

Female Body and Identity:  
A Critical Reflection into the Art of Mid-life

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art Education

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## ABSTRACT

### **Female Body and Identity: A Critical Reflection into the Art of Mid-life**

Carol Beer Houpert

This thesis articulates how my own artwork/artistic process is part of a lifelong narrative about my female body and identity, which has unfolded within a patriarchal society and its language. This project of articulation is supported by two related activities. First, I compare my current artwork and life narrative, which are focused on mid-life and menopause, with those of artist Pauline Aitken. Second, by using selected literature from feminist art scholarship, I interpret and contextualise key themes of my own and Aitken's artworks and life narratives.

I show how gender influences the woman artist's intent and process: her choice of subject matter and materials, and the resulting narrative. I examine how other women artists and I create a visual vocabulary that is true to our female identities, a vocabulary that can withstand the language of our patriarchal society. This thesis concludes with critical reflections on my own art learning experiences.

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**Marie Genevieve, Merci**

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## Introduction

This thesis articulates how my own artwork/artistic process is part of a lifelong narrative about my female body and identity, which has unfolded within a patriarchal society and its language. This project of articulation is supported by two related activities. First, I compare my current artwork and life narrative, which are focused on mid-life and menopause, with those of artist Pauline Aitken. Second, by using selected literature from feminist art scholarship, I interpret and contextualise key themes of my own and Aitken's artworks and life narratives.

I show how gender influences the woman artist's intent and process: her choice of subject matter and materials, and the resulting narrative. I examine how other women artists and I create a visual vocabulary that is true to our female identities, a vocabulary that can withstand the language of our patriarchal society. This thesis concludes with critical reflections on my own art learning experiences.

The idea for this thesis grew from my interest in narrative found in women's art. Not all women's art is feminist art, but I believe that art made from a feminist consciousness holds a narrative that has a sense of the familiar for both women artists and women viewers.

### *My Background Narrative*

We did not have a television when I was young. In the evening, my mother would sit and read to us. She did not read children's books, and I still remember realising that the stories being told allowed me to enter into someone else's life experiences. One book in particular was called *I, Mungo Park*. I do not remember who Mungo Park was, but I do remember that he was on an adventure in Africa and this was his diary. My mother's

voice and gestures conjured up vivid pictures that the words alone could not have conveyed, and this inspired me to record my own personal narrative. I began to write journals, hiding them under my bed, and, later, when I made art, I would write about it. I did not realise that my artwork held another kind of narrative that I was making public: a silent visual journal.

In retrospect, at what seemed a very young age, I did what was expected of me: I got married and stopped making art; I was too busy fulfilling the role that I had assumed. After my marriage ended, I started to write and make art again. My art related mostly to my body, and depicted a faceless woman, so I believed there was nothing to link me to the viewer's experience of the object. I wrote a narrative about each piece, making it an integral part of the work.

I did not question why I made this kind of art. Most people thought my work was not “real art,” but an extension of the “women’s art” that I did to make my world more interesting. Stained glass, quilting, embroidery, and weaving—all outlets for my creativity—were acceptable feminine forms of art.<sup>1</sup> This was not like the other “stuff” that I “wasted” my time on, the “stuff that was hidden in the basement.”

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable. (Rich, 1980, p. 63)

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<sup>1</sup>Helen Chadwick (1997), in *Women, Art and Society*, states that during the 15th century the “male” art of painting was elevated above “female” art such as embroidery. She mentions Neri De Bicci, Sandro Botticelli, and Antonio Pollaiuolo as artists who produced designs for professional embroiderers. During this period, embroidery was relegated to the province of the woman amateur. Pollaiuolo, in his embroidery *The Birth of John the Baptist*, used a technique called *or nué*, which created the same perspective effects as in painting. Redefined as a domestic art requiring manual labour and collective activity rather than individual genius, mathematical reasoning, and divine inspiration, embroidery and needlework came to signify domesticity and “femininity” (p. 75).

I enjoyed my “women’s art.” It was necessary for my sense of well-being, but I did not write about it. I wrote about the art that seemed to be part of me, part of my body. I worried who would see my art, and what they would think of me—that perhaps I was not normal. My mother said it was angry art, and that I had no reason to be angry. My father said it was not art; my work disturbed him. Already my art told a story, but I still did not realise that it was my story.

Again, my life circumstances changed and I enrolled in the Art Education programme at Concordia University. I took studio courses to allow me to make the kind of art that seemed instinctive to me. What I made did not always please my teachers or me, but I continued to work instinctively, making work that I felt I needed to do. I called my art “women’s art—body memories.”

I have always had huge gaps in my childhood memories, but I knew that what was missing in my mind, my body held. By creating body works, I was working with my memories—a woman’s memories. I had disowned my body; I felt it was no longer mine, that it had stopped functioning, and now I wanted it back. It belonged to me. With this realisation, my art began to change and the personal work began to address what I felt to be more social issues. I began using my own body in my work, affirming its place in a society that objectified women and their bodies. I did not consciously set out to use my body as a medium for my narrative. I made a series of self-portraits that said who and what I was, and my body became the vehicle for that message. By using my body, both as self-portrait and as a social commentary, I addressed issues that are part of my life experience. I transferred these life experiences into my artwork and gave them a new life. This work empowered me because it afforded me the opportunity to take control and to

represent my body as I saw myself: as a woman and not as an image created by the media.

My works dealt with birth, motherhood, ageing, and death. Depicted with its scars of time, its memories, and its experiences, my body is defined and shaped by pregnancy, menstruation, and menopause. This older body is no longer an object of interest by media standards, but it is still a force to be reckoned with. At this point in my process, I ask, “What is the position of the mid-life woman in today’s society and how does the menopausal woman artist represent her embodied experience through her art and the media she uses?”

## Methods of Inquiry

### *2.1 How and Why I Chose Pauline Aitken*

I needed to see what other women artists did and how they represented themselves in society. I sought out women artists who also addressed the subjects of ageing, motherhood, life, and death.

Women studying women reveals the complex way in which women as objects of knowledge reflect back upon women as subjects of knowledge. Knowledge of the other and knowledge of self are mutually informing because self and other share a common condition of being women. (Weskott, 1979 in McLaren, 2001)

How did women artists represent themselves and their society in their work? As a woman and artist, I wanted to experience the impact that other women's art had on me. I wanted to know the "why" behind the autobiographical and social content of the art. Was the art simply about an object, or was it addressing the relationship between the object and its personal or social context?

The core of this thesis parallels British artist Pauline Aitken's and my own works and puts emphasis on the role gender plays in the written, verbal, and visual narratives of both our art and our artist identities. The comparison is based upon recorded interviews, e-mails, and telephone conversations with Aitken, and my own journals, prose, and narrative related to the artwork of my mid-life period.

My choice of Aitken was the result of a gradual process. I searched databases and indexes that related to art and artists, including an Internet search, and narrowed my search to Canada and the United Kingdom. I researched women artists in galleries, art reviews, magazines, and art books, and came up with a set of criteria for comparing my own process and art with that of other women artists. I concluded that, to do a meaningful study, the artists chosen should fit the following criteria: They should use or create

images referring to the female body; they should come from a similar cultural environment and have a similar education background as myself; and, lastly, they should also, like me, be women in their mid-life.

