, in turn, influences my ongoing artistic exploration and aids in shaping future outcomes, responding to the core aspect of reflective practice. This method also underscores the importance of focusing on audience engagement and reaction; the performative drawing act becomes a dynamic process where the act of creation and the responses are equally significant.

In summarising my journey with the performative drawing act, I recognise it as a reflectively changeable art process that defies simple definition or categorisation. This form of artistic expression and process is not static; it evolves and transforms, reflecting the shifts in my understanding and perspective as a practitioner. As I process in my practice, I anticipate that the performative drawing act will continue to change, taking on new forms and meanings. This continuous development is a feature of my artistic journey and a core aspect of my changeable female body. It embodies the idea that art, especially when intertwined with complex themes like feminism, gender and societal power, is a constantly evolving dialogue, one that challenges, reflects, and potentially reshapes both the creator and the audience's perceptions.

6.3.1 *The Scroll*, 2021-2023

The act of drawing, inherently performative, invited onlookers into a shared space of observation and reflection, establishing a dialogue mediated by the gaze, a concept explored within Sartre's existential framework. This gaze I explained in previous the performative drawing act section, which transforms both seer and seen, set the stage for the ensuing section, *The Scroll* (2021-2023) (fig.6-16).



Figure 6-16

Meichen Lu, *The Performative Drawing Act*, 28012023

Exhibition: "An Intimate Process of Strangeness"

Location: 34 Grove Park Road, SE94QA

As we transition to *The Scroll* (2021-23) it is crucial to view this artefact not merely as a static record but as a living narrative that extends the dialogue initiated by the

performative acts. Encapsulating the essence of these interactions, the scroll unfolds as a chronological tapestry, rich with the documented responses that emerged from the performative encounters. Here, the audience's presence is perpetuated through the visual and textual elements, resonating with the immediacy of the performance yet grounded in the enduring fabric of recorded history.

The Scroll functions as a chronological record, detailing the evolution of my Performative Drawing Acts across five distinct exhibitions that have marked critical stages of my PhD journey. *The Scroll* captures the public expression of my drawing practice, charting a trajectory of both artistic and personal inquiry and engagement from one exhibition to the next. The sequence commenced with the inaugural act on May 2, 2021, at the *Anchor* Exhibition in Arthill Gallery. Following this, in February 2022, I performed at the *Secret Heim* Exhibition at the Triangle Space of the Chelsea College of Art. The third recorded event on the scroll took place at *All Sorts of Ephemera* at Hive Holborn in August 2021. Moving into the year 2023, the fourth act was presented at the *An Intimate Process of Strangeness* exhibition, conducted by the Lucky Pot Art Community in London. The culmination of these documented performances was at *Unfolding Narrative 3*, the Ph.D. exhibition of the University of the Arts London, which was displayed at Well Gallery in April 2023. Each event in this sequence has contributed to the scroll's narrative, encapsulating a distinct phase of integrating drawing and performance, which forms an approach of personal expression, storytelling, and autobiographical records.

In a typical gallery setting, *The Scroll* is presented in a manner that enables direct visual access to its content, allowing the audience to peruse the work on the paper substrate. *The Scroll* in question is a tangible entity, which, upon completion of my artistic process, is available for visitors to manually navigate through within the museum space. However, for the purposes of this thesis discussion, the scroll is represented through a video⁴¹. In the 4-minute video I am situated in a domestic

⁴¹ Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRDVKDRmgpU>

setting, standing behind a makeshift screen fashioned from a white bedsheet. *The Scroll* is positioned upon this white backdrop, and over the course of the video, I gradually draw out the scroll, revealing the entirety of its content from start to finish.

The Scroll, (2021-2023) represents a creative journey encapsulated within a 20-meter-long drawing, covering my two-year experience with performative drawing acts. It employs both visual and textual elements to document and articulate responses to various exhibitions over the period.

To contextualise this work, I will start by referring to an autobiographical monologue by the artist Sophie Calle from her work *Take Care of Yourself* (2007),

I received an email telling me it was over.
I didn't know how to respond.
It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me.
It ended with the words, "Take care of yourself".
And so, I did.

(Sophie Calle 2007, p.1)

The project was initiated by Calle in reaction to receiving a breakup email from her former lover, G, which concluded with the phrase "Take care of yourself". This particular phrase, marking the end of their relationship, prompted Calle to undertake a unique artistic attempt. Calle engaged 107 women from various professional backgrounds to interpret the breakup letter, thus transforming her personal experience into a broader exploration of interpretation, emotion, from a female perspective (Neri 2009). Psychologist Darian Leader discusses Calle's oeuvre engages with the fundamental psychological concepts of mourning and melancholia, positioning her art within a broader dialogue on the universal aspects of human experience (2008, p.88-91). He acknowledges that this is simply a connection to the idea or possibility of the universal rather than advocating the universal as truth. Art, Leader argues, does not expect the viewer to experience the same emotion that is being displayed, rather the work expresses something that the viewer is unable to express (2008, p.88). Calle's intention, in articulating her rationale for collaborating

with other women in the creation of *Take Care of Yourself*, as she states, was to "play with the dryness of professional vocabulary" (Neri 2009). She further articulates that "I didn't want the women expressing sentiment for me" (ibid).

Calle's approach is marked by her adept manipulation of chance and the establishment of specific rules that govern the unfolding of her projects. This methodological framework, while giving an appearance of relinquishing control, paradoxically allows Calle to maintain a firm grip on the narrative structure. As Leader puts it "the dialogue of mourning has not pushed Calle, for example, into an identification with her interlocuters, but allowed her to process and work through her own pain and distress" (2008, p.91). Calle's rules act as a mechanism for exerting control over the narrative and direction of her projects, yet they also create a space for unpredictability and release from personal bias (Thorn 2010). This duality allows her to explore the boundaries between the artist's intent and the autonomy of the project's subjects, highlighting the fluid and constructed nature of identity and experiences.

Although Sophie Calle's practice is not generally autobiographical, her project *Take Care of Yourself* (2007) profoundly resonated with me on a personal level. In the weeks leading up to my exhibition *Secret Heim*, I was processing a breakup of my own. The final text message of my former partner—"向着明日和朝阳，未来的你要更好，好好照顾自己" ("Toward tomorrow and the morning sun, I wish you the best future—take care")—echoed the phrase that prompted Calle's entire project. This unexpected parallel struck me deeply, not only in terms of content but in the way personal loss can be publicly reframed through artistic practice. While Calle delegated the act of emotional processing to over a hundred professional women who interpreted her breakup letter, I turned inward. My way of responding was to draw—visibly, vulnerably, and in real time—on *The Scroll*. One particularly fragile moment was recorded after I had coffee with the same partner, who unexpectedly visited the gallery (fig.6-17). I returned alone, emotionally unsettled, and chose to

depict the encounter using red acrylic pen, annotating the drawing with fragmented thoughts in English and Chinese. Whereas Calle's process invited participation and distanced her from the emotional core of the event, mine rested on exposure: the act of drawing became a quiet confrontation with intimacy in a public milieu. Both practices invite others in, though our methods differ—hers through formalised collaboration, mine through open visibility.

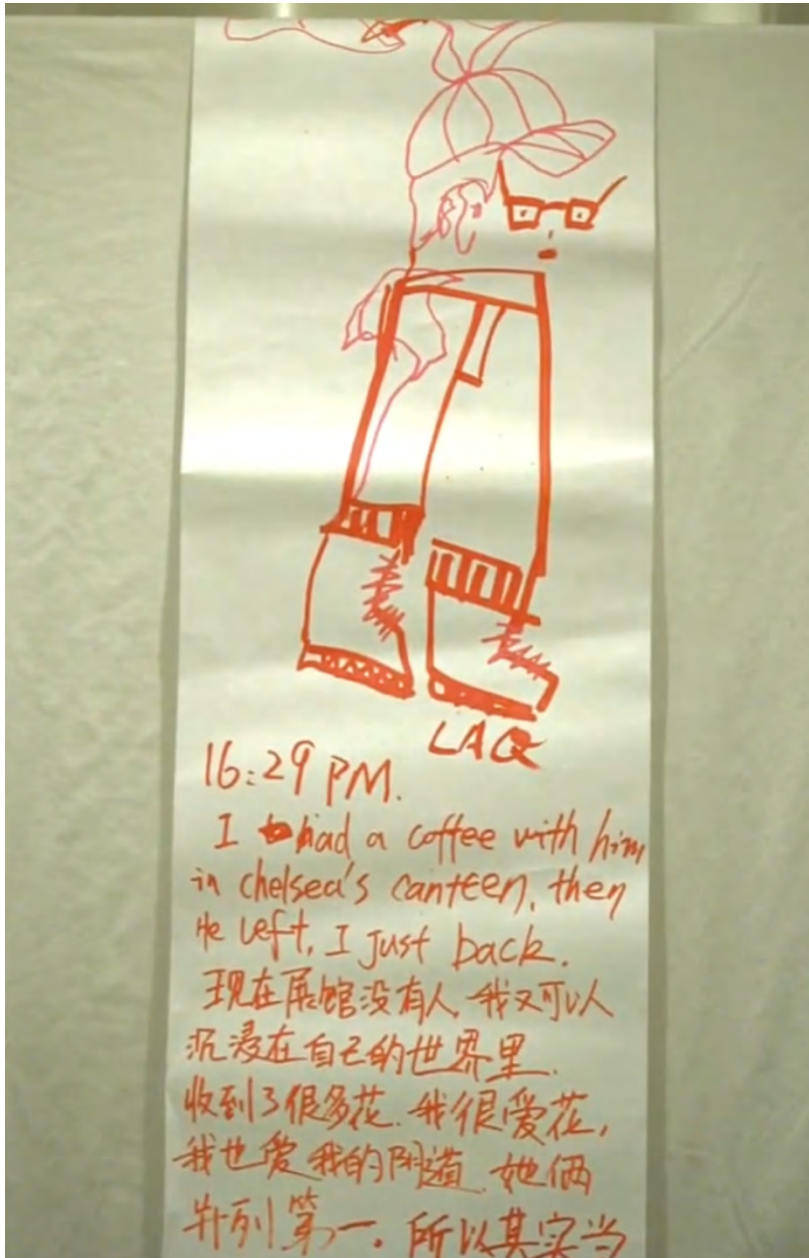


Figure 6-17

Still from *The Scroll*, (2021-2023), screenshot taken at 2:15, YouTube video by Meichen Lu, published March 2023.

What makes Calle's method of self-documentation distinctive is her use of delegated interpretation: rather than narrating her own emotions directly, she invites professionals from various disciplines to

analyse her breakup letter, thereby transforming private experience into collective reflection. While Calle's approach may not constitute self-documentation in the conventional sense of first-person narration, it nevertheless orchestrates a deeply

personal process through curated delegation. In this sense, *Take Care of Yourself* represents an expanded mode of autobiographical expression, where subjectivity is not erased but redistributed.

As Leigh Gilmore argues in *The Limits of Autobiography*, self-narration need not conform to traditional models of first-person confession. Instead, autobiographical expression may be dispersed, mediated, and shaped by discursive structures that extend beyond the individual voice (Gilmore, 1994, pp. 25–27). Calle's approach exemplifies this expanded model: by inviting others to interpret her breakup letter, she curates a process of distributed authorship in which personal experience is refracted through a multitude of perspectives. While this may appear to distance the artist from her emotional content, it instead repositions the self as a subject constructed through relational and textual acts. In this sense, *Take Care of Yourself* operates within what Gilmore describes as a polyphonic and culturally embedded form of autobiographical practice—one that challenges conventional truth-regimes and resituates agency within the act of framing rather than confession.

In contrast to Calle's model of distributed authorship, *The Scroll* positions the artist—myself—as both the subject and the agent of narration. Rather than delegating interpretation to external voices, I record emotional states directly through image and text, often in real time. This immediacy results in a form of self-documentation that is less mediated but no less constructed. Phrases such as "Someone broke my mind" and "the one who broke my heart" are direct, emotionally charged expressions that mark moments of personal crisis (see Figure 6-17). These annotations, alongside the accompanying drawings—a pair of high heels I was wearing, a male figure I encountered—frame *The Scroll* as a space where intimate emotional states are recorded and visually rendered. The sketches are not merely illustrations; they serve as material traces of psychological states, rendered in coloured acrylic pens—primarily pink, red, and black—chosen intentionally for their symbolic and emotional resonance. Varying line thickness and colour allow me to differentiate between emotional tones, character traits, and narrative emphasis. While Calle orchestrates

distance by multiplying interpretive lenses, I choose exposure: my subjectivity is rendered not through abstraction or displacement, but through the intimacy of presence. Through this interplay of word and image, *The Scroll* becomes a lived document where everyday encounters, memory, and introspection converge within an evolving visual language.

Applying phenomenological ideas to the concept of breakup, the focus shifts from seeking a definitive explanation of what a breakup is to exploring how it is experienced—how its affective and bodily traces unfold in real time. As shown previously, my engagement with this theme is captured in *The Scroll*, where the unexpected presence of an ex-partner during a performative drawing act prompted an immediate, embodied reflection. This moment was not analysed retrospectively, but rather lived, felt, and marked visually on the page.

While Leigh Gilmore (1994) rightly challenges the authority of the first-person voice in conventional autobiography—arguing that subjectivity is constructed through discourses of truth and legitimacy—this does not negate the validity of first-person expression. In my case, working within an expanded mode of autobiographical expression, the use of subjective voice and embodied presence is not a claim to objective truth, but an exploration of lived experience as it unfolds phenomenologically. The phenomenological focus on perception, temporality, and affect complements rather than contradicts Gilmore’s framework: if, as she writes, “autobiography is not the narrative of a life, but a genre through which discourses of truth, identity, and legitimacy are negotiated” (Gilmore, 1994, p. 25), then my drawing-based responses are precisely situated within that negotiation. By documenting feeling as form, thought as trace, and presence as process, my practice does not retreat into a confessional mode but actively constructs subjectivity through visual, material, and durational means.

This exploration is grounded in the philosophy that life's inherent uncertainty mirrors the unpredictable nature of human experiences. My artistic practice, particularly through performative drawing in public spaces, serves as a conduit for examining these spontaneous, unforeseeable moments that punctuate our existence. In this context, *The Scroll* transcends its role as a mere visual record, evolving into a medium for real-time documentation of life's unpredictability, essentially embodying life itself.

The significance of this approach lies in its ability to not only showcase the uncertainties within the artistic creation process but also to unveil the variety of human responses and coping mechanisms when confronted with the unknown. Here, art and life are inextricably linked, influencing each other and revealing a deeper truth: in the face of uncertainty, our choices and responses shape our reality.

My work, resonating with Calle's *Take Care of Yourself*, engages themes of vulnerability, reflection, and the processing of personal experiences within artistic practice. By incorporating a performative drawing act and documenting audience reactions, my practice embodies an interdisciplinary approach that bridges visual and performance art, women's lived experiences, psychology and feminist theory. This multifaceted method enriches the exploration of female agency, offering diverse insights into the ways art interacts with and reflects societal attitudes, personal perceptions, and cultural dynamics.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

As outlined in the Introduction, this research set out to investigate the following question:

How does the integration of feminist autobiographical graphic narratives into gallery milieux, informed by phenomenological inquiry, challenge and transform the representation and perception of female genitalia within the context of the visual arts?

The research aimed to: (1) analyse the symbolic representation of female genitalia in graphic narratives and feminist art; (2) develop an autobiographical practice centring vulva figure to explore women's lived experiences; and (3) utilise gallery-based portrayals of female genitalia to disrupt conventional gendered power dynamics through a phenomenological framework.

Over the course of this doctoral journey, my research evolved through a dynamic interplay of theory and practice. Theoretically, my study critically engaged with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, interrogating its cross-cultural translations and the socio-cultural impacts of rendering feminist philosophy into Chinese. This highlighted how core phenomenological insights can be compromised or distorted, deepening the understanding of feminist theory's transfer across contexts. My exploration of phenomenology—drawing from Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Beauvoir—clarified the centrality of the lived body in the constitution of female subjectivity, a principle that became foundational to my creative inquiry.

The research further integrated psychoanalytic critiques, especially of Freud's phallogocentric models, to challenge reductive understandings of female sexuality. This enriched my methodological stance, which is rooted in autobiographical feminist inquiry. Through this, I was able to interrogate gender inequalities and offer a layered, reflexive response to questions of representation, identity, and embodiment.

Practically, my research established a symbol matrix that compiles international representations of femininity, incorporating these symbols into vulva figures to articulate agency and subjective presence. By situating this work within gallery contexts, I aimed not only to subvert visual conventions but also to enhance the phenomenological encounter—inviting viewers to engage bodily and affectively with the artworks.

Materiality emerged as a vital axis of exploration. Guided by phenomenology, my use of clay, textiles, collage, and sculptural painting was never incidental but emerged from an embodied, intuitive response to the themes at hand. This was shaped by Luce Irigaray's emphasis on fluidity and sexual difference, underscoring how material processes can reflect and resist patriarchal visual regimes. For instance, in *Familia Fantasy* (2022–2023), working with clay allowed me to extend vulva representations into tactile, three-dimensional forms, challenging flat depictions of the female body and demanding shared spatial engagement from the viewer.

Reflecting on the methodological journey, I recognise how integrating comics aesthetics, performance, and installation within feminist visual practice fostered new intersections between autobiographical narrative and social critique. The use of metacomics and wall-based comic installations (e.g., *Menstruation Envy*, 2022) challenged traditional museum hierarchies and reasserted comics as a powerful tool for feminist activism. This not only repositions comics as a serious medium in

contemporary art discourse but also expands their potential for phenomenological engagement within gallery settings.

The Performative Drawing Act within my research project remains a compelling yet unfinished aspect. This act serves as the primary interface for interaction with the audience, elaborately weaving the personal narrative with collective response, especially in relation to the perceptions of female genitalia.

Although the act has significantly developed my research, it remains an open-ended inquiry. the nature of performative act as fluid and responsive, not confined to a definitive conclusion but rather an ongoing conversation with the audience and me. The performative acts surpass mere creativity, functioning as a trigger for self-reflection and social critique. Similarly, *The Scroll* captures these instances, providing a visual and textual record of this ongoing conversation. As the audience's gaze intersects with my own, the exchange transcends traditional art-viewing experiences, engaging in a shared exploration of identity, objectivity, and subjectivity. This interplay captures the essence of Sartre's existential gaze, transforming participants and precipitating a deeper reflection on the societal structures that inform our interactions.

Through this research, several key insights have emerged:

- First, integrating phenomenology into autobiographical feminist art foregrounds the lived, embodied nature of female subjectivity, challenging static and objectified portrayals of female genitalia.
- Second, materiality—when approached as an extension of embodied experience—becomes a critical site for negotiating identity and power, offering rich terrain for feminist resistance and reclamation.

-
- Third, comics traditionally marginalised in fine art contexts, can powerfully disrupt entrenched gendered narratives, particularly when adapted to gallery settings in ways that emphasise both narrative complexity and embodied presence.

In addressing the research question, my work demonstrates that feminist autobiographical graphic narratives, when informed by phenomenological inquiry and embedded in gallery environments, do not merely represent female genitalia—they reconfigure the ways in which these forms are seen, understood, and engaged. By weaving together personal experience, cultural symbols, and theoretical critique, my practice generates a new visual discourse that reclaims and reimagines female sexuality and subjectivity.

This thesis contributes to the fields of feminist visual art, phenomenological theory, and comics studies by offering a model for integrating autobiographical narrative, material exploration, and critical theory. It invites further research into the cross-cultural dimensions of feminist art, the evolving role of comics in contemporary practice, and the potentials of performative drawing as a mode of embodied feminist critique.

While this doctoral research marks a significant stage in my journey, it also opens new questions and paths for exploration—underscoring the iterative, unfinished nature of feminist inquiry itself.

7.1 Future Research Directions

In the next stages of my academic journey, I am drawn to distinct yet interconnected domains, each reflecting a facet of my exploration into womanhood and its broader socio-cultural implications. While my current research has centred on documenting and interpreting my own bodily experiences, I also seek to expand the scope towards a more participatory and interactive exploration that bridges personal, collective, and social dimensions.

One key direction is the continued development of the performative drawing act. In my earlier research, audience feedback was primarily integrated as a form of self-reflection, enriching my understanding of my own positionality within feminist discourse. However, in future research, I aim to explore methodologies that allow for a more direct engagement with and analysis of audience responses—particularly their reactions to representations of female genitalia. I am interested in identifying and developing artistic strategies that do not merely record passive observation but actively elicit and document the emotional, psychological, and cultural responses of participants. This shift is critical for deepening the inquiry into how representations of the vulva—and by extension, female sexuality—are perceived and internalised within different social and cultural contexts.

Another significant strand of my future research involves extending my participatory practice through workshops. In 2023, I hosted the “Down There: Vulva Fantasy” workshop, which engaged 12 participants in creating vulva figures using roses as symbolic guides, highlighted the potential of community-based art practice in challenging eroticised and taboo representations of female genitalia. This workshop demonstrated that when women are invited to engage creatively with their own

anatomy—free from societal shame or embarrassment—a powerful shift in perspective can occur, fostering self-recognition and empowerment.

Looking ahead, I plan to expand this workshop model to reach broader and more diverse female communities. My objective is to cultivate environments where women are encouraged not only to represent but also to critically reflect on their lived bodily experiences. I believe that real progress in addressing women's issues can only happen when individuals actively engage in self-reflection and direct confrontation of the realities of their own bodies. Through participatory methodologies, I hope to facilitate a collective reimagining of the vulva figure—transforming it from a site of objectification into a symbol of agency and autonomy.

Furthermore, I intend to refine the methodological framework of these workshops to include structured ways of gathering feedback and analysing participants' responses, ensuring that the research not only empowers but also generates valuable insights into contemporary perceptions of female genitalia. By embedding feminist theory into accessible creative practices, I aim to bridge the gap between academic research and lived experience, fostering spaces where art, theory, and personal narratives intersect.

In summary, my future research will continue to weave together phenomenological inquiry, feminist visual practice, and participatory engagement. By advancing methods that invite both personal introspection and collective dialogue, I seek to contribute to a deeper, more inclusive understanding of the complexities of female embodiment and identity—pushing the boundaries of feminist art practice and its potential for social transformation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abbot, L. (1986). Comic art: Characteristics and potentialities or a narrative medium. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 19(4), pp.155-176.
- Ades, D. (2014). *Hannah Höch*. London: Ridinghouse.
- Ault, I. (1976). Comic art and how to read it. *California Monthly*, Jan-Feb 13-14.
- Alleva, A. (2012). *Methods & Theories of Art History*. 2nd ed. London: Laurence King Publishing.
- Anoesh. (2018) *Doodle World*, Available at: <https://www.startingfromkorea.com/doodle-world> , [Accessed 22 October 2022].
- Aristotle, A. (BC431a) *De Anima, book III 7* [Online]: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.3.iii.html>, [Access: 12th September 2022].
- Artsy.net. 2020. *Loie Hollowell | Stacked Lingams (Blue, Pink) (December 26-2017) | Artsy*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/loie-hollowell-stacked-lingams-blue-pink>> [Accessed 19 May 2020].
- Arakistain, X. et al. (2018) *The art of feminism: Images that shaped the fight for Equality, 1857-2017*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Balsam, R.M. (2012) *Women's bodies in psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Bayne, E. (2011). Womb envy: *The cause of misogyny and even male achievement*, Women's Studies International Forum, 34(2), pp.151-160.
- Beauvoir, S. (1949). *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- . (1953). *The Second Sex*. Great British: Lowe Brydone. pp. 35, 40–41, 113, 114–115, 139, 142, 172, 190, 191, 273-672.
- . (1998). *Di Er Xing: Quan Yi Ben*. Beijing: Chinese Academy of Press and Publication.
- . (1948) *The ethics of Ambiguity*. translated from the French by Frechtman, B. N.Y: Citadel Press, A division of Lyle Stuart Inc.
- . (2014). *Di Er Xing: He Juan Ben*. Shanghai: Digital Lab, Shanghai Translation Publishing House.

-
- Baetens, J. (2011). Abstraction in comics. **SubStance** 40 (1), pp. 94-113.
- . (2011). From Black & White to Color and Back: What Does It Mean (not) to Use Color? **College Literature**, 38(3), pp.111-128.
- Bayfield, S. (2009). **Tomb of Rekhmire (TT100)**. [online] Egyptian Monuments. Available at: <<https://egyptsites.wordpress.com/2009/02/07/tomb-of-rekhmire-tt100/>> [Accessed 12 September 2022].
- Bardwick, J. (1995). **Danger in The Comfort Zone**. New York: Amacom, American Management Association.
- Barnett, P. (1995). Afterthoughts on curating 'The subversive stitch'. In: Deepwell, K. ed. **New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies**. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 76–85.
- Beaty, B. (2012) **Comics Versus Art**. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp.188-190.
- Bergoffen, D. (1997), **The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities**, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Betterton, R. (1985) 'How do women look? the female nude in the work of Suzanne Valadon', **Feminist Review**, (19), p. 3.
- Biro, M. (2009). **The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 75-83
- Bowcock, S. (2015). **Photography is the most important visual art**. [online] Redeye. Available at: <<https://www.redeye.org.uk/opinion/photography-most-important-visual-art>> [Accessed 22 July 2022].
- Bostanci, M. (2022). **Heartfield Political Photomontage "Blind and Deaf"**. [online] John Heartfield Exhibition. Available at: <<https://www.johnheartfield.com/John-Heartfield-Exhibition/about-john-heartfield-photomontages/heartfield-photomontage-dada-political/turkish-political-art-dada-fascist/political-photomontage-bostanci>> [Accessed 18 June 2022].
- Bois, Y.-A. (2000) Character study: Sophie Calle, **Artforum**. Available at: <https://www.artforum.com/features/character-study-sophie-calle-2-162375/> [Accessed: 08 March 2024].

Brooklyn Museum Official website. Accessed Jan 2013

Bramlett, F & Cook, R & Meskin A. (2017) *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, Routledge: New York, pp. 257-267.

Brown, H. (2016). ***Carpet Sweeper Tales by Julie Doucet Review***. [online] pastemagazine.com. Available at: <<https://www.pastemagazine.com/comics/carpet-sweeper-ales-by-julie-doucet-review/>> [Accessed 18 June 2022].

Bronstein, C. and Seulin, C. (2020). ***On Freud's "The Uncanny"***. 1st ed. Oxon: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1990) ***Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity***. New York and London: Routledge, p.179.

———. (1998) ***Imitation and Gender Subordination***. In Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, ed. *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, pp.119-136.

Carlin, J. and Wagstaff, S. (1983). ***The Comic art show: Cartoons in painting and popular culture***. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, pp. 10-16.