## ***2.2 Interview and Data Collection: Methods and Procedures Used***

I met with Aitken at her home in Suffolk, England, and conducted several hours of tape-recorded interviews. The interviews were open-ended, allowing Aitken to talk about herself and her work. Before the actual interviews, I discussed with Aitken my reasons for choosing her, and then suggested topics that I would like her to address: her choice of materials, her intent, her concern with the viewer, and the importance of an artist's gender. I asked her to talk about the experience of using her own body in art making, and the use of narrative in and about the work. The interviews were then transcribed and discussed with Aitken. Given the geographical distance, further information or questions were answered over the telephone and via e-mail.

I then wrote my responses to the same topics that I asked Aitken to address in the interviews. I analysed our answers and looked for similarities in our narratives and visual vocabulary. I then reflected on my own narratives using written and visual material and the reaction of viewers to specific pieces of my art. The artworks that I have selected are those that I believe confront the personal and cultural experience of ageing, in particular those that focus on the period of mid-life that includes menopause.

The essence of the comparison is on specific similarities between Pauline Aitken's artwork and my own. I explore the following four themes common to us both and relate them to relevant scholarly literature:

1. Both Aitken and I work with mixed media. I discuss Aitken's and my reasons for working with particular materials, and their impact on the narrative of our works.
2. We both work with our own bodies or with metaphorical images and symbols of the female body. In my discussion, I refer to feminist literature that deals with the use of the body by women artists.
3. In our current work, we both address the meaning of mid-life and menopause. I will examine historical autobiographical women's art for societal and cultural narrative that relates to the artists' status as ageing women. I will also examine how culture and the male medical model has influenced the language of mid-life and menopause for women.

I conclude by looking at Aitken's and my works for their use of a female visual vocabulary. I will not use formal qualities as a criteria for determining narrative. During my research I found this to be a criteria used in the patriarchal system. Borzello (1998,2000), Chadwick (1997), state that the theory and standards for practice and discussion of art were set by men adding that the systems used to define good art were taught to men according to male expectations.

I first contacted Pauline Aitken through Axis Artist, a database of professional artists run by Leeds Metropolitan University in England. The university provided me with Aitken's telephone number and e-mail address, and I sent Aitken a brief overview of my interests and why I had been drawn to her art. I wrote about my interest in narrative, both visual and written, and that I believed it was an important part of women's art. I also sent

a list of questions that I would like her to consider. Aitken agreed that we would meet at her home during my visit to England that summer.

I sat on the train to Eye, rereading my e-mail to Aitken, mouthing the words I would use and trying to anticipate any questions that might arise. I reviewed my sources, ideas, and beliefs. I searched for the right words so that I would not hesitate or go off on a tangent, something I tend to do when talking about women artists. This interview was important to my thesis, and I was sure that I would get the answers I wanted by asking the right questions in a certain way.

I felt nervous as I knocked on the door at the address Aitken had given me. A woman with a warm smile, not much different from myself in height and stature, introduced herself as Pauline Aitken, and invited me into her house. She was very businesslike, but at the same time very welcoming. I was presented to her husband, and then we sat straight down at the kitchen table to begin the interview. We first discussed the direction the interview should take. We decided that the first part of the interview would be general background on who Aitken was and how she had become an artist, and then later, after lunch, we would go into her studio to discuss her art.

I began by restating my purpose as I had outlined in the e-mails. I explained that I was doing research for my thesis on a woman artist, a woman that used her body, or metaphors for the body, in her art. I clarified that I was not trying to make a comparison between men and women artists, but rather examine how women artists who use female imagery see themselves and their narrative, whether real or implied, written or visual. I also told Aitken that I was interested in whether or not her gender had had any impact on



her work or herself as an artist. Once these basics were covered, we tested the equipment and began the interview.

At this point, Pauline told me that she preferred to talk and not answer questions. She felt that, if she were concentrating on specific questions, she would always be aware of being focused only in one area and therefore it would be a less complete interview. She felt that by just talking she would forget I was interviewing her, and it would be much more natural and honest. I agreed that I would not interrupt unless it applied to the specific point she was making. I put away my questions and made a mental note that I was relinquishing control of the interview.

### ***2.3 Presenting Pauline Aitkin's Narrative***

For the purpose of this thesis, I have selected narrative from the transcribed interviews with Aitken, according to its relevance to my research themes. My dilemma was how to present Aitken's story without inserting my own voice into her narrative. Laurel Richardson (1990) in *Writing Strategies: Reaching Diverse Audiences* discusses different narrative formats and practical solutions for presenting storytelling within a text. She suggests that there are no wrong methods and that existing "grand theories" on writing format are open to question.

Richardson (1990) uses the example of her own book *The New Other Woman* to discuss the method of presenting a text that has two interlocking narratives: a social narrative and that of the "other woman." She calls these "analytical chronologies," which she divides into separate chapters, linking the themes by chronological order so as not to separate the data from the theory, thus giving the other women space to tell their own stories. This is the method that I have chosen to present the social and personal narratives

in this thesis. The interlocking narratives presented here are the narrative of the historical and societal attitudes that affect women artists in mid-life and the artist's narrative itself. Aitken had given me a complete chronological narrative of her life as an artist, including the social and personal events that had created change or transformation in her artwork. I wanted this story to be heard in her own voice, a voice coming from her own collective memory of embodied experiences. Judy Long (1999) suggests that the boundaries between narrator and subject are not fixed. The narrator at times is also the subject, and likewise the subject becomes the narrator, each with his or her own truth. To maintain individual truths, I have separated myself as subject and narrator from Aitken as subject and narrator, giving place to each voice within a chapter. To further emphasise this, I have italicised Aitken's narrative.

#### ***2.4 Pauline Aitken's Background Narrative***

*I believe that it is important to begin at the beginning. I graduated from the Slade School of Art, and then did one year of graduate studies. After I finished at the Slade, I was visiting, lecturing, and producing my own work and exhibiting.*

*Then, I did the typical thing—I got married. I was visiting and lecturing on the south coast of England. I was based in London, so I went home at weekends.*

*My husband was given a full-time lectureship at Norwich, so I did what was expected of me. I did the woman's thing of following her man and relinquished my lecturing . . . that was in the 70s.*

*We had a large property and the idea to turn it into a studio for ourselves because he was a painter. In fact, the marriage break-up came at a point when the*

*building was still being restored, and this was when my work came to a standstill because I was typically working on the building, restoring it, then we reached a point where we had two rooms that were liveable—I was about 32 and I said I would like a child . . . it was about time to have a child. Then I had my baby and was bringing up the baby in a difficult environment. I was also working, still on the building, and so at that point [I went] from being very productive, down to drawing pictures of my child—because the drawing board could be picked up and put down, and the medium lends itself to being taken everywhere and quickly used.*

*My own work, which was very much about plant forms and looking at plant systems and processes, came to a total end, really. There were aspects that I continued, but I might as well say that it fizzled out altogether. So, the creativity within me came out through the drawings, through working on the house, through the restoration work, and also through what could be called “craft activities” as well, even down to crocheting for my child. You know your whole heart is in it, [laughing] it’s just wonderful.*

*And then my marriage broke up.*

*James was two, and that was when I came to live in Eye. I had to get a full-time job to support us. A teaching job came up, literally down the road, teaching art and design at a local high school, and I got the job.*

*Through my teaching, I met my present husband. He was working at the school at that time. At the point when we were married, not only did we move into a bigger house in Eye, but also the interesting thing was what was happening to*