Calle, S (2007). ***Take Care of Yourself***, (trans.) Charles Renwarden, LeMéjan: Actes Sud, p. 7-38.

Calle, S. (2017). ***True Stories***. Arles: Actes Sud.

Calogero, R. (2012) Objectification theory, self-objectification, and body image. In: Cash, Thomas, ed. ***Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance***. Academic Press, pp. 574-580.

Cartwright, L. (1995) ***Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine s Visual Culture***. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Chen, J. (2011). ***Exploring the Application of Chinese Traditional Patterns in Modern Packaging Design*** (探索中国传统图案在现代包装设计中的应用), *Grand View of Art*, 1(1), pp. 89–90.

———. (2013). ***Evolution of Cloud Patterns and Their Application and Innovation in Fashion Design*** (云纹的演变及其在服装设计中的应用与创新), *Art and Design*, 7(3), pp. 103–107.

Chute, H. (2010) ***Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics***. New York: Columbia University Press, pp.20, 29-33, 46-47, 62-65.

-
- Chicago, J. (1979) ***The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage***. NY: Anchor Press, p.155.
- . (1982). ***Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist***. London: The Women's Press, pp.113, 135-136
- Childers, J. & Hentzi, G. (1978). ***The Columbia Dictionary of modern Literary and Cultural Criticism***. Columbia University Press.
- Cooper, P. (1995). ***Cubism***. London: Phaidon, p.14.
- Cormier, L. and Sharyn, J. (2010). ***The domesticated penis, how womanhood has shaped manhood***, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, pp. 1-10; pp. 54-72; p.86.
- Couperie, P. (1968). ***A history of the comic strip***. New York, N.Y.: Crown Publ, pp. 229-247.
- Creed, B. (1993) ***The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis***. LONDON: Routledge, pp.1-80; pp.105-160.
- Daniélou, A. (1995). ***The Phallus: Sacred Symbol of Male Creative Power***. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, pp. 13-15.
- Daly, M. (1973) ***Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation***. Boston Mass: Beacon Press.
- Diels, N. (2014). ***Art and the Uncanny: Tapping the Potential***. Leonardo Music Journal, [online] 24(40), pp.75-77. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43832717>> [Accessed 18 September 2021].
- Doucet, J. (1992). ***Dirty Plotte 2***. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.
- . (1993). ***Dirty Plotte 6***. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.
- . (1993). ***Dirty Plotte 7***. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.
- . (1993). ***Lève ta jambe mon poisson est mort! (Lift Your Leg, My Fish is Dead!)*** Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.
- . (1994). ***Dirty Plotte 8***. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.
- . (1995). ***My Most Secret Desire***. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.

———. (1997). **Schnitte**. Berlin: Reprodukt.

———. (1999). **My New York Diary**. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.

———. (2007). **365 Days**. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.

Duffy, D. (2009, a) Learning from Comics on the Wall: Sequential art narrative design in museology and multimodal education. **Visual art research**, 35(1), pp.1-11.

———. (2009, b) Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context, **Journal of Media Arts Culture**, pp.278-280. In book: Munson, K. (2020). *Comic art in museums*. Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, pp.275-287.

Eberly, J. (1996) The "Arabic" Parts of the Original Rosicrucian Documents. Caduceus. **The Hermetic Quarterly**, (2)2, Seattle, Summer, pp. 16-32.

Eberly, J (1996). **Rosicrucian Essays**. Anamnesis Press

Eberly, J. (2000). **Commentary: Dat Rosa Mel Apibus**. [online] Esoteric.msu.edu. Available at: <<http://esoteric.msu.edu/Eberly/CommentaryDR.htm>> [Accessed 22 July 2022].

Elger, D. (2004). **Dadaism**. Los Angeles: Taschen, p.42.

Ellis, H. (1928) **Studies in The Psychology of Sex, Volume VII**. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, pp.121-203

Eliade, M. (1958) **Patterns in Comparative Religion**. London: Sheed and Ward.

Ensler, E. (1998). **The Vagina Monologues**. New York, NY: Random House Audible. pp. 3-7; 15-21; 38-54.

Eisner, W. (2008). **Comics and sequential art: Principles and practices**. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, pp.38-45.

Frayling, C. (1993). **Research in Art and Design**. RCA Research Papers, 1(1).

Fredrickson, B and Roberts, T. (1997) **Objectification Thoery: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks**. Psychology of Women Quarterly: pp.173-206.

Freud, S. (1962) **Three essays on the theory of sexuality**. New York: Basic Books, Inc., p.61.

———. (2003). **The uncanny**. London: penguin.

———. (2013). *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.15-37.

Frownfelter, A. (2010). *Flower Symbolism as Female Sexual Metaphor*. Open Access Senior Honors Thesis. Eastern Michigan University.

Friedan, B. (2010). *The Feminine Mystique*. London: Penguin Group.

Gabilliet, J. P. (2010) *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Gans, H. (2008) *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*. New York: Basic Books.

Gardner, S. (2014). *New Women in the Weimar Republic: Hannah Höch*. Chancellor's Honors Program Projects. https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/1703

Gingerich, W & Carr, P. (1983). "*The Vagina Dentata Motif in Nahuatl and Pueblo Mythic Narratives: A Comparative Study*". Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works. 80. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs/80> [accessed: 25th September 2023] .

Gilmore, L. (2001). *The Limits of Autobiography*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Gilmore, L and Marshall, E (2019). *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing*. New York: Fordham University Press, p.72.

Given, L.M. (2008) *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Gray, C. and Malins, J. (2004). *Visualizing research: A guide to The Research Progress in Art and Design*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, pp.22-23; 104-116.

Gowri, S. (2019). *sculptor-painter Evgenia Ermilova creates flowers*. [online] Thehindu.com. Available at: <<https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/art/when-paintings-escape-with-evgenia-ermilova/article27011790.ece?homepage=true>> [Accessed 22 July 2022].

Goldenberg, J. & Roberts, T. (2004) The beast within the beauty: An existential perspective on the objectification and condemnation of women. In: Greenberg, J; Koole, S & Pyszczaynski, T (Eds.), *Handbook of experimental existential psychology*. New York: Guildford, pp. 71–85.

-
- Greatwallofvagina.co.uk. (2022) **Labias**. [online] Available at: <<https://www.greatwallofvagina.co.uk/labias/>> [Accessed 22 July 2022].
- Gravett, P. (2013) “**Remembering Les Coleman: A Tribute**”. Remembering Les Coleman I PAUL GRAVETT. Available at: http://paulgravett.com/articles/article/remembering_les_coleman [Accessed: 25 September 2023].
- Gubar, S (2000). **Critical Condition Feminism at the Turn of the Century**. New York: Columbia university press.
- Gu, Y. (2010) **Chinese Traditional Pattern Atlas (中国传统纹样/古月编著)**. Beijing: Oriental Press.
- Gu, L. (2016) **Study on Decorative Patterns of Song, Liao, Xia, and Jin Dynasties (宋辽夏金装饰纹样研究)**. Beijing: China Drama Publishing House.
- Harpold, T. (1992). **The Grotesque Corpus**. Perforations, 2(3) After the Book: Writing Literature / Writing Technology, [online]. Available at: http://www.pd.org/Perforations/perf3/grotesque_corpus.html
- Harris, B and Zucker, S. (2015) “**Pablo Picasso, Still Life with Chair Caning**”, Smarthistory. Available from: <https://smarthistory.org/picasso-still-life-with-chair-caning/>. [Accessed 18 June 2022].
- Heinämaa, S. (2003) **Toward a phenomenology of Sexual Difference Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir**. Lanham (Md.): Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Hoch, J.H. (1934) Alchemical symbol. **The Journal of the American Pharmaceutical Association**, 23(5), pp. 431–437.
- Hong, Y. (2010) All Things Are Already Complete in My Body: An Explanation of the Views of the Taizhou School on the Human Body, **Frontiers of Philosophy in China**, 5(3), pp. 396–413.
- Howard, Clifford. 1898. **Sex Worship: An Exposition of the Phallic Origin of Religion**. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: published by the author. p.5
- Horney, K. (1926). The flight from womanhood: the masculinity-complex in women, as viewed by men and by women. **The International Journal of Psychoanalysis**, 7, pp. 324–339.

-
- Horney, K. (1967). ***Feminine Psychology***. W.W. Norton Company, New York.
- Hopkins, D. (2004). ***Dada and surrealism: A very short introduction***. Oxford University Press.
- Huang, Q.S. (2021). ***The Chinese Classic Pattern Book (中国经典纹样图鉴)***. Edited by Zhang, Y.L. Beijing: People's Posts and Telecommunications Publishing House.
- Husserl, E. (1952) ***Ideen zu einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution; edited by Marly Biemel***. Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, pp. 162-208.
- . (1969). *Formal and Transcendental Logic*. Translated by Dorion Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- . (1982). ***Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. First Book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology***. Collected Works, Volume II. Translated by F. Kersten. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- . (1989). ***Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. Second Book: Studies in the phenomenology of constitution***. Collected Works, Volume III. Translated by R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer. Boston: Kluwer Academic.
- Israel, T. (2003) ***Some place like home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places***. Princeton, NJ: Design Psychology Press.
- Irigaray, L. (1985a). ***This sex which is not one***; translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. New York: Cornell University Press, pp.9-86
- . (1985b). ***Speculum: Of the Other Woman***. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- . (1996). ***I love to you: Sketch for a felicity within history***; translated by Alison Martin, New York: Routledge.
- . (2002). ***To Speak Is Never Neutral***, Translated by Gail Schwab. New York: Routledge.
- Jin, Z.L. (2002). ***The Tree of Life and Chinese Folk Customs Art (生命之树与中国民间民俗艺术)***. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press.
- Jennings, H. (1890). ***Fishes, Flowers, and Fire as Elements and Deities in the Phallic Faiths and Worship***, Privately Printed, pp. 9-15

Jones, A. (1998). ***Body Art: Performing the Subject***. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.3–9; 21–25.

———. (2005). ***The "Sexual Politics" of the Dinner Party***. Berkeley: University of California. pp. 409–33.

Jooa, K. (2021). ***Comics / Collage / Appropriation***, The Comics Journal. [online] The Comics Journal. Available at: <<https://www.tcj.com/expanded-comics-collage-comics-appropriation/>> [Accessed 18 June 2022].

Johnston-Robledo and Zekoll, A (2003). ***To Bleed or Not to Bleed: Young Women's Attitudes toward Menstrual Suppression***. Women & Health 38 (3), pp. 59–75.

Jung, C. (1966). ***The practice of psychotherapy***. New York: Bolligen Foundation, pp.321-327.

———. (1975) ***The Collected Works of C.G. Jung***; translated by R. F. C. Hull. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, New York, N.Y.

———. (1975) ***The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche***; translated by R.F.C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton University Press

———. (1980, a) ***Psychology and Alchemy***; translated by R. F. C. Hull. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

———. (1980, b) ***The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious***; translated by R. F. C. Hull. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

———. (1983) ***Alchemical Studies***; translated by R. F. C. Hull. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kang, W. (2010). ***Art of Cloud Patterns in Chinese History (中国历史上的云纹艺术)***. Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House.

Kaiser-Schatzlein, R. (2015). ***Interview: Loie Hollowell in Sunnyside***. Available at: <https://www.twocoatsofpaint.com/2015/09/interview-loie-hollowell-in-sunnyside.html>, [Accessed 19 May 2020].

Karlyn, R. (2011). ***Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on The Screen***. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. p.11

Kelly, K. (2010). **"O'Keeffe and the Flower Equation"**. CIRCA: THE NCMA BLOG [Blog], Available at: https://ncartmuseum.org/blog/view/okeeffe_and_the_flower_equation, [Accessed 19 May 2020].

Keane, J. (2012) ***Between fear and fascination: The horrific in women's contemporary video installation***. Great Britain: University of Ulster, pp.10-67.

Kuenzli, R. (2015). ***Dada***. London: Phaidon, p.104.

Kitchen, D. (2007). Comic Art in Museums: An Overview, In book: Munson, K. (2020). ***Comic Art in Museums***. Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, pp.14-22.

Koloski-Ostrow, Ann Olga. (1997). ***Violent stages in two Pompeian Houses: Imperial taste, aristocratic response, and messages of male control***, pp.254-257. In: Koloski-Ostrow, O and Claire, L. *Naked Truths: Women, Sexuality, and Gender in Classical Art and Archaeology*, ed. London: Routledge. pp.243–266.

Kominsky-Crumb, Aline. (1997) ***Interview with Andrea Juno in Dangerous Drawings***. New York: Juno Books.

Kramer, Hilton (1980). **"Art: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party Comes to Brooklyn Museum."** The New York Times.

Kristeva, J. (1982). ***Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection***. Trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Krauss, R. (1977) ***Passages in Modern Sculpture***. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Köhlert, F. (2012). ***Female Grotesques: Carnavalesque Subversion***

in The Comics of Julie Doucet, Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, 3:1, 19-38, DOI: 10.1080/21504857.2012.703883.

La Cour, E. ***Social Abstraction: Toward Exhibiting Comics as Comics***. In: Rommens, A. 2019. *Abstraction and Comics*, Volume 1. Liège (Belgique): Presses. p.843-859.

Laaniste, M. (2002). The Relationship between Art and Comic Strip. ***Kunst. ee***, 1, p.81.

Larson, J. (2007). ***Ancient Greek Cults: A Guide***. New York: Routledge. pp. 130-132

Laughlin, K.A., & Castledine, J. (Eds.). (2011). ***Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*** (1st ed.). Routledge.

-
- Lavin, M. (1994). *Cut With the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1993. *The American Historical Review*. pp. xvii, 260; 178
- Levin, G. (2007). *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist*. 1st ed. New York: Harmony Books, p.19
- Given, Lisa. & Saumure, Kristie. (2008). *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods, Volumes 1&2*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lévinas, E. (1987) *Time and the other: And other essays*; translated by Richard A Cohen Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Leader, D. (2008) *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression*, London: Hamish Hamilton, p. 88-153.
- Lindseth, A. & Norberg, A. (2004) "A phenomenological hermeneutical method for researching lived experience," *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 18(2), pp. 145–153. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6712.2004.00258.x>. [accessed: 14th January 2023]
- Li, N. & Liu, B. (2019). *A Comprehensive Study of Chinese Traditional Patterns and Contemporary Textile Design (中国传统纹样与现代纺织品设计融合研究)*. Beijing: China Textile Press.
- Low, D. (2012). "Spaces invested with content": Crossing the "gaps" in comics with readers in schools, pp.372-374. *Children's Literature in Education*, 43(4), pp.368–385.
- Lydenberg, R. (1997). *Freud's Uncanny Narratives*. PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 112(5), pp.1072-1086. doi:10.2307/463484
- Mancoff, D (2008). *Van Gogh's Flowers*. London: Frances Lincoln Limited, pp. 23-32.
- Makholm, K. (1997). Strange Beauty: Hannah Höch and the Photomontage, *MoMA, Winter - Spring*, (1997)24, The Museum of Modern Art, pp. 19-23.
- Magnussen, A. and Christiansen, H.C. (2000) "*Comics & Culture: Analytical and theoretical approaches to comics*". Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen.
- Marsh, E. and Domas White, M. (2003). A taxonomy of relationships between images and text. *Journal of Documentation*, 59(6), pp.647-672.

Meacham, T. 2020. ***Female Purity (Niddah) | Jewish Women's Archive***. [online] Jewish Women's Archive. Available at: <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/female-purity-niddah>> [Accessed 23 April 2022].

Meng, X. (2009). ***Integration of Traditional Meanings of Auspicious Patterns into Modern Visual Design (吉祥图案的传统寓意融入现代视觉设计)***. Master's thesis. Henan University, Kaifeng.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2005) ***Phenomenology of Perception (Phénoménologie de la perception published, 1945)*** M. Taylor and Francis e-Library.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012) ***Phenomenology of Perception (Phénoménologie de la perception published, 1945)***. Oxon: Routledge.

McCloud, S. (1993). ***Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art***. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.: New York, NY.

McCartney, J. (2011). ***The great wall of vagina***. Brighton: Jamie McCartney, pp.24-27; 76-80.

McIntosh, Christopher. ***The Rosicrucians-The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order***. Weiser: York Beach, 1997.

Mitchell, W.J.T. 1994. ***Picture Theory***. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stevenson, D. (1990). ***The origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's century, 1590-1710***. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.97

McLean, A. (1991). A source for Robert Fludd's sevenfold rose. ***The Hermetic Journal 1991***, [online]. Available at: <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/fludd_rose.html>.

Meacham, T. (1999) ***An Abbreviated History of The Development of The Jewish Menstrual Laws***. In: Wasserfall, R. (2015). *Women and Water*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press. pp.23-39

Miller, G. (2017) ***The Consequences of the “Male Gaze” and Sexual Objectification***. *Rhetorical Theories and Professional Communication*, pp.1-3.

Mulvey, L. (1972) ***Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema***. New York: Oxford UP.

———. (2006) ***Death 24 x a second: Stillness and the moving image***. London: Reaktion Books.

-
- Murphy, R., Ran, T., & Xi, L. (2011). "Son preference in rural China: patrilineal families and socioeconomic change". *Population and Development Review*. 37 (4): 665–690.
doi:10.1111/j.1728-4457.2011.00452. x. PMID 22319769
- Molotiu, A. (2007). Permanent Ink: Comic Book and Comic Strip Art as Aesthetic Object, *International Journal of Comic Art*, 9(2) pp.24–42.
- Munson, K. (2020). *Comic Art in Museums*. Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, p.113.
- Nadel, D (2007). A Good Life: The Julie Doucet Interview. *The Drama*, [online] (7), p.47. Available at: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgiclfindmkaj/http://dnadel.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TheDrama007_JulieDoucet.pdf> [Accessed 22 July 2022].
- Naifeh, S. and Smith, G. (2011). *Vincent van Gogh*. New York: Random House.
- Nead, L. (2001) *The female nude art, obscenity, and sexuality*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, pp.5-68.
- Neri, L. (2010) *Sophie Calle, Interview Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/sophie-calle> [Accessed: 08 March 2024].
- Noble, I. and Bestley, R. (2005). *Visual Research: An Introduction to Research Methodologies in Graphic Design*. Switzerland: AVA Publishing SA. pp. 82-87.
- Nochlin, L. & Grant, C. (2021). *Why have there been no great women artists?* Thames & Hudson.
- Nussbaum, M. (1995). *Objectification*. Philosophy & Public Affairs: 24(4), pp. 249–291.
- Okamoto, F., Hosoi, J., and Xu, Z.L. (eds.). (2019). *Hand-drawn Atlas of the Book of Poetry, Volume of Plants (诗经手绘图谱-植物卷)*. Shandong: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House.
- Okay, A. 2019. *REVIEW: Ken Koyama's LITTLE MISS P is your terrifying new best friend*. [online] The Beat. Available at: <<https://www.comicsbeat.com/review-little-miss-p/>> [Accessed 22 April 2022].
- Olney, J. (1980). *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 236.
- Parrott, G. & Smith, H. (1993). *Distinguishing the experiences of envy and jealousy*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 64 (6): 906–920.

Peng, X. (2015). *Dandyism and Transcultural modernity: The dandy, the Flaneur, and the translator in 1930s Shanghai, Tokyo, and Paris*. London: Routledge.

Peirce, C.S. (1932) ***Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Vol. II: Elements of Logic***. Edited by C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Available at: https://archive.org/details/collectedpaperso0000unse_v0n0 (Accessed: 13 May 2025).

———. (1931–1958) ***Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Vols. I–VIII***, edited by C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss and A. Burks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Picone, M. (2013) “Comic Art in Museums and Museums in Comic Art”, ***European Comic Art***, 6(2): 40–68.

Piekos, N. and Orzechowski, T. (2021) ***Essential Guide to Comic Book Lettering***. Portland: Image Comics.

Priest, C. (1999) "Chapter X Verse One: Sending in the Clowns" ***Deadpool v3***, #34, New York, NY: Marvel Comics

Piekos, N. (2007) ***Comic book grammar & tradition***, Available at: <https://blambot.com/pages/comic-book-grammar-tradition> (Accessed: October 25, 2022).

Postema, B. (2013). ***Narrative structures in comics: Making sense of fragments***. Rochester, NY: RIT Press, pp.46-49

Qian, M. (2010). ***A Design Interpretation of Qing Dynasty Cloud Pattern Motifs***. Master's thesis. Hubei Academy of Fine Arts, Wuhan.

Qin, R. (2015). ***Auspicious Animals and Birds in Chinese Culture (中国瑞兽祥禽)***. Hefei: Huangshan Publishing House.

Racz, I. (2015). ***Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday***. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Rees, E. (2013). ***The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History***. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 41-43; 50; 63; 117-121; 140-142; 230-232.

Roberts, A. (2020). ***Bleeding in Jail: Objectification, Self-Objectification, and Menstrual Injustice***. In: Bobel C, Winkler IT, Fahs B, et al., editors. *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, Chapter 6.

Ronnberg, A. and Martin, K. (2010). ***The book of symbols***. Köln: Taschen.

Rommens, A. (2019). ***Abstraction and Comics, Volume 1***. Liège (Belgique): Presses universitaires de Liège, pp. 373, 377-379.

———. (2019). ***Abstraction and Comics, Volume 2***. Liège (Belgique): Presses universitaires de Liège, pp. 271, 414.

Rosler, M. (2011). ***Martha Rosler introduces Semiotics of the Kitchen at EAI***. [video] Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), 19 January. Available at: <https://www.eai.org/blog/martha-rosler-introduces-semiotics-of-the-kitchen> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

Rykvert, J. (2011). ***The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy, and the Ancient World***. London: Faber and Faber.

Rudick, N. (2016). ***Carpet Sweeper Tales***, The Comics Journal. [online] The Comics Journal. Available at: <https://www.tcj.com/reviews/carpet-sweeper-tales/> [Accessed 18 June 2022].

Røstvik, C. (2019). ***Blood Works: Judy Chicago and. Menstrual Art Since 1970***, Oxford art journal, 42.3, pp. 335–353

Saatchi Art. (2016). ***Evgenia Ermilova I Saatchi Art***. [online] Available at: <https://www.saatchiart.com/evgenia-ermilova?epik=dj0yJnU9Mzh0NnhrWDNaMDc4eENwVk0tTmxnWmcwSmttYW9SelQmcD0wJm49ZXRXQY2FRNV9ZNUZ0Q2pEYzYyRnVTZyZ0PUFBQUFBR0xGNWdr> [Accessed 22 July 2022].

Sartre, J.P. (1993) ***Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology***; translated by Hazel E. Barnes. Washington Square Press.

Salter, A. (2017) Comics and art. In: Bramlett, F., Cook, R., & Meskin A. eds. ***The Routledge companion to comics***. New York: Routledge, p. 348–58.

Samuels, L. (2017) ***“Bioautography and Carolee Schneemann's VULVA'S MORPHIA”***, Chicago Review, [online] Available at: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Bioautography+and+Carolee+Schneemann%27s+VULVA%27S+MORPHIA-a0522758666> [Accessed 11 March 2021].

Saussure, F. (1916) ***Course in General Linguistics***. Translated by R. Harris (1983). London: Duckworth.

Sausverd, A. (2014). Comics and Figurative Narration: What Pierre Couperie Contributed, **NeuviemeArt 2.0**, In book: Munson, K. (2020). **Comic Art in Museums**. Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, pp.104-112.

Salvador-González, J.M. (2024) Hortus Conclusus: A Mariological symbol in some quattrocento annunciations, according to Church Fathers and medieval theologians, **Religions**, 15(2), pp.1-17.

Schaffeld, S.J. (2019) **Ambiguity, the disembodied self, and the performative: How medical imaging techniques inform embodied art-work**. [online] ResearchGate. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337335164> (Accessed: [insert date]).

Schneemann, C. (2003). **Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects**. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 151–161; 235–249; 298–303.

Schön, D. (1983). **The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action**, New York: Basic Books.

Secomb, L. (2007) **Philosophy and Love: From Plato to popular culture**. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 41-74; 93-109.

Sharp, G. (2018). **Flawed perceptions**. InPsych, 40(3).

Shu, W. 2012. **Auspicious Design of China (吉祥图案)**. Beijing: Huangshan Publishing House.

Simons, M.A. (2006) **The philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical essays**. **Bloomington**, IN: Indiana University Press.

Singulart.com. (2021). **SPARK OF LOVE by Evgenia Ermilova (2021): Painting Acrylic, Plaster on Wood - SINGULART**. [online] Available at: <<https://www.singulart.com/en/artworks/evgenia-ermilova-spark-of-love-1345651>> [Accessed 22 July 2022].

Smith, M, & Duncan, R (2011). **Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods**, [ebook] Taylor & Francis Group, ProQuest, pp.36-37, 39. Available at: <Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uai/detail.action?docID=957439>.> [Accessed 11 April 2021].

Soergel, D. (1974), **Indexing Languages and Thesauri: Construction and Maintenance**, Los Angeles: Melville Publishing Company.

Steinem, G. (2019). *If Men Could Menstruate*. WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, 6(3), pp.151-152.

Stein, W. A. (2010, March 24). The Hours of the Virgin. The Art of Illumination. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved from:
<https://blog.metmuseum.org/artofillumination/2010/03/24/the-hours-of-the-virgin/> [Accessed 6 April 2023].

The Museum of Modern Art. (2020). *Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making I Moma*. [online] Available at: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/13?> [Accessed 21 April 2020].

Thompson, C. (1943). *“Penis Envy” in Women*, Psychiatry, 6:2, pp. 123-125.

Tinker, E. (2009). *Identity and Form in Alternative Comics, 1967–2007* [online]. Unpublished thesis. University College, London. Available from:
<http://emmatinker.oxalto.co.uk> [Accessed 17 June 2022].

Tickner, L. (1978). ‘The body politic: Female sexuality & women artists since 1970’, *Art History*, 1(2), pp. 236–251.

Turkel, R. (2004). *The hand that rocks the cradle rocks the boat: The empowerment of women*. The Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry, 32(1), pp. 41–53.

Vaughan, K. (2004). *Pieced Together: Collage as An Artist’s Method for Interdisciplinary Research*. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 4(1), Article 3. Available from: http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/4_1/pdf/vaughan.pdf. [Accessed 17 June 2022]

Vice, S. (2008). *Introducing Bakhtin*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Walker, B. (1983). *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

———. (1988). *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*. New York: HarperCollins, pp.4; 15-18; 35-37; 44; 318; 423-425; 429; 431; 472.

Wallner, L. (2018). Gutter Talk: Co-Constructing Narratives Using Comics in the Classroom. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 63(6), pp.819-838.