*me. I was starting to get periods of intense migraines. I had never had them in my life before. I decided I didn't want to take drugs, so I thought I would take the alternative route and I saw an herbalist. She said, "the first thing you've got to do is to stop full-time work, it's just too much, you're not doing any of your own work. Try to work out in yourself what it is you want to do, and you have got to try and do that in some way." Well, pretty obviously, I wanted to do my own work. My family life was important as well, but what I had stopped doing was producing my own paintings, drawings, and prints, and exhibitions were few and far between. I had just turned my whole attention to teaching, really. So I reduced myself to, I think, three days a week at that stage, part-time teaching, at two local colleges of art, and the next important repatterning of my life where I became more productive [in terms of my own artwork].*

*I should say there was a huge gap in my life at the period following the birth of my child. When I talk to friends and colleagues, certainly, that period of bringing up a family meant that they couldn't be productive as artists. [There are difficulties in] managing to maintain some kind of productivity, or some form of creativity, through that period. But really, I think most people resume, or most women resume, work once children have gone to school, and ditto, once all the children have left home, and the pattern of your life changes again. Also at that point, if you have a partner who helps in supporting you, you can reorientate totally and divide the day into what you want to do when you want to do it.*

*I remember listening to a seminar by a fellow student from the Slade on women's hour on the radio, talking about a big exhibition she had in London. She*

*was a single woman; she had never married, not divorced, never married. She was asked whether her paintings were her children and she replied yes, to a degree, they were. The assumption was then made that she hadn't had children because she was too busy producing her artwork and it was totally involving.*

Here, I interjected that Paula Modersohn Becker and Frida Kahlo wrote in their dairies of giving birth to their paintings.

*Yes, yes. To relate to that comment myself, I am so fussy about going to an exhibition or something, I am like a broody hen about the place, and I always apologise and say I am sorry, but these are like my babies. I use that phrase and I know it is true.*

*I have got a room in the house where the work is stacked and sometimes I go in there and I love the feeling that comes over me. It is like checking through things like, I don't know, like checking through the laundry for the child. There is another feeling that comes over you, checking that things are stacked correctly and, therefore, all is safe and secure. Yes, I look around as you would look at a child in its cot and check that all is safe before you turn and leave the room.*

*When James [Aitken's son] left school, that was another big changing point in my life because the whole pattern of my day changed . . . . He left home, and then again, the work pattern changed for me, changed at home.*

*You might be interested to know that the whole period of work that relates to me printing my body, and the work associated with that, relates very directly to some work that my son did. I would rather talk about that when we go over [to the studio] and we are looking at it. I just want to say this about where I am now*

*because, up to two years ago, the work was running in two parallel directions. I had always worked on this thing about plant processes, and that had been analogous to processes in the human body, particularly the female body, and forms that became metaphors, and that sort of thing. Then, I actually printed my body, and the first time ever since being a student, the work was figurative. Then the residency placement came up and I had to think about what I was going to do in this factory. Now, I had just received a grant award, which would enable me to use the electro-microscope at Cambridge University. Since 1984, I have looked at one plant, and one plant only, and prior to that, it was different plants and it was mostly leaves. I honed in on this one plant called the "Snake's Head Fritillary," and the grant enabled me to look at certain tissue, particularly petal tissue, of this one flower under the electronic microscope. So, that was a mind-blowing new development in my work and that's probably enough about me.*

## Comparison through Conversation on Three Themes

In 1990, Yvonne Rainer's film *Privilege* premiered at New York's Film Forum. Rainer's work was noted for being unconventional, and the reaction of the audience to the film was one of shock. Marcia Tucker (1999) explains that it was not the unconventionality of *Privilege* that so shocked the audience, but the use of the word "menopause": "The word 'menopause' just wasn't spoken out loud—at least not outside the doctor's office" (p. 4).

I think it necessary, before addressing the artist's visual and oral text on the art of menopause, to proceed with a brief, historical medical and cultural overview of the female menopause, and offer the reader an understanding of how the social vocabulary, symbols, and metaphors of menopause were constructed and continue to be perpetuated.

### *3.1 Art and Menopause*

#### *A Historical Overview of Menopause: Medical Model*

In Western culture, there is conflict between the understanding of ageing and menopause; society tends not to be able to differentiate between the two. Lock (1982, 1993) states that menopausal women are characterised by abnormality—a pathological hormonal system that is the result of increased life expectancy. Before advances in public health, housing, and nutrition were made at the beginning of the 20th century, women seldom made it to the age of menopause (Martin, 1994). It was common for women to die either during childbirth or of some disease before reaching the age of menopause. The fact that many women died before reaching menopause could explain the lack of non-medical vocabulary for the individual menopausal experience.

Menopause occurs clinically one year after the last menstruation, although this is not necessarily the case. It is defined as the cessation of menstruation that occurs when the ovaries no longer produce eggs or hormones. This usually occurs sometime between 45 and 55 years of age. Zamecki (2001) states that historically, the Western medical model has seen menopause as a disease that affects society in a negative way. She argues that the medical profession created a vocabulary for menopause, constructing a disease model that implies women in mid-life become ill.

In 1848, the “change of life,” as it is commonly called, was considered to lead to insanity because certain functions cease and the constitution is thereby always more or less deranged (Delaney et al, 1976). Delaney et al suggest that opinions such as this gave rise to the hysterical woman stereotype and state that the treatment for hysteria in the 1900s was to remove the offending cause, the ovaries, and thereby push women into early menopause. This was considered castration of women. By 1976, 63% of menopausal women in North America had had their uterus removed as a treatment for menopause (Delaney et al, 1976).

In 1938, Organon, a leading Dutch drug company, argued that there were economic and social reasons for treating menopausal women with oestrogen. They promoted oestrogen therapy for women as a means to reduce sickness in the workplace and maintain the level of women’s productivity (Oudshoorn, 1994).

David Reuben (1969), a psychiatrist and the author of the best-selling book *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex: But Were Afraid to Ask*, wrote:

As estrogen is shut off, a woman comes as close as she can to being a man. Increased facial hair, deepened voice, obesity, and decline of breasts and female genitalia all contribute to a masculine appearance. Not really a man, but no longer a functional woman, these individuals live in a world of intersex. Having outlived their ovaries, they have outlived their usefulness as human beings. (p. 287)



Robert Wilson (1966), psychiatrist and author of *Feminine Forever*, maintained that menopause was a “mutilation of the whole body.” He advocated hormone replacement for women from puberty to the grave to alleviate this physical decline. Opinions such as those of Wilson and Reuben are no longer considered appropriate, but were nevertheless internalised by a society that holds youth and beauty as the norm for women in society. Wilson was instrumental in convincing medical practitioners that women could be kept “feminine forever.” As Lock explains, “The youthful, fertile, sensual female body is woman; once past reproductive age she becomes other, bound for decrepitude, her life split in two by the presence or absence of menstrual cycles, normal to abnormal, healthy to diseased” (1993, p. 365).

In 1981, the World Health Organization defined menopause as an “oestrogen deficiency disease,” a sickness to be medicated (Kaufert, 1986). This disease, considered by many cultures as a natural and spiritual rite of passage, relegates the mid-life female to the status of a sick person, and puts control of the female body in the hands of the doctors.