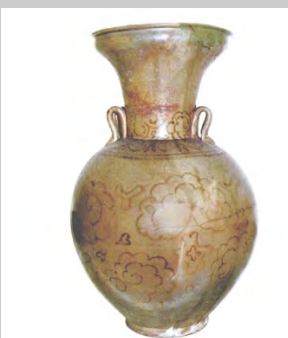
-
- Warner, M. (2013). ***Alone of all her sex: The Myth and The Cult of The Virgin Mary***. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Watson, J. and Yerkes, R. (1908). The Dancing Mouse: A Study in Animal Behavior. ***The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods***, 5(7), p.184.
- Wolk, D. (2007). Reading comics: How graphic novels work and what they mean. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, pp.127-131.
- Wiber, M. (1997). ***Erect Men/Undulating Women: The Visual Imagery of Gender, Race, and Progress in Reconstructive Illustrations of Human Evolution***. Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Wu, S. 2009. ***Atlas of Chinese Patterns (中国纹样全集)***. Shandong: Shandong Fine Arts Publishing House
- Xu, P.C., Guo, Q., Sun, Z.C., Zhang, Y.N., & Wang, M.J., (2015). ***Auspicious Chinese Picture Book, Volume of Festive (吉祥图案-节庆篇)***. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.
- Xu, J. (2008). ***Preliminary Exploration of Traditional Chinese Cloud Pattern Design***, Art Sea, 2, pp. 91–92.
- Yang, G.P., 2016. ***Collections of Dragon and Phoenix Decoration (龙凤篇-传统纹样图典)***. Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House.
- Yee, J. (2010). ***Methodological Innovation in Practice-Based Design Doctorates***. Journal of Research Practice, 6(2), pp.125-156.
- Zhang, X.X. (2010). ***Natural Attracting: The History of Chinese Ancient Patterns of Plant Motifs (天赐荣华:中国古代纹样装饰发展史)***. Shanghai: Shanghai Wen Hua publisher.
- Zhang, Z.G. (2013) ***Art, myth, and ritual: the path to political authority in ancient China (张光直作品系列, 美术、神话与祭祀)***. Beijing: Sheng Huo, Du Shu, Xin Zhi publisher.
- Zhao, W. (2016). ***Application of Chinese Traditional pattern in Modern Jewellery Design***. Journal of Gems and Gemmology, 18(1), pp.59-66.
- Zhao, G. (1990). ***The Theory of Reproductive Worship Culture (生殖崇拜文化论 Sheng zhi chong bai wen hua lun)***. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- ZHBC (2009). ***Dictionary of Chinese idioms***. Beijing: China University of Geosciences Press, p.209.
- Zilboorg, G. (1944). ***Masculine and feminine; some biological and cultural aspects***. Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes, 7, pp. 257–296.

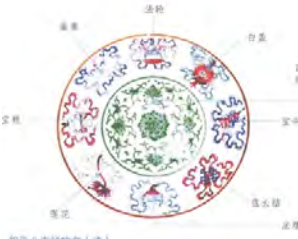
Zuylen, M, V. (2005). *Monomania: The Flight from Everyday Life in Literature and Art*, London: Cornell University Press, p.180-192.

Appendix 1

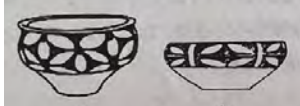
Symbol Matrices

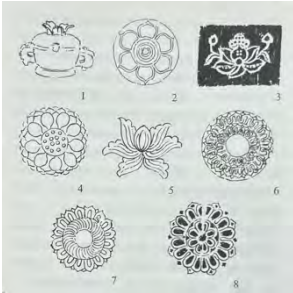
Matrix 1-1, Chinese Notion of Patterns

Symbols	Origins and Representation	Figure and Resources	Applications
云纹/cloud pattern	Cloud pattern is the most common traditional pattern in China, which is used by the ancients to depict the clouds in the sky, representing auspicious omen. It is usually combined with other objects to generate new motifs, such as cloud and thunder pattern, cirrus cloud pattern, cloud animal pattern, etc. For example, the cloud and thunder pattern refer to geometric patterns composed of continuous convoluted lines which is composed of single cloud and thunder pattern that generally appeared on bronze and jade wares from the Shang and Zhou dynasties (Yue Gu, 2010; Na Li & Bao Liu, 2019). Please see below, the matrix of the cloud pattern as the comprehensive explanation of the most widely used, specific pattern.	 云雷纹拓片 <i>The Rubbing of the cloud and thunder pattern, (unknown)</i> Traditional Resource: Chinese Tattoo Book, 2010, p. 4  <i>Yue Kiln Celadon Cloud Pattern Poppy, (Five Dynasties Period)</i> Resource: Zhejiang Provincial Museum	The cloud and rain pattern and its depiction of specific Chinese idiom such 云雨之欢 (<i>The joy of clouds and rain</i>), 翻云覆雨 (<i>As Changeable as Clouds and Rain</i>), and 云雨交融 (<i>the conjunction of clouds and rain</i>) displays on <i>Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality, (2020)</i>

盘长结/同心结/ Auspicious knot/ True lover's knot	The auspicious knot, also known as the True lover's knot, is one of the Buddhist Auspicious, <i>Eight treasures</i>⁴², that later evolved into the traditional Chinese handicraft knot art (Yue Gu, 2010, p.124-128). The true lover's knot is an important decorative pattern in China with the symbolism of love. Since its characteristic of connecting two knots which is typically used as a symbol of loyal love refers to 永结同心 (unbreakable knot of one heart) (Na Li & Bao Liu, 2019, p.25-26).	 The True lover's knot, (unknown) Resource: Traditional Chinese Tattoo Book, 2010, p. 126  Famille Rose Porcelain with Eight Auspicious Pattern Plate, (Qing dynasty) Resource: Traditional Chinese Tattoo Book, 2010, p. 125	The use of the auspicious knot motif is evident in <i>Familias Fantasy</i> (2022-2023), where it serves as a decorative element for the border.
囍/Double Xi character	Double Xi character (Literally, happiness character pattern) is one of the most traditional Chinese decorative patterns. As one type of patterns with Chinese characters, it is known as Shuang Xi (double Xi/double happiness). Generally, two connected characters Xi (喜) is widely used	 双喜铜烛台 (清)	Double Xi character is a significance symbol applied on my practice through the paper cutting approach, which is shown on

⁴² The eight treasures are also called the eight auspicious phases and the eight auspicious signs, including the vase, the treasure cover, the double fish, the lotus, the right-handed snail, the auspicious knot, the Zunsheng building, and the Falun. These eight patterns are mostly used as decorations in Buddhist temples, religious objects, ritual implements, Tibetan and Mongolian dwelling decoration to symbolize auspiciousness, happiness and consummation.

	as decorations on bronze wares, porcelains, furniture, woodcarvings, wedding dress, and especially on paper-cut and new year paintings, implying the advent of double blessing or great happiness (Xu Shu, 2012, p.160-162). The vertical flipped "囍" could refer to the conventional Chinese traditional symbolic approach of "福". Posting "福" in such inverted method is one of the traditional Chinese New Year customs. In the Chinese pronunciation, the status of vertical flip is equivalent to "coming", so when posting the celebrated symbols such as "福" and "囍" through vertical flipped approaches indicate that happy events are coming soon.	<i>Double Xi Copper Candle Holder</i>, (Qing dynasty) Resource: Traditional Chinese Tattoo Book, 2010, p. 122.  <i>Enamel Mirror with Eight Precious Things and the Character Xi</i>, (Qing Dynasty 1644-1911) Resource: Auspicious Design of China, 2012, p.161.	<i>Opus Magnum for a Girl</i>, (2020). The border decoration of 囍 I applied to the central panel indicate there are two great events for my aunt or my parents, the first one is I have menstruation and the second one is I could give birth in the future.
莲花/Lotus	The symbolic meaning of Chinese plant patterns is unified with the connotation of botanical plants' characteristics, Weiming Du points that one of the foundations of Chinese symbolism and philosophy is unifying the inanimate objects, plants and animals with the human being and the soul into closely related and intermingled entities (1981, p.1). The most typical plants pattern since Chinese primitive period is		In <i>Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality</i> (2020), the lotus motif is employed to represent the internal female genital system. In panel 4, positioned within a circular form, the lotus initially symbolises the

the sacred flowers, lotus, and the Sun God Tree. The lotus originated from Chinese hieroglyphs, the "蒂", in oracle bone inscriptions shown as , displaying the combination of graphical calyx, flower ovary, stamens and gynoecium (Zhang, 2010, p.36). Botanically, the lotus flower produces plenty of fresh lotus seeds after its maturity, which symbolises the fullness of descendant while represents the primitive fertility worship. Guohua Zhao (1996, p.223) mentions in the <i>Culture of Reproductive Worship</i> that flower patterns are widely used to represent the female external genitalia due to its consistent similarity in shape. Specific to the lotus, as an androgynous plants, respectively, its flower petals represent the vulva; gynoecium is the womb; and plant roots emblems phallus, addressing both male and female representation that symbolises the most divine generative ability.	<i>Painted pottery with flower patterns</i>⁴³, excavated in Shan County, Henan, China. Resource: Natural Attracting: The History of Chinese Ancient Patterns of Plant Motifs, 2010, p.38.  <i>Portrait Bricks of the Han Dynasty</i>, excavated in Luoyang, Henan, China Resource: Atlas of Chinese Patterns, Volume 2, 2009, p.11.  The Evolution of Lotus Patterns from the Warring States Period to the Tang Dynasty Resource: <i>Natural A Resource: Atlas of</i>	womb, and its plant root, interacting with a representation of male genitalia, signifies the cervix. The comprehensive utilisation and portrayal of the lotus symbol are inherently aligned with the female anatomical structure, serving to elucidate the female reproductive organs with precision. Furthermore, the lotus motif is utilized in conjunction with the pinecone symbol to represent the union of the two sexes. This combination
---	--	---

⁴³ The flower pattern is the pattern prototype of Neolithic painted pottery, which is not identified as any specific flower, however, arguably recognised as the origins of lotus pattern (Renxiang Wang, 1989, p.56).

	<i>Chinese Patterns, Volume 3, 2009, p.8.</i>  <i>Matrix of figures of the lotus pattern on different carriers edited by Li Gu.</i> Resource: Study on Decorative Patterns of Song, Liao, Xia and Jin Dynasties, 2016, p.70-71.	symbolises the interaction and connection between male and female principles. (see conjunction motifs section)
鸳鸯/ Yuan Yang	The mandarin duck, also known as Yuan Yang, is a water-bird smaller than wild ducks. Yuan and Yang respectively stand for male and female mandarin ducks, which usually play in the water in pairs. Mandarin ducks are very dedicated to love, and the male Yan and female Yang are inseparable, which is regarded as a symbol of steadfast love, and used it as a metaphor for happiness marriage and couples.  <i>Bronze Mirror with Mandarin Ducks Perch on Lotus, (Tang Dynasty 618-907)</i>	Although the Yuan Yang symbol is not specifically applied into my currently research and practice through thesis, it is a significant symbol I will definitely explore in the

As Shu (2012, p.70) confines “since ancient times, Chinese people have seen Yuan Yang as a symbol of loyalty to love”, it is also recorded by <i>The Book of Poetry</i>⁴⁴, as “鸳鸯于飞，毕之罗之” (Mandarin ducks fly together every day, facing difficulties and the hunter's bird net)”. Yuan Yang patterns are especially used in weddings, symbolizing conjugal affection and bliss, specifically, it also indicates sexual intercourse in the Chinese contextualisation.	Resource: Auspicious Design of China, (2012), p.70.  <i>Mandarin ducks playing in water, watercolour drawing displays on Architectures in Summer Palace, Beijing, China.</i> Resource: A Comprehensive Study of Chinese Traditional Patterns and Contemporary Textile Design (2019), p.40.	future research. Arguably, Yuan Yang is an anthropological emblem of the Yin and Yang⁴⁵.
---	---	--

⁴⁴ “*The Book of Poetry*” is the earliest collection of poems in China, as the beginning of ancient Chinese poetry and most of poetry cannot be verified its author. There are 311 articles in total in the “*The Book of Poetry*” collects poems from the early years of the Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle of the Spring and Autumn Period (from 11th century BC to 6th century BC) and its content is divided into three parts shown as "Feng", "Ya" and "Song" (岡元鳳 (Japanese), 2019).

⁴⁵ In Chinese philosophical concept that describes opposite but interconnected forces where Yin is the receptive and yang the active principle, which forms the sex (female and male) and the formation of both men and women as characters (Feuchtwang, 2016, p.150).