Modern-day media also plays a part in perpetuating the diseased image of menopause. Media images of supermodel Lauren Hutton promote oestrogen replacement therapy as a means of staying young and well: “Hutton is currently the spokesperson for ‘Vitality: Health and Wellness for Midlife and Beyond,’ a national menopause health education campaign sponsored by an educational grant from Wyeth-Ayerst pharmaceuticals” (<http://healthology.com/2002>).

### *Cross-Cultural Perspective of Menopause*

“For what is done or learned by one class of women becomes, by virtue of their common womanhood, the property of all women,” so wrote Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman in the U.S. to become a physician.

Menopause is a rite of passage shared by all women of all races and classes. How women experience this rite of passage is affected by the culture in which they live. Certain physiological changes occur universally in the human organism during the life cycle. No matter how intimate or idiosyncratic these changes may be, they are filtered through cultural expectations and are experienced in conformity with those expectations.

A 1993 study by Gannon and Ekstrom on North American women found that, when menopause was discussed within a medical context, women expressed more negative and fewer positive attitudes than they did when menopause was discussed in reference to ageing and life transitions. The research concludes “beliefs and expectations inherent in the prevailing socio-cultural paradigm are responsible for the formation of specific attitudes toward menopause, which in turn influence the actual experience of menopause” (p. 276).

Cross-cultural studies have found that not all menopausal women experience the same physical and psychological symptoms. Beyene’s (1989) research with Mayan women and Lock’s (1993) study of Japanese menopausal women found that, although non-Western women could attribute the inexistence or lack of physical symptoms of menopause to bio-cultural differences, they did not suffer the psychological problems of Western women that are linked to socio-cultural differences.

Every individual within a particular socio-cultural context is shaped by that context. The “practice of the self” involves using the language of one’s cultural milieu to express one’s autonomy, to shape the individual. But the dynamic and continuous process is inherently

limited because the culture provides only one version of “language”; there is a discrete and limited pool of cultural idioms and metaphors from which an individual can draw. (Bulbeck, 2001)

Dr. Gabriella Berger’s (1999) study on the role culture plays in menopause found that societies’ stereotypical and negative attitudes are damaging for women. Berger’s research looked at 140 women from the Philippines and Australia, and found that, although both sets of women experienced few physical problems in menopause, four times more Australian than Philippine women had psychological problems relating to depression, irritability, and anger. At first, Berger attributed these symptoms to menopause, but on further research found that this was not so. The psychological difficulties were related to getting older and the value Western culture places on beauty and youth. Ageing for a Philippine woman meant a gain in status and importance, but for Australian women, ageing was associated with loss of power and status, and created a negative experience causing symptoms that are considered stereotypical of menopausal women.

### *An Artist’s Perspective*

Germaine Greer (1991) states that the menopausal woman is the prisoner of a stereotype and will not be rescued from it until she has begun to tell her own story (p. 17). In Western cultures, menopausal women are informed by the medical profession about menopause and use the language and metaphors taken from a medical vocabulary to describe their own experiences. Zamecki (2001) argues that women who choose to invent their own language open the possibility for experiencing a potentially positive and life-altering menopause.

We are not trying to discover and treat a disease, we are trying to invent and speak a language. That is the treatment. To speak and listen to the life, and the goal isn’t that the life

heal or become normal or even cease its suffering, but that the life become more itself, be more true to its soul. (Hillman in McLaren, 2001)

**Pauline Aitken**

*I have always drawn in a very precise way, not emotional; I have never come from the emotional standpoint, always very measured. Meticulous mark making and drawing, you know, the old Euston Road school of drawing—not a glimmer of emotion going into it, all careful assessment—that is where I was from.*

*From all of this objective, cool, and whatever, I started to work on some big watercolours. I got the largest sheets of paper I could. I had this thing about “the bleed line” in the bud shape. I would look at where the sepal met the petal and I did a whole lot of works on the bleed line. I produced very powerful, emotional watercolour pieces with large brushes, quite different from the other work.*

[Figures 1 and 2].



Figure 1



Figure 2

*I had several things all on the go. Once, I had about six in a row, and I decided that I was going to start off with the bleed line.*

*Everything had to grow from the bleed line.*

*So, I dripped my paint on and I let it work its way down the sheet, or I activated it slightly, you know, and then I worked them all in sequence. While one dried, I worked on another, in a way that I have never worked before, strongly emotional, using watercolours, like I say, with big brushes and really brilliant colour.*

*Quite a new direction for me.*

*So, that was that. And, of course, I started to see what I was looking at. I was looking at a form, which I was calling a bleeding form and I immediately associated it with my own bleeding.*

*At that stage I was nearing the menopause, so being aware that the time would shortly come where this routine—and it is such a routine, isn't it, the monthly thing, when you start to watch it and are more conscious of it, because it is going to cease—would cease. I was doing these things, and they are all about bleeding forms. I have always worked since being a student. I had a post-graduate year at the Slade; I was a painter, but getting more interested in printmaking, and for that post-grad year, I spent the whole year in the etching room, where everything went toward etching because I was looking at plant process. The thing about etching is that it is a process—not only the process of making the plate, but also the way you print the plate. It gave me what I wanted for examining the processes; you could activate a process, which was analogous*

*to a natural process. You could control it to a degree, and it could go its own way, you know, it is just wonderful. So, that's where I have been with etching all the time.*

*I am doing the watercolours, I am doing the drawings, but I am also making my prints. I was heavily into this sequential thing, so I thought I would use playing card-size etching plates that I would format in different ways. I got to know somebody who was a photographer, and he had a camera mounted on a microscope for his own use because he was interested in local wildlife and that sort of thing. I got him to take sequences of photos for me through the microscope showing me exactly what was happening to the structure of the petal. Then I developed the prints from these. These are the contact sheets, but I liked the sequential thing about the contact sheet. As I printed them out, I began to recognise that, okay, they were the bud, but they looked like a fruit, something about the colour, but also they could look one minute like male genitalia and then another time similar shapes could look like female genitalia. Then I started to format them, the idea being that I was "marrying" up my bleed line with my female genitalia forms. All related to the same plant, but actually converted. I suppose from exploring different media, they came together. This is part of that series of bleed lines where I started the six pieces of work together [Figure 3].*

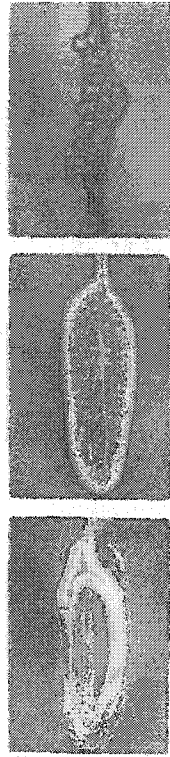


Figure 3

*I had a show about the time of the forbidden fruit and I called it Forbidden Fruit and Secret Places [Figures 4 and 5], and, like I say, I was beginning to recognise these sorts of anatomical parallels, really, and, although they were androgynous, they could be female one minute and they could be male the next, and so it hadn't settled down to anything in particular. Once the bleeding stops, women become androgynous.*