神树纹 The sacred tree patterns.	The sacred tree pattern is usually taken from the <i>Fu Sang</i> (扶桑) in ancient China. As the “<i>Classic of Mountains and Rivers</i>” records, “下有汤谷，汤谷上有扶桑，十日所浴，在黑齿北。居水中，有大木，九日居下枝，一日居上枝”⁴⁶. In the botanical field, it is identified as red hibiscus. It has a similar symbolic meaning to the tree of life in the Western mythology and symbolism. Specifically, Xiaoxia Zhang (2010, p.53-55) identifies the sacred tree is the most primitive representation of the male sexual identity, relating to the oracle bone inscription form of the Chinese character, “生 (sheng, means life)”, shown as  , emblemizing phallus worship. According to the <i>淮南子</i> (<i>Huai Nan Zi</i>), a philosophical work of Western Han Dynasty, one of the most important functions of the <i>Fu Sang</i> in ancient times was to provide a place for men and women to freely intercourse (Zhang, 2010, p.56), describing	 <i>Tree-like patterns on painted pottery of the Yangshao Culture</i> Resource: Natural Attracting: The History of Chinese Ancient Patterns of Plant Motifs, 2010, p.56.  <i>Tree Pattern on Wadang, Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period</i> Resource: Natural Attracting: The History of Chinese Ancient Patterns of Plant Motifs, 2010, p.57.  <i>Sacred Tree Pattern on Brick Carving in Han Dynasty</i> Resource: <i>Atlas of Chinese Patterns</i>, Volume 2, 2009, p.210.	The tree symbol plays a essential role in this thesis, representing a point of intersection across cultures. The Chinese sacred tree patterns warrant examination in conjunction with the alchemical Philosophical Tree and the Western concept of the Tree of Life. Detailed analysis of the tree symbol is provided in Chapter 6. Initially, the sacred tree motifs reflect my cultural background, interpreting the tree as a symbol of the male
---	--	--	--

⁴⁶Resource from the “*Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, Overseas East Longitude” which depicts the graphical characters of the sacred tree, *Fu Sang*, and its origins and mythical background. Translated as: “Below the Black Tooth country is Yanggu. There is a *Fu Sang* tree growing in here, where the ten suns bathe, and it is located in the north of the country of Black Tooth. There is a big tree in the water, nine suns live on the lower branch while the remaining sun lives on the upper branch”.

	as “桑林者，桑山之林，能兴云作雨也 (The <i>Fu Sang</i> forest is the forest in the <i>Fu Sang</i> mountains which could combine clouds with rain)⁴⁷” (Liming He, 2021). The scholar Zhilin Jin specifically research on the Chinese ancient representation of the <i>Fu Sang</i> as the fertility worship, identifying the tree-like figures on the pottery pattern since Neolithic Age is the earliest symbol of the tree of life. It is graphically composed of symmetrical animals, people or patron saints on both sides of the tree associating to the western identification of the Tree of Life “as a specific model in ancient Greece, Rome which affecting Chinese development of the tree-based symbolism (Jin, 2002, p.5)”.	 Sacred Tree Pattern on Stone Relief in Han Dynasty Resource: <i>Natural Attracting: The History of Chinese Ancient Patterns of Plant Motifs</i>, 2010, p.58.	principle within the Chinese context. This perspective served as a foundational element in my exploration of medieval alchemical culture and archetypal symbols, leading to an awareness of the tree's feminine connotations.
葡萄纹 Grape pattern	Following the turmoil and devastation of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, which left China's socio-economic landscape in ruins and significantly reduced the population, there was a shift in societal focus towards desires for peace, longevity, and offspring proliferation (Wu 2009). The early Qing era saw the emergence of	 Fragments of a Kangxi-era Qing porcelain bowl with grape pattern	In <i>Plentiful in Ideals yet Skinny in Reality</i> (2020), the grape pattern is featured in the final panel of the work. the grape is positioned between representations

⁴⁷ 兴云作雨 (combine clouds with rain) is the euphemism of sexual intercourse (Liming He, 2021) that similar with the Chinese idiom, such as “云雨之欢 (The joy of clouds and rain) I analyse in previous matrix. Resources: <https://www.printdiy.cn/xinqingriji/2021/0106/415008.html> ,accessed: [23rd March 2023].

three main aspirations among the people: abundance of peace (as peace is a form of blessing), longevity, and numerous progeny, collectively known as the "三多 (three abundances)" (Wu 2009 p.28). Consequently, porcelain patterns carrying the three abundances symbolism became increasingly popular, with grape patterns from this period being imbued with this new meaning. Although these grape patterns appeared similar to those from the later Ming period, porcelain craftsmen deliberately inscribed the words "福寿葡萄 (Blessings, Longevity, and Grapes)" next to them to signify the enriched symbolic meanings of prosperity, longevity, and fertility (Yue, 2018). The grape's numerous seeds symbolise the wish for many children, aligning with the era's societal values. This pattern reflects the deep-seated issue of sex-based discrimination entrenched in Chinese culture, significantly influenced by the traditional preference for male heirs, a preference that is rooted in Chinese Confucian patriarchal norms (Murphy, Ran & Xi, 2011). Consequently, the grape symbolises the perpetuation of	 Grapes (1947), Baishi Qi Size: 123cm*34cm Medium: Ink, Chinese rice paper  Early Qing Dynasty 福寿葡萄 (Blessings, Longevity, and Grapes) Pattern Porcelain Fragments	of penis and vulva figures, serving as a visual metaphor for sexual union. While the grape motif does not convey themes of sexual inequality in this context, it functions as a metaphor for the desire associated with a first sexual encounter.
--	--	--

sexual inequality within traditional Chinese society, serving as a metaphor for the inexhaustible seed. In this context, grape motifs are not solely aesthetic decisions; they carry profound societal expectations and values, particularly regarding women's roles in reproduction.		
---	--	--

Matrix 1-2, Specific Distinction of The Cloud Pattern

云纹 Cloud Pattern	Period and Dynasties	Graphical Characteristics	Figure and Resources
云雷纹/ Cloud and Thunder Pattern	Late Western Zhou Dynasty and Early Spring and Autumn Period. It is widely used on bronze wares. (Wu, 2009)	Cloud and Thunder Pattern is a graphical combination of ancient Chinese pictographs of the cloud, , and thunder, . When the cloud and thunder graphically combine, it becomes the pattern, . Besides, there are two shapes of cloud and thunder patterns, respectively as square and round.	 <i>Rubbings of the cloud and thunder pattern in Shang Dynasty, Western Zhou Dynasty and Spring and Autumn Period.</i> Resource: Atlas of Chinese Patterns, Volume 1, (2009), p.30

卷云纹/ Cirrus cloud pattern	Warring States Period and Qin and Han Dynasties	Cirrus cloud pattern presents the development of cloud pattern to be more realistic, different from the previous single-form abstract graphics which highlight the features of clouds in nature. Its application on utensils shows a symmetrical form. In particular, the four-sided symmetrical cirrus cloud pattern is widely used on eaves tile⁴⁸ shown as .	<i>Wadang in the Warring States Period, Excavated in Shangshui County, Henan Province, China.</i> Resource: Atlas of Chinese Patterns, Volume 2, (2009), p.128 <i>Warring States period lacquerware plate, Excavated in Changsha, Hunan, China.</i>Resource: Atlas of Chinese Patterns, Volume 2, (2009), p.111
--	--	--	---

⁴⁸ Eaves tile, in Chinese as Wadang, refers to the shielding of the front end of the tube tile covering the eaves of the building in ancient Chinese architecture.

流云纹/
Flowing
cloud
patterns

From Han
Dynasty

The development of flowing cloud patterns reached its peak in the Han Dynasty focusses on balance composition and dynamic cloud shape in decoration that different from the practice of using straight lines and simply geometric motifs in the Warring States Period. It highlights the interaction between flowing cloud patterns and the whole decorative scenery.



Lacquerware in Western Han dynasties, excavated in Hanjiang Yaozhuang, Yangzhou, Jiangsu, China.



Han Dynasty Bronze Ware.

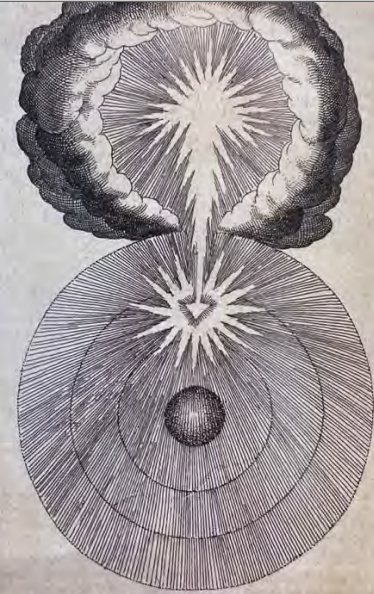
Resource: Atlas of Chinese Patterns, Volume 2, (2009), p.111

Matrix 1-3 Alchemy symbols

Symbols/Myth	Origins and Representation	Figure and Resources	Applications
Four Classical Elements: Earth/Fire/ Water/Air	The Greek philosopher, Empedocles of Agrigent (c.440 B.C.) considered fire, air, water and earth (deified as Zeus, Hera, Nestis and Aidoneus) to be the four elements; a fifth, "ether", was added by Aristotle (Hoch 1934, p. 433). In the realm of alchemical traditions, fire and water are portrayed as deeply contrasting yet interconnected forces. Fire is symbolised by an upward-pointing triangle, representing warmth, heat, and dryness, and it embodies intense emotions such as love, passion, and anger, indicative of the masculine aspect and the quest for spiritual transcendence.	Earth An illustration from a 17th century alchemical. In: <i>An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols</i> (1978), p.67 Water	The specific application of the four basic elements focuses on fire and water, which respectively symbolize the male and female principles. These are graphically represented by an upward triangle for fire and an inverted triangle for water. (see Three-way motifs section)

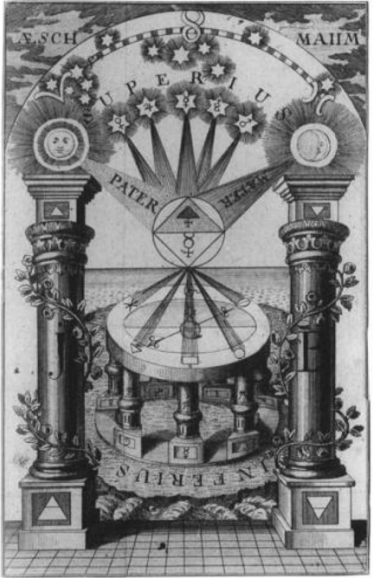
	Alchemically, fire typically associated with transformation. This concept is echoed in the imagery where the Kings of the earth, with their crowns encircling a globe, pay homage through this proxy to the supreme transforming fire, symbolizing a reverence for the transformative power of fire (Cooper, 1978). Conversely, water, depicted by a downward-pointing triangle, symbolizes intuition and femininity, and is characterized by wetness, coldness, and a connection to mercury, aspects that were also underscored by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato.			Air Figure resources⁴⁹
--	---	--	--	---

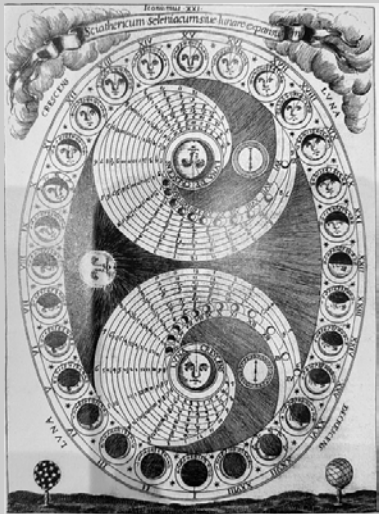
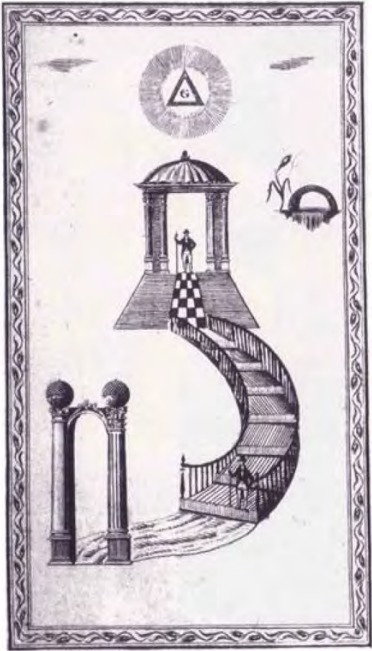
⁴⁹ Figure resource available at: https://mythologian.net/alchemy-symbols-meanings-extended-list-alchemical-symbols/#The_Four_Classical_Elements_as_Alchemy_Symbols [Accessed: 22nd Dec 2023].

	(Cooper 1978; Walker 1988)		
Sun	It became more usual, for the sun to be considered a male deity in contrast to the moon, which was almost always female. Numerous mythological narratives establish a connection between the sun and the male spirit, often leading to the male identification with diurnal cycles, solar calendars, and deities of light and fire. This contrasts with the female association with nocturnal realms, the moon, the abyss, the secrecy of uterine darkness, and the elements of water and earth (Walker, 1988). In the Renaissance, the sun embodied, in descending order, God, divine light, spiritual enlightenment and physical warmth. in the translations by Marsilio	 R. Fludd, <i>Philosophia sacra</i>, Frankfurt (1626), in <i>Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.60  R. Fludd, <i>Utriusque Cosmi, Voll</i>, Oppenheim (1617), in <i>Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.61	While the individual sun symbol is not the primary focus of this thesis, it is graphically paired with the moon symbol within my body of work to represent the two sexes and their balance.

	Ficino (1433-1499) of the Corpus Hermeticum revived the cult of the sun based on the ancient Egyptian mysteries (Roob, 2001). Besides, In Timothy W. Hogan's book, <i>The Alchemical Keys to Masonic Ritual</i> (2007), it's affirmed that the sun, within alchemical and Qabbalistic traditions, is symbolically linked to gold. This association is depicted in alchemical texts and ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs alike, where the imagery of a point within a circle represents both the sun and gold—a symbol also recognized within Masonic circles (2007, p.23). However, as Walker (1988, p.15) elucidates, in the earliest symbolism, the sun sign — a circle with a central dot — did not represent masculine	SUN SIGN  Sun Sign by Barbara Walker, in <i>The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects</i> (1988) ☿ <i>Scorpio.</i> * <i>Sextilis.</i> ☼ <i>Sol.</i> ♂ <i>Sp. Spiritus.</i> ☿ <i>Spiritus vini.</i> ♂ <i>Stannum.</i> S. S. S. <i>Stratum Super Stratum.</i> ☿ <i>Sublimare.</i> ♂ <i>Sulphur.</i> X <i>Talcum.</i> ♂ <i>Tartarus.</i> ♂ <i>Taurus.</i> ♂ <i>Terra.</i> ♂ <i>Trigonum.</i> ♀ <i>Venus.</i> V <i>Vinum.</i> ♂ <i>Virgo.</i> ⊕ ♂ <i>Vitriolum.</i> ☼ <i>Urina.</i> Alchemical Symbols from a work Athanasius Kircher <i>Mundus Subterraneus in XII Libros digestus</i> (1678). Resource from Alchemy Website⁵⁰	
--	---	---	--

⁵⁰ Available: https://www.alchemywebsite.com/Kircher_symbols.html [Accessed: 29th November 2023]

	energy but rather the archetypal womb containing the spark of life. Ancient Mesopotamian myths, for instance, portrayed the sun as a goddess, such as Estan among the Hittites. This feminine deity of sunlight was subsequently transformed into the male god Istanu, illustrating a shift in gendered divine representations (ibid, p.15).		
Moon	As discussed in the sun symbolism section, the Moon is often portrayed as embodying feminine power, epitomised by the Mother Goddess or the Queen of Heaven, juxtaposed with the Sun's masculine attributes. In alchemical terms, Luna (silver) represents the purified affections; Sol (gold) and Luna are emblematic of the soul and body, the king and queen, respectively	 <i>Der Compaß der Weisen</i>, Ketima Vere, Berlin (1782). In: <i>Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.185	The moon symbol is significant through my body of work, it could be found in <i>Opus Magnum for a Girl</i> (2020), and <i>Menstruation Envy</i> (2022). In <i>Hortus Conclusus for a Woman</i> (2022), the moon phase

	(Cooper 1978, p.107). Moreover, J. Hampton Hoch elucidates that the alchemical principles, traditionally referred to as “man and woman, red and white, sun and moon, sulphur and mercury”, are considered qualities rather than substances (1934, p. 433-434). The phases of the Moon, mirroring a woman's periodic transformation, resonated with ancient perceptions, casting the moon goddesses primarily as maternal deities and consorts of the Sun (Hoch, 1934).	 A. Kircher, <i>Ars magna lucis</i>, Amsterdam (1671). In: <i>Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.68	imagery from <i>Ars magna lucis et umbrae</i> (1671) serves as a significant reference, which I utilised to depict my menstrual cycle.
Ladder	The ladder is a potent symbol in various cultural and spiritual contexts, representing transition, connection, and the quest for higher understanding. It signifies the passage from one state of being to another and serves as a conduit for communication between the celestial and the terrestrial		In <i>Opus Magnum for a Girl</i> (2022), the ladder is employed as decorative borders, drawing upon its Greek connotations of a sexual encounter with the Goddess. The portrayal

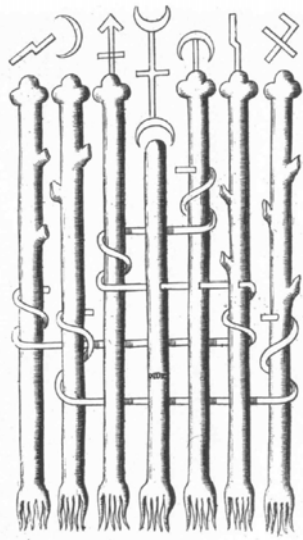
	realms (Roob 2001). As a symbol of the world axis, it is often associated with the Cosmic Tree and the pillar, each representing the link between different planes of existence. (Cooper 1978, p.94) In alchemy culture, Roob presents an analysis of the ladder as a symbol of advanced progression towards enlightenment. This metaphorical ladder represents the journey from ignorance to knowledge, and from the finite to the infinite, illustrating a path to transcendence and the divine. It encapsulates humanity's aspiration to attain the Absolute. (2001, p. 246-259) Additionally, Walker's research highlights that the Greek word <i>klimax</i> not only refers to a ladder to heaven but also signifies a "sexual encounter with the Goddess or with one's own feminine soul	F. Curtis, <i>Work Chart for the 2nd Level</i> (1801). In: <i>Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.255  <i>The 'ladder of heaven' of John Klimakos, 12th Century. In: Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.251	of the ladder integrates a triangle at its base and an inverted triangle at its apex, symbolizing the male and female principles, respectively. This configuration suggests that a sexual encounter is anticipated at the climax of the ladder.
--	---	--	--

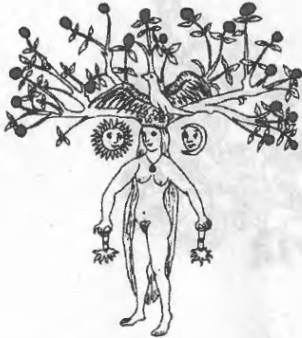
	(psyche, <i>shakti</i>), leading in both cases to mystic enlightenment” (1988, p.24).		
Conjunctio	<i>Conjunctio</i> could be considered as the "Conjunction", is a fundamental concept in alchemical tradition, representing the union of opposing elements or principles, such as the water and fire; moon (Luna) and sun (Sol); Sulphur and Mercury; as well as the universally masculine and feminine principles. (Hoch, 1934; Cooper 1978; Walker 1988) <i>Conjunctio</i> is one of the key stages in the alchemical <i>Magnum Opus</i> (great work). The Great Work is the process of creating the philosopher's stone and typically involves several stages of transformation, purification, and ultimately, union; it is a critical phase where	 <i>Materia Prima Lapidis Philosophorum</i>, manuscript, early 18th century. In: <i>Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.357 	In <i>Opus Magnum for a Girl</i> (2022), the theme of <i>conjunctio</i> is prominently depicted. I have incorporated the Sema symbol, along with representations of the sun and moon, within the imagery of a long neck beaker. This arrangement symbolises the process of creation and the birth of new life, illustrating the symbolic union of

	opposites (generally represented by the Queen and the King) are brought together, signifying a major advancement towards completion of the Work. (Roob 2001, p. 356-362) The illustrations from an alchemical manuscript such as the <i>Donum Dei</i>⁵¹, which depict various stages or concepts within the alchemical process. Roob (2001, p.358) exemplified 6 images to understanding the spiritual and physical transformations sought in alchemy; for example, in the <i>Solutio</i> (Solution, stage two): This image represents the stage of dissolution, where substances are broken down or dissolved. "The royal	<i>Donum Dei</i>, 12th Century. In: <i>Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.358  <i>Donum Dei</i>, 12th Century. In: <i>Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.359	complementary forces.
--	---	--	------------------------------

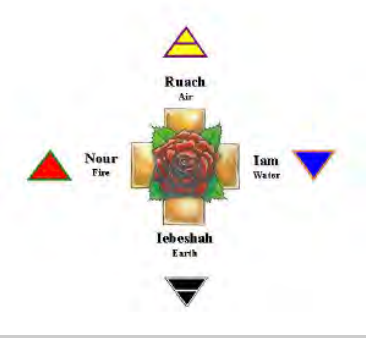
⁵¹ *The Pretiosissimum Donum Dei*, meaning "the most precious gift of God", stands as a pivotal early work within the alchemical corpus, renowned for its series of twelve intricate illustrations, with the earliest known version originating from the 15th century. Certain renditions attribute the authorship to Georgius Aurach de Argentina, occasionally cited as "Anrach", and date the work to circa 1475. Extant versions are found in several European languages — Latin, German, French, and Italian — with an English translation housed within the British Library's manuscript collection. Adam McLean [online], available from: <http://charm.cs.uiuc.edu/users/jyelon/pict-donum.html> [accessed: 22nd Dec 2023].

	pair" (The king and queen) within the flask represent the masculine and feminine principles, which are to be separated and dissolved in the alchemist's vessel. While the plant growing from the top suggests the growth or manifestation of new life or the new substance from this process.		
Philosophical Tree	In the discipline of alchemy, the Philosophical Tree or <i>Arbor Philosophica</i> often equated with the Tree of Life (Jung, 1967). Particularly, within the <i>Splendor Solis</i> manuscript, the Philosophical Tree is imbued with profound symbolism, which serves to elucidate essential progress to the alchemical pursuit of perfection. The ladder positioned on the middle of the image, a symbol traditionally linked in alchemical traditions	 S. Trismosin, <i>Splendor Solis</i>, London, 16th Century.	The Philosophical Tree, along with the broader concept of the worldwide tree symbol, occupies a central position in my research. Initially, it was applied in <i>Opus Magnum for a Girl</i> (2020), integrated with the vulva figure to create what I term the <i>Tree</i>

	with the Tree of Life, to symbolise the advancement through the stages of the opus magnum. Focusing on the content of the preceding allegory in the manuscript, Roob (2001, p.261) gives description of the figures embody the three generations of Aeneas' lineage: Aeneas himself, his father Anchises, and his son Silvius perched in the ladder. They are adorned in the primary colours of alchemical principle. The youth, Silvius, is garbed in black, marking the beginning of the work; Aeneas, in white, represents the intermediate stage known as opus parvum; and the elder, Anchises, is draped in red, symbolizing the culmination of the work or opus magnum. (ibid, p.261) In the alchemical process described by	 J. Lacinius, <i>Pretiosa Margarita</i>, Venice, 1546, Leipzig edition, 1714. In: <i>Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.359  Miscellanea d'Alchimia, Italy, 15th century	<i>of Vulva</i> (2020). This exploration of the Philosophical Tree serves as a foundational element for analysing the symbolic language inherent in alchemy. This principle is mirrored in the application of symbols within my own practice, illustrating a deep engagement with the symbolic and cultural analysis (see detail in chapter 6). This approach not only aids in deciphering the rich symbolic language of alchemy but also
--	---	---	--

	Gerard Dorneus portrays mercury as the 'mineral root' of a tree planted at the core of nature's womb, suggesting that all metals derive from it, and its branches extend across the world akin to veins within a body. In one of Jung's case studies, he examines the symbolic significance of the tree within alchemical context. Jung verified that none of the patients involved had prior knowledge of alchemy or shamanism. Yet, the tree symbol manifested with several inherent characteristics: (1) Universal midpoint of mankind. (2) Spiral rotation. (3) Tree of life and death. (4) The heart as the centre of man's vitality in conjunction with the tree. (5) Natural wisdom in the form of a dwarf. (6) the island as seat of the tree of life. (7) Cube=philosophers'	ALCHEMICAL TREE from a 16th-century Swiss manuscript  Alchemical tree by Barbara Walker, in <i>The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects</i> (1988), p. 459  The tree itself assumes human form and carries the sun. In the background is a wavy band of blood, surging rhythmically round the island Patient case study figure 23 by Jung, in provided figure the tree itself assumes human form, arguably woman, and carries the sun. In: Carl Jung's <i>Alchemical Studies</i> (1983), p.262.	underscores the significance of symbols in cultural discourse, thereby enriching the interpretative framework of my work.
--	--	---	--

	stone = treasure guarded by the tree. (Jung 1983, p.253-271)		
Alchemical Rose	Interestingly, the masculine red rose brings the different colour principle from contemporary gender colour stereotypes. In alchemical discourse, Roob's analysis suggests that the rose may be associated with the serpent. Within this symbolic context, the white rose represents the lunar Philosophical Tincture, and the red rose denotes the solar Metallic Tincture. The enigmatic blue rose, positioned centrally, is termed the flower of wisdom. Notably, blue does not possess an autonomous significance in alchemical colour theories; it typically indicates a moist state of matter and is seen	 Reussner H, <i>Pandora</i> (1582). In: <i>Alchemy & Mysticism</i> (2001), p.359  The 'White Rose' of alchemy, the queen, whose sceptred power is secondary to that of her consort and opposite, the king. Cooper's analysis associates the white rose with the queen in alchemy. In: <i>An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of</i>	I implied the contemporary red and blue gender stereotype to the alchemical rose to test if it is proper for my practice. (see fig.3-39 in the end of matrix 1-3) My first menstruation is a story about self-exploration and self-reflection. So, I have no intention to interpret the male principle in my work that will be represented by the blue colour. Through my

	as a variant of saturnine black. Besides, according to the bible (Leviticus 15:24), refers to the menstrual blood as “flowers”. In the Rosicrucian tradition, the alchemical rose is associated with the four fundamental elements and the Rose Cross, symbolizing the juncture between the celestial and the terrestrial within the human psyche (Pike, 1966). In general, it stands universally acknowledged as an emblem of beauty and love.	<i>Traditional Symbols</i> (1978), p.135.  Albert Pike’s cross of the elements, symbolic animals and alchemical principles. In book <i>Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite</i>, (1966), p. 791.  J. Augustus Knapp, <i>The Jewel of the Rose Croix</i>. in <i>An Encyclopedic Outline...</i>, p. LXXXIX. Note that this image of the pelican is suggestive of an	practice, the red rose character only represents the menstruation blood that contain merely female principle that different from the original alchemical red rose, and the red colour principle could further critique the gender stereotype.
--	--	---	--

		alchemist's athanor and alembic.	
--	--	-------------------------------------	--



Figure 3-39

Application of Alchemical Rose (2020)