Figure 4

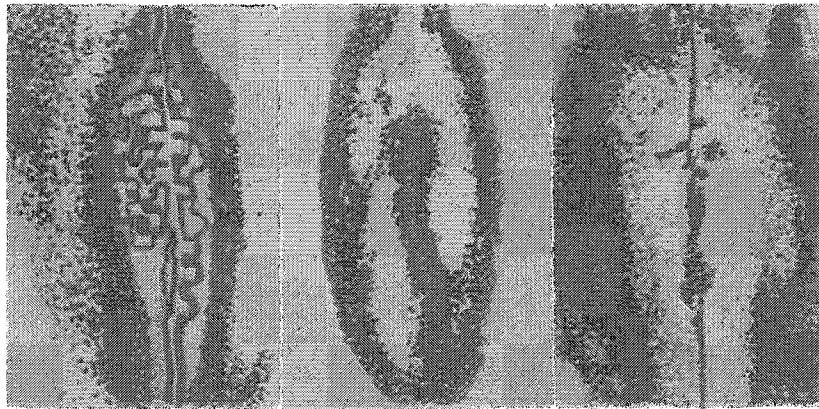


Figure 5

*Carol Beer*

You cannot ignore menopause. It is insidious; it creeps up on you and leaves signs that are not always easy to read. I saw ageing and menopause as two different processes. I was in mid-life, menopausal. Ageing was not a process that I identified with. As I approached menopause, not only did my body change, but also my art. I searched for universal symbols as visual narrative for this taboo female experience. I began by making



pen-and-ink sketches of fruit as metaphors for the changing female body. This was my “forbidden fruit” series (Figures 6, 7).

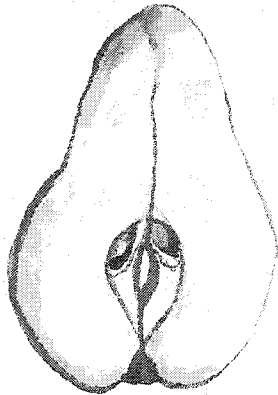


Figure 6

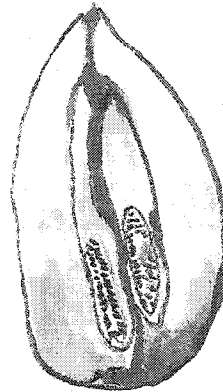


Figure 7

At this stage, I was trying to express visually that which is unmentionable. I felt that the fruit image was too suggestive of sensuality, voluptuousness, and ripeness, and it seemed that I was appropriating a symbol that, when used with women in mind, objectified them. The words “ripe for the plucking” come to mind. I wanted a symbol that would be read as female that would resonate with other women. The symbol had to be something that came from my lived experience. At this point, I looked at a self-portrait I had made earlier. I sensed that the form in this piece was the visual symbol for the beginning of my menopause. The space, the bleed lines, and the form all represented for me the vocabulary of my embodied experience of this change. Although the work was a self-portrait, I called it “Cicatrices” (scars), acknowledging that the bleed lines had left their scars on my mind and body. This was the first work and narrative that I had exhibited as a whole (Figure 8).

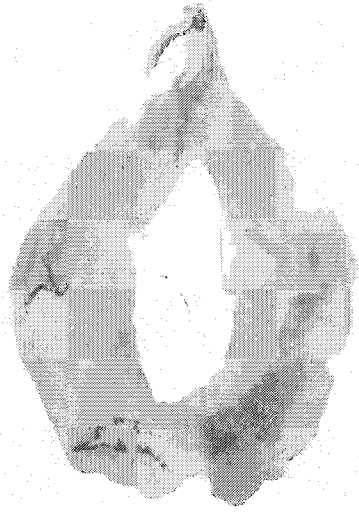


Figure 8

She was my womb, my safe place,  
But she was also his womb.

I am their womb, their safe place,  
But I am also his womb.

Now there is solitude and aloneness  
And for the first time I am not 'wo'man.

I am me, growing stronger,  
I have found my place.

My feeling was that my menopause was a rite of passage that, when passed through, would lead to freedom, tranquillity, and calm. I wanted the work to celebrate my transformation into what I consider to be a whole woman. I began a series of paintings. I had always perceived painting as a male domain; I believed that in some way this was a “master’s” medium, and so decided to approach it instinctively through my body, and thereby give it a female narrative and identity. I intended to feminise this medium by turning it into a ritual for transformation. I chose to face my fears and defeat them. Painting was one of my fears; as a female artist I felt insecure. I hoped to bring together a certain level of competence and expressiveness not solely dependent on the paintings themselves, but on their part in my “rite of passage”

(Figures 9, 10, and 11)

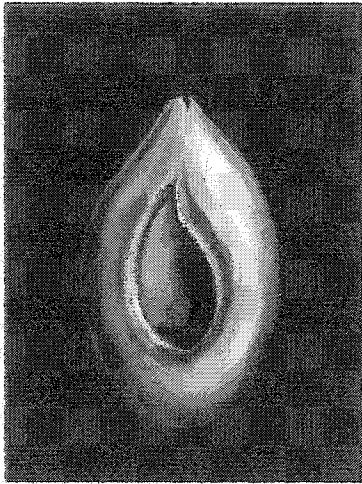


Figure 9

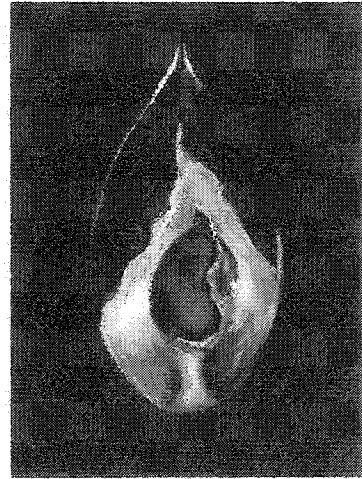


Figure 10

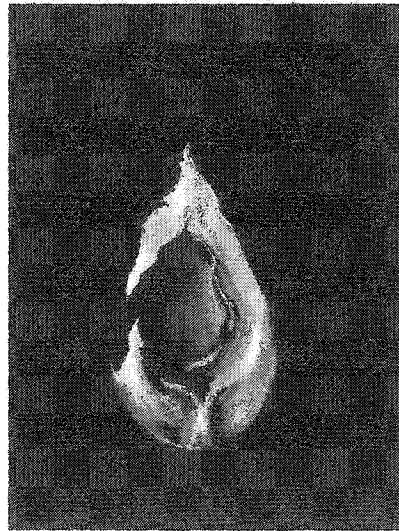


Figure 11

The only conscious choice I made as I began these works was to use only black and white, apart from the red “bleed line.” I had previously made a couple of coloured drawings, but felt that the colour carried its own narrative, creating the effect of actual genitalia rather than the metaphor that I was looking for (Figure 12).

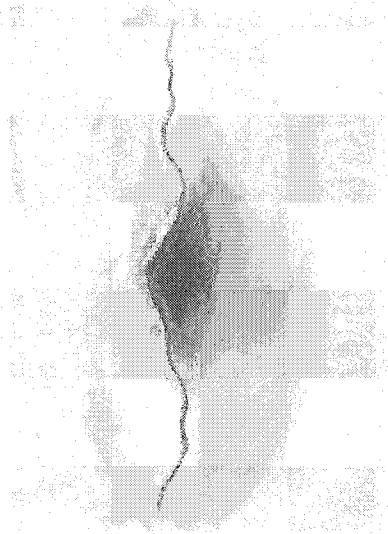


Figure 12

I wanted the works to be more about what was suggested rather than what was seen. They are about the space, the pause. The title for the black and white paintings, “Ceremony of the 14th Moon,” comes from their moon-like quality, which reminded me of the Native American concept that women who had reached menopause were in their “14th moon,” a reference to having only 13 menstrual moons, or cycles, in a year, the 14th being the absence of blood.

### ***3.2 The Art of Ageing***

#### *An Old Maid*

*Long ago your charms decayed,  
You'll never get them back—Old Maid  
And when you show what now remains,  
You're only laughed at for your pains;  
Your neck so scraggy, legs so thin,  
Are shapeless as a rolling pin;  
While such a frightful chin and nose  
Are only fit to frighten crows.*

Charles J. Howard

Marginalised in the Western culture, the ageing woman is condemned to the endless pursuit of eternal youth, constantly urged to conceal the telltale signs of

advancing years. Art historian and critic Frances Borzello (2002) asks, “Why does the prospect of ageing have to be so horrifying? Why is beauty a woman’s only worthwhile possession?”

Marcia Tucker (1999) argues that we figure out what old is from images in the society that surrounds us. We live in a society that bombards us with images of old, sickly people, and we adopt these attitudes of ageing at an early age. Youth is something that is lost, rather than a passage of acquisition. This sensation of loss escalates with age and reinforces women’s image of decrepitude. Tucker also states that, in Western society, old people are their bodies, defined by their physical features. In a society that prizes youth and beauty, images of old age are in bad taste.

Paintings such as Giorgione’s “Portrait of an Old Woman” (1508–1510) emphasise the stereotype of the ageing woman. The aged, curved body, the balding hair and the lack of teeth are reminders of the loss of feminine beauty. Vita Fortunati (2001) posits that the representation of the old woman in Giorgione’s painting is a “symbol of evil and an allegory of time, which completely corrupts everything . . . providing a terrible warning of what is to come.” Fortunati argues, “that it is no coincidence that old age is represented by a woman because, right from the start, there have been strong attacks by male writers and painters against the body of the ageing woman.”

*Pauline Aitken*

*I think that women from the age of 17 years to 50 do not change, not physically. At 50, the change is on a cellular level, skin and shape—our very physical body, both interior and exterior. It is this that motivates my work at the moment. We*

*become in a way like the fritillary, androgynous once the bleeding stops, both male and female.*

*My son has gone to his B-tech course. He left home two years sooner than I was prepared for emotionally. He hadn't gone out of my life, he had just gone on—he got on with his life. He was doing a media studies course; his was very much hands-on dealing with sound, the camera. . . . His final major piece was going to be a video and he was going to work with visual effects.*

*I received a phone call, he [James] never talked about what he was doing and I never asked questions because I didn't want to sound like some sort of lecturing mother. So, the phone call comes through. "Mum, can you do me the greatest favour ever?" I thought, "Hello, what's this?" "Mum," he said, "I got this idea for my final major project and I want to project film and slides onto a female body, but my girlfriend won't do it, too shy. Would you do it?" So I said, "Yes, okay, fine," and then I thought, "oh God, staying behind in school, locking doors with a student." Funnily enough, his girlfriend sat on guard. Anyway, I did it. I didn't get involved emotionally at all; I had a book to read. It took ages to get the lighting right and he had to get his equipment right, so I had to stand there while he got his moving slides, etc. right. Then he gets it set up and he says, "Well, okay, so we try again, move a bit to the left," and so I did. Then I would go and sit down and that is how it went. I had made a mask for the face. I did move around 360 degrees and I did do some arm movements, but because of this cord stuff over my head, it was totally anonymous. So I thought, even in the watching of it, it won't relate it to me; it is just a female form.*

*So we finish. "Well," he asked, "would you like to see it?" He said he would come back on the weekend and show me the video. I sat down and the video started, and I'm sitting there, totally dispassionately, thinking, "God, what am I going to look like?" And I think the phone rang, and he went away. Anyway, he left at that moment, and I was left to look at the video on my own. Within about five, oh not even five, within about one minute, I thought someone had kicked me in the stomach. The emotional impact of this thing suddenly hit me.*

"In what way?" I asked.

*In a most extraordinary way. I really had not anticipated it. I had been dealing with, or coming toward, this thing about the bleeding, thinking about my own state, premenopausal, body changes. I could see my flesh beginning to change, everything. He had come at this through being interested in using the body as a screen, but in the written work done on the video, he had talked about textures looking like disease. It was sort of disease and the body affected by this, but I quickly made that adjustment into body changes and time causing the changes, rather than disease. I don't know, it just hit me, right, so I finished this video and I just sort of sat there, you see. I don't know, it was an emotional impact that I couldn't deal with or wasn't dealing with it with the mind, the brain at all. As I say, it was like someone had kicked me. It was a kind of physical reaction, and in an emotional way, something at a degree to which I didn't try to analyse. I think you let things float over you, through you and come to you. So life goes, and I just had this overwhelming feeling that it was a really powerful statement that, although he hadn't directed it at me, I was his mother, he was my*

*child, he produced this thing and it had literally shocked my system. I'd got to respond to what he had said, or [the work] was saying, or what he was communicating to me.*

*Then I remember having made up my mind and thinking, "I don't know how to go about this." Still doing the past stuff, I came in here one day and I pinned some paper up, and I knew it [the work] had to be my scale. You see, I've not worked figuratively since life drawings as a student. I stood myself up and I measured where I came to and I thought, "No, I've got this all wrong. Me has got to be put on the surface of whatever I'm choosing to do."*

*So that's what started me off. We moved from this [the video image] to me looking at ways of printing myself onto various surfaces, from quite thick through to very thin, transparent layers. I could do the full frontal stuff, I set something up. I had to kneel, but I wanted it to be mid-torso actually, because I took these stills of his video and I wanted to work with these and I recognised that this looked like a ceramic. I had all these various ideas to begin with and I thought I might even be building ceramics, I didn't know, you know, the idea of the body as a vessel. How is it affecting me? Well, there is the colour, the colour changes; I was feeding it through to the other work as well. I could do the full front of things, kneeling and pressing myself forward, but then I had a friend who came over and she helped to apply the fabric to me on my side and my back because I couldn't do that myself. So, we had sessions of that and I looked to see what I had got [Figure 13].*





Figure 13

*Now I was working with a resist technique. In other words, the resist was painted on me and that meant then that I had the choice of what I did in terms of staining or dyeing or painting on. So the resist was on the surface, like this piece [Figure 14].*

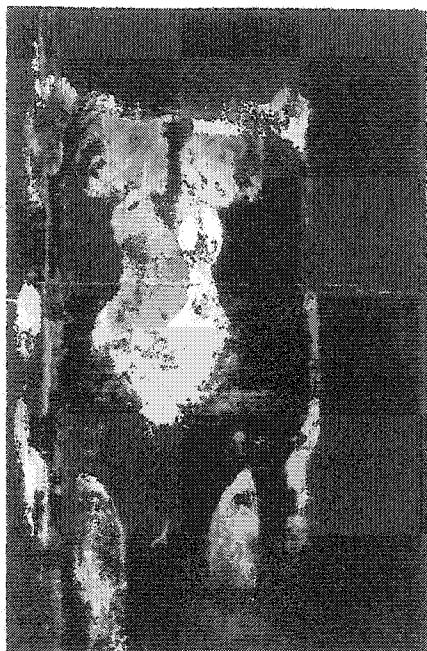


Figure 14

*I dyed the canvas or painted part of the canvas before I printed myself onto it. This series of these frontal ones are actually screen-printed; I printed my torso on the screen and then I did a run. They are all on different surfaces. I pressed **me** onto the silkscreen and then screened onto some plain, dyed canvas. There was a series directly printing me on the thing, not the screen [Figure 15]. I didn't want to include the head.*