Meichen Lu

Chinese watercolour

200mm x 200mm

Matrix 1-4 Collections of Geometrical Motifs

Symbols	Origins and Representation	Figure and Resources	Applications
<i>Round and oval motifs:</i> <i>Circle</i> <i>Mandala</i> <i>Mandorla</i> <i>Yoni</i> <i>Vesica</i> <i>Piscis</i>	The oval, round and lozenge are both recognised as the vulva, embodies the female life symbol in various cultural and spiritual contexts (Cooper 1978). Walker (1988, p.2) posits that pre-patriarchal worldviews were fundamentally non-linear and multidimensional, perceiving life not merely as a sequence of events but as a mandala—a holistic representation where each facet is interwoven into the grand continuum of being. This perspective resonates with Jung's conception of the mandala. Jung (1983, p.75) perceives mandala as emblematic of individuation, a process leading to the realisation of the Self. He elaborates that mandala imagery, rather than depicting the various stages and	 Mandala containing the Infant Christ carrying the Cross —Mural painting by Albertus Pictor in the church of Harkeberga, Sweden (c. 1480). In: Carl Jung's Alchemical Studies (1983, p.130, fig.52)  Graphical mandorla motifs by Barbara Walker.	In my body of work, the oval motif is a recurring element, notably featured in pieces such as <i>Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality</i> (2020) and <i>Opus Magnum for a Girl</i> (2022). In these works, the oval shape is used as a decorative background pattern, complementing and reflecting the evolving depiction of the foreground vulva-character. Through this artistic choice, I intend to emphasise the symbolic essence of the oval: it represents the vulva rather than

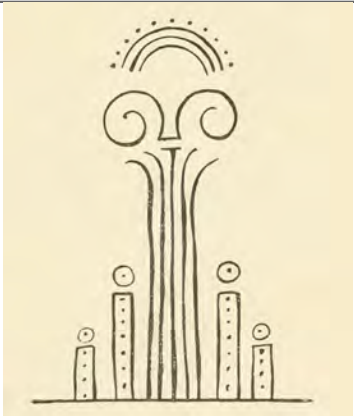
metamorphoses of individuation, primarily illuminates the emergent consciousness of a new psychic centre (Jung 1983, p.75-78). However, Walker highlights the roundness symbolism as the beginning of universe, which transcends patriarchal hierarchical structures, acknowledging no head or tail, no upper or lower echelons, eschewing status indicators entirely. Unlike the cross, with its masculine and phallic implications, the circle is devoid of status cues, symbolising a seamless continuum that unifies life and death, light and dark, celestial and infernal, into a singular holistic ideal. The mandorla, commonly known as the *vesica piscis* (Vessel of the Fish) *ichthus*, is an almond-shaped aureole often referred to as the mystical almond, and more simply as the yoni (Walker, 1988, p.10). These three symbols have carries rich



Graphical mandorla motifs by Barbara Walker. Indeed, it is straightforward to ascertain from graphic representations that both the yoni and the mandorla share an almond-like shape. This similarity in form underlines the symbolic resonance of these motifs across different cultural and spiritual contexts.

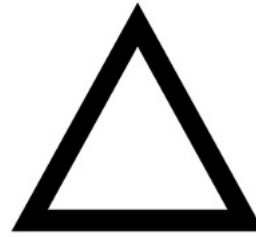


the uterus. This distinction is crucial in my graphical narrative, underscoring the specific anatomical and symbolic significance of the oval motif and distinguish of female genitalia details. Besides, in *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020) and *Hortus Conclusus for a Woman* (2022), I employ oval and roundness shapes in the painting frame, reinforcing the feminine narrative and its centrality.

	connotations, both representing divinity, holiness, the sacred, virginity, and the vulva. It symbolizes an opening or gateway, with its bilateral symmetry denoting the convergence of opposites and the interplay of duality (Cooper 1978; Walker, 1988). Walker (1988, p.18) specifies the sign of the yoni originated from the Sanskrit term <i>Jagad Yoni</i> which was meant to convey the shape of external female genitalia, the vulva instead of the womb.	Carlo Crivelli, <i>Vision of the Blessed Gabriele</i>, 1489. Egg and oil on poplar, 141 × 87 cm. The National Gallery, London.	
<i>Long motifs:</i> <i>Pillar</i> <i>Linga</i> <i>(Lingam)</i>	I propose that long way motifs as symbols of the masculine principle are more readily understood compared to roundness symbolising the feminine. Since this is largely self-explanatory given the outward physicality and observable morphology of male genitals. Additionally, as feminist philosophers like Beauvoir and Irigaray have posited, there exists a cultural tendency among male	 Group of Sacred Pillars on Mycenaean Vase from Haliki. In: Evans, A.J. <i>Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult</i> (1901), p.41	In my body of work, the long way motif is employed as a background decoration, designed to complement and integrate with the actions of the foreground characters. This strategic placement enhances the overall narrative

groups to compare the length of their genitals. Hence, the elongated or longitudinal motif is undeniably representative of the phallus. Cooper (1978, p.98) clarifies in Hinduism, the Linga represents the phallus, embodying creativity and the masculine generative principle, often paired with the yoni, symbolising the feminine. It is primarily a symbol of Shiva as the creator. The Linga is often depicted in forms such as pillars, columns, rectangle, cones, etc., and is frequently associated with the tree, reinforcing its profound and multifaceted masculine symbolism.	 Arthur Evans (1901, p.42) explains the artifact depicts a male figure engaged in an act of adoration before five columns that bear architectural significance, characterized by their vertical and spiral flutings. Figure: Worship of Group of Pillars on Cylinder, Mycenae. In: <i>Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult</i> (1901), p.43	and visual depth of the pieces, creating a cohesive interaction between the background and the foreground elements.
---	---	--

Three-way motifs: The triangle has historically symbolised the three-in-one unity of the Goddess, dating back to the earliest forms of written expression, “as the four-way designs of squares and crosses usually represented the male principle, so the three-way design of the triangle and its many relatives usually represented the female principle” (Walker, 1988, p.39). However, similar to the four fundamental elements symbols of water and fire in alchemy, which are represented by upright triangle and the inverted triangle, respectively, these shapes symbolise the male and female principles. Cooper (1978, p.179-180) confirms the double triangle, also known as the six-pointed star or the Seal of Solomon, represents the harmonious union of opposites; it includes the male and female, positive and negative, also the hermaphrodite.



Graphical double triangle creation by Barbara Walker.

The predominant use of triangular motifs is evident in the artwork titled *The Horror of The Little Dickhead* (2020). This piece features a graphical title drawn on the wall, incorporating six distinct triangular motifs. These motifs succinctly encapsulate my introspective journey towards an accurate comprehension of the cervix during an initial masturbation experience. Within this context, the upright triangle symbolises the male principle, whereas the inverted triangle is emblematic of female genitalia, thereby providing a visual discourse

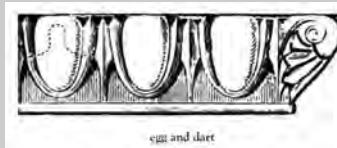
on gender and biological identity

<i>Conjunction motifs:</i> <i>Lingam-Yoni Sema (Sma) Egg and dart frieze Pinecone and lotus</i>	The conjunction motifs could be understood as the combination of long way motifs with the oval and round way motifs. The most typically example is the lingam-yoni, specifically depicting the lingam within the yoni. It is a prominent feature of Tantric altars, including the belief that sexual love is the origin of human life, the necessity of the union of male and female principles for the existence of all things, and the perpetual union of the Goddess and God as essential for the sustenance of the universe (Walker, 1988). In ancient Egyptian culture, the Menat holds a similar symbolic significance to the lingam-yoni in Tantric tradition. The Menat is analogous to the Egyptian symbol of authority, often represented as a whip (Cooper, 1978). This association indicates a connotation of strength	Stone lingam and yoni pedestal found in Cát Tiên, Vietnam, circa 8th century. Graphical lingam-yoni motifs by Barbara Walker. Linga and Yoni, in the Trowulan Museum,	The use of conjunction motifs is a prevalent feature in my work, most notably exemplified by <i>Plentiful in Ideal yet Skinny in Reality</i> (2020). Within this piece, the lingam-yoni motif is employed as a background decoration, while the egg-and-dart frieze is adapted into a decorative border. In <i>Opus Magnum for a Girl</i> (2020), the motifs of the pinecone and lotus are utilised to signify sexual intercourse, integrated within my symbol methodology of decorative border application. in this piece, I incorporate the Sema symbol
--	---	---	--

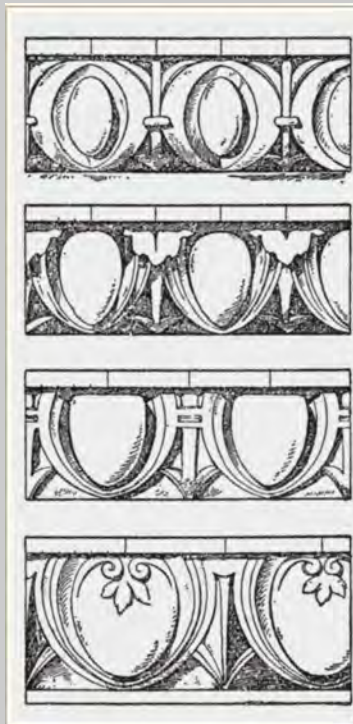
and power. Furthermore, the menat was believed to promote fertility, underscoring its multifaceted role in Egyptian religious and cultural practices (Cooper, 1978; Walker, 1988). Walker (1988, p.312) discusses the Egyptian “Amulet of the Sam”, or “sma”, noting its resemblance to the lingam-yoni design. While Egyptologists often refer to it as a symbol of union, its significance to the Egyptians extended beyond this. In the context of Egyptian culture, the amulet symbolised knowledge, understood in the biblical sense where “knowing” equates to sexual intercourse (Walker 1988, p. 312). This interpretation implies that divine power is comprehended through physical sensation. Budge⁵² (1977, p.58) identified <i>seshemu</i> as a	Mojokerto, in East Java, Indonesia. Online resource: https://www.egyptian-witchcraft.com/ancient-egyptian-amulets/#Amulet of Sam Graphical Sam motifs by Barbara Walker.	alongside arum plants to emphasise the concept of the union of two sexes. The arum plant, known as jack-in-the-pulpit, in the United States, is predominantly interpreted as a symbol of the lingam-yoni, more than any other association Walker (1988). Walker (1988, p.440) references Geoffrey Grigson's interpretation of the arum representing the phallus of the lecherous cuckoo, which symbolises the act of cuckoldry among birds, depicting the phallus
--	--	--

⁵² Sir E.A. Wallis Budge (27 July 1857 – 23 November 1934), a distinguished English Egyptologist, Orientalist, and philologist, made significant contributions to the study of ancient Egyptian culture during his tenure at the British Museum. His extensive publications shed light on various aspects of ancient Egyptian life and beliefs. (Who's Who, 1907)

hieroglyph denoting knowledge, directly translated as sexual intercourse. This interpretation aligns with the broader Egyptian perception of knowledge as an experiential understanding. Further, Budge cites Herodotus in his *Gods of the Egyptians*, noting that priestesses of Bast, in their religious practices, would conduct a ritual exhibition of their genitals (1969, p.448). This act was interpreted as a symbolic gesture, inviting a deeper comprehension of the Goddess, and was an integral part of their sacred rites. Accordingly, in tantric religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, Indian, and Egyptian culture, the lingam-yoni symbolises the embodiment of male and female divine power. However, this perception contrasts sharply with Western attitudes towards the symbol. Walker (1988, p.318) observes that



Egg and dart motif. In: Harris, M. *Dictionary of Architecture & Construction* (2006, p.357).



Online resources:

<https://ornamental-woodcarver-patrickdamiaens.blogspot.com/2014/04/egg-and-dart-molding-carved-in-wood.html>



ensconced within a sheath. In *Opus Magnum for a Girl* (2020), I depict the arum entwining in a vine-like manner around the columnar structure of the Sema. The Sema is additionally showcased within an oval framed panel, where it is associated with the moon and sun symbol, depicting and representing the progress of giving birth to new-born.

Westerners typically label the lingam-yoni as obscene; in Western religious traditions, sexuality is not commonly regarded as a divine or motivating force, leading to its more critical perception of symbols like the lingam-yoni. The egg and dart motif are a recurrent feature in classical Greek and Roman architecture (Harris, 2006). John Milnes Baker, an AIA architect, describes the pattern as comprising oval shapes resembling longitudinally split eggs, interspersed with non-curved elements resembling darts (1994, p.170). Graphically, these darts are repeated within the egg pattern. The egg symbol is often interpreted as representing life or rebirth, while the dart, akin to an arrow, might symbolise death or mortality (Walker, 1988). This combination serves to create a balance, encapsulating both birth	A palmette, lotus flower and pinecone frieze covering a trabeation, Etruscan Museum of Villa Giulia, Rome  The pine-cone incense-burner on this ancient Nubian bronze shrine symbolizes the life-sustaining power and fertility of the gods to whose service and worship the incense was burned. Cooper's analysis on pine-cone symbolism. In: <i>An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols</i> (1978), p.131.	
--	--	--

and decay, male and female.

Arnold Whittick (1971, p.296-297) explicates that the pinecone has been an ancient symbol, representing fertility and regeneration, which subsequently leads to its adoption as a motif in sepulchral and architectural ornamentation. A notable instance of its use is observed in Assyrian ornamentation, where pinecones are alternated with lotus flowers in a border pattern (Whittick 1971). This motif is decorative while symbolic, offering an alternative to other classic ornamentations such as the Egg and Dart frieze (Walker 1988).