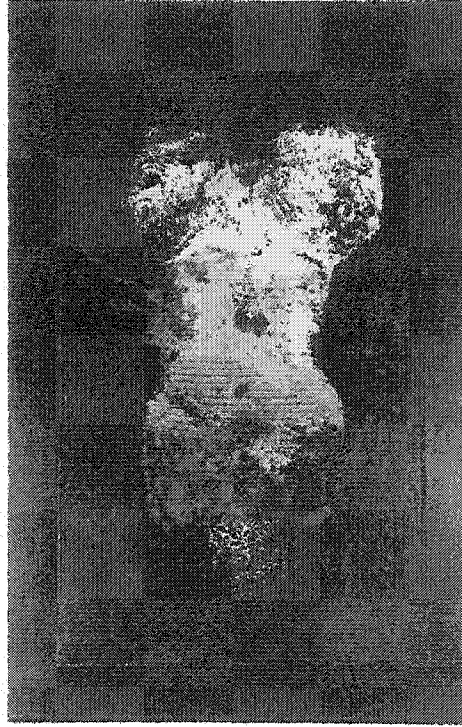


Figure 15

I asked, “Was there any particular reason why you didn’t want to include the head?”

*Identity, faces carry so much, they are so potent, aren’t they? I didn’t want it to be anything to do with the portraiture, or identification, or head—one is riveted to eyes and features, and I didn’t want that. In terms of a series of works, they were the two directions I was going in. I was also starting work by drawing with cobwebs. I was catching cobwebs and then laying them down onto paper. [I looked up.] Yes, I’ve got a nice little batch coming up there. I started to then blow pigment onto them so that they were coloured to a degree before they were put onto paper. Right, these are mostly earth colours—but just so you see that I am looking in another direction and another media from looking at the body. I have pieces that are reminiscent of body. I mean, that is a definite breast form there, and that is an etching plate that was cut like a breastplate. That’s cobweb on*

*three separate pieces of paper that, when they are placed together, they become torso, and there is also torso form in this [Figure 16]. There is also a snakeskin in that as well.*



Figure 16

*Yes, it's very much like pubic hair or underarm hair, but it's a secret places thing. Private. This is a similar piece, but it is in two layers, so I hung them on glass rods. Glass rods are threaded through, something like these pieces [Figures 17 and 18].*



Figure 17



Figure 18

*There is a sequence that is actually directly about the flower, but they are very like female torso. I started to part print and part paint inside them, and it is very much like the ovaries and fallopian tubes in terms of elements [Figure 19].*

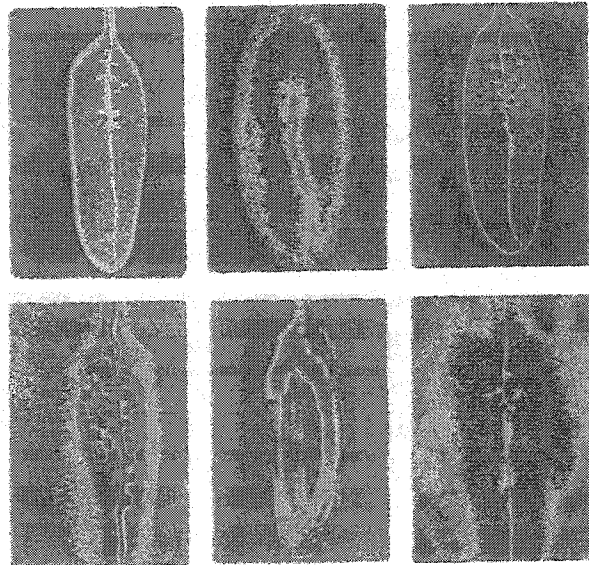


Figure 19

*I was starting to scrub the resist off the screen and I said "stop, stop, stop."*

*"Behold the night and the day, gently they give way to each other." It's a Marsalis song [Figure 20]. I tried to get that feeling of the way the video distorted by printing things across the body. All these distortions.*



Figure 20

*I was getting ready for the exhibition. I knew I would be interviewed, so I sat down and tried to think how it was that these two sets of works interrelated, and it was fascinating. When I actually brought my mind and attention to how I thought that my work was two things, [I saw it was] separate, but everything linked across. I did a flow diagram and I just couldn't believe it. It was interesting and intriguing. This is the petal surface of this fritillary flower and, as I say, this is the waxy surface, this*

*is a cut across the surface there, and the surface of the petal. I've got some of the most amazing imagery.*

*This is the petal, I have now looked at the whole plant. I have now looked at the stomata of the plant and the breathing pores, and they are so sexual.*

“You can't mistake it, can you?” I remarked.

*No, it is just staggering. Again, it is sometimes male form, like the tip of a penis, and other times, it is just like the vulva.*

*These are fairly recent watercolours [based on] looking through the electron microscope, and this is why I am saying to you that this is the direction I'm going to go in. I am picking up on it being analogous to female structure or internal structure or anatomy.*

*The body works were to record myself at a specific moment in time as an acknowledgement of my own momentous “state of change.” Passing through the menopause instigated an important period of self-awareness of my psychological and physical state of being. It had to be an actual record—not an interpretation—made as a statement: Here I am. It was to mark a state of passage, **my** state of passage; therefore, a body form identifiable as my own. My role as life giver and nurturer was over, and I was about to move into the final phase of my life.*

*Through the making of the works, I felt profoundly that I made a connection with all women in all time.*

*In some works there was identification with the archetypal woman portrayed within all cultures as a divine being.*

“Was the viewer a consideration or part of the intent of the work?” I asked.

*No. Not directly, but I would hope the works touch a chord, that they would be read as the “essential” female—particularly the goddess series.*

**Carol Beer**

Through quantum memory, the past is alive, open, and in dialogue with the present. As in any true dialogue, this means that not only does the past influence the present but also that the present impinges on the past, giving it new life and new meaning, at times transforming it utterly. (Zohar, 1990, p. 145)

Five years ago, I was working on a series of silkscreens that depicted three generations of women in my family: my grandmother, my mother and me. I printed each woman’s face onto a large silk organdy panel, which, when hung one behind the other, would give the illusion of looking through one woman’s eyes.

I became my mother and grandmother’s memory; I saw through their eyes. Although this work was about my mother, I think it was also, on a subconscious level, a reflection on my own ageing. McLaren (2001), when looking at her own ageing process through her mother’s memories, quotes Virginia Woolf, “We think back through our mothers, if we are women” (p. 235).

At the same time that I was working on the memory piece, I was working on a self-portrait. I did not plan the piece or the narrative that grew from it. I am usually very conscious when the moment of writing my narrative begins, but with this work I was not sure which came first, the image or the word. The work is not recognisable as a self-portrait; it is a shell or fruit-like form around a space with bleed lines. It was the space and the bleed lines that were important to me; they seemed to say more about me than the actual form. Grosz (1989) states that there must be “space for women as women” and suggests that, for feminist writer Luce Irigaray, this means a renegotiation of the mother daughter



relationship, implying that unless the daughter can see the mother as a whole, then there is no basis for her own feminine identity. I associated this “space” with my own womb and identity as a woman, linking me to the womb of my mother and her mother. That was an important visual symbol for me. It linked me to generations of women. I think one work triggered the other, but I was still not completely aware in what direction my work was taking me. I was not even sure where “Cicatrices” came from.

The works that followed were in direct response to how I felt society perceived women and, especially, ageing women. By ageing, I do not mean old; I do not consider myself old. I am just older than the media’s obsession with the youthful image. I am an older woman, but not yet old. I made two body pieces, “Best Before Date” and “1970, 1999.”

A few years ago, I had to have surgery on my breasts. I was amazed to find that doctors have templates for what are considered to be the correct form for women’s breasts, even down to the perfect placement for the nipple. As the doctor traced the template of the ideal breast on my imperfect body, I wondered how many women had been measured to create that perfect form. What are the ideal measurements? Is the perfect form decided by the doctor? By the women? By whom?

“Best Before Date” (Figure 21) is a series of women’s breasts, bar-coded with birth dates and placed on Plexiglas shelves as if in a supermarket, a commodity unattached to the human body. Next to the shelves is a basket of breast rejects, considered past their “sell by” date, but visually they look similar to the ones on the shelves. With no face or body attached to them, there is no way of dating them. I wanted

the viewers to respond to the breasts using their own life experiences. I meant this work to be a comment, a metaphor for what I saw as societal norms for all female bodies, and a response to my own experience of my ageing body. Grosz (1995) states that “bodies speak, without necessarily talking, . . . because they are coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativised; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms and ideals become incarnated” (p. 35). Who decides whether a woman’s body part is past its due date and no longer fits society’s norms?

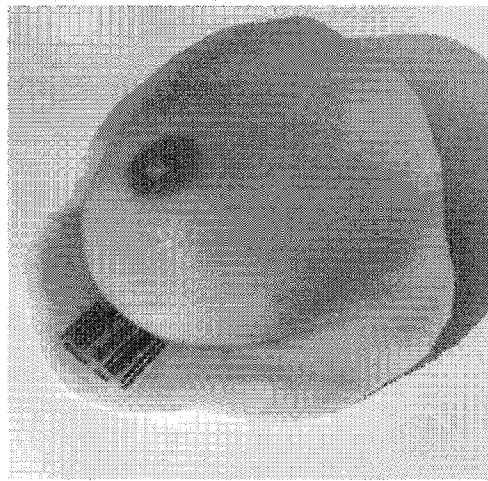


Figure 21

“1970, 1999” (Figures 22 and 23) is about ageing and motherhood. The visual impact of the breast “1970” is soft white, the translucent beauty of youth and the fragile, easily breakable quality sensitive to the touch. The beauty is visual and, if touched or mishandled, will shatter like glass. The impact of the breast “1999” is strong, solid yet still beautiful: a more worn object, yet with a beauty that comes from the use of traditional materials that appear aged with time. This piece has both autobiographical and social meaning, and deals with my ageing body and my own vision of women and

beauty. I could not resist mounting the breasts on plaques to imply possession of women as social trophies, although the piece is more to do with beauty at all ages.



Figure 22



Figure 23

At this stage I was still not including my face, just the body. Susan Sontag (1979), in her essay “The Double Standard of Ageing,” argues that a woman’s face is separate from her body, that women don’t see their faces naturally but as a canvas, a painting made to create an image that is acceptable to society, an image that establishes status. According to Sontag, the face is an emblem, an icon, a flag that cannot be altered with age.

It slowly dawned on me that I did not see myself as ageing in the way that society did. I had copied a Lucille Clifton poem into my sketchbook and read and reread it, recognising the struggling woman as myself.

A woman precedes me up the long rope.  
her dangling braids the color of rain.  
maybe i should have had braids.  
maybe i should have kept the body  
i started, slim and possible as a  
boy’s bone.

Maybe i should have wanted less.  
maybe i should have ignored the  
bowl in me, burning to be filled.  
maybe i should have wanted less.

The woman passes the notch in  
the rope marked Sixty.  
i rise toward it, struggling, hand over  
hungry hand.

(Date Unknown)

This poem spoke to me. Where had I come from, and how had I attained this age without my knowing? In response, I wrote my own narrative dealing with the differences between how I was perceived by society and how I perceived myself—the two images did not coincide.

The following is the narrative in which I tried to deal with the differing me's reflected in a mirror, my inner self-reflection and the outer reflection as seen by others. I entitled the piece "What You See Is What You Get."

What you see is what you get. Don't ask for more, for me to be different.  
You are looking with your eyes, not mine.  
What your eyes tell you, what your eyes see beyond my eyes is what you  
want me to be, what you want to see.  
A shell, an extension of you.

Stand beside me, see me in the mirror, what do you see?  
Not me, I know me.  
I have lost touch with the shell that you see. I don't recognise that body,  
that face, that look.  
See that smile?  
No. Only I know the smile behind those eyes.  
What I see is what I get. I am lucky.  
Maybe?  
I get what is inside the shell, behind the eyes.  
Only in my head, my mind. No one knows what I get.  
Short quick glimpses pass in front of your eyes, shadows, then they are  
gone.  
You missed me. Optical illusion?  
Too busy seeing the shell, fitting it into your life.

I know the pain of who I am, I know the joy of who I am, but you only know what you see.  
I have tried to see with your eyes. I have been what you see and I stopped seeing. I went blind. I stopped being.  
I got what you saw.  
I don't see with your eyes.  
I see me with my eyes. With my mind, with my whole being and I smile, I see me.  
You may as well be blind when you walk by me; all you get is what you see. I see me.  
I am what I see, no mirrors, no lies.

What was it that I saw in the mirror? I looked at my daughter, my mirror image, a reflection of me. Daughter and ageing mother side by side, looking into the mirror.

I made paintings of us side by side from the shoulders up. The works made me anxious, as I am not a painter. In her I saw my past, and I wanted her to see her future.

This work was a visual text for my daughter to read (Figure 24). Grosz (1989) says of the mother–daughter relationship:

the mother must give the daughter more than food to nourish her, she may also give her words with which to speak and hear. The gift of language in a place of suffocation and silence imposed by food. The gift of words will always be reciprocated as food can never be: it is returned to the mother “with interest,” in the daughter’s newfound ability to speak to, rather than at, her mother. (p. 125)

Although this work was about my ageing, I also wanted to offer my daughter a vocabulary for her future and to allow her to understand my ageing in words other than those offered in the media.



Figure 24

First you are young;  
then you are middle-aged;  
then you are old;  
*then you are wonderful.*

Lady Diana Cooper (1994)

### ***3.3 Material and Gender***

#### ***Pauline Aitken***

I transcribed the interviews with Aitken and, although throughout her narrative, she had addressed the social and physical impact of her gender on her lived experience and her art, I still felt the need for a direct answer to the questions that I had asked in my pre-interview e-mail. I e-mailed Aitken and asked if she would respond to the questions that I had agreed not to ask during the telling of her story.

In response to my question “How important is your gender as an artist?” Aitken replied,

*Gender as artist—very important. I respond to the world around myself and of which I am part, and process my responses as a female, translating/transforming these through visual means as a woman artist.*

I then asked, “Do you feel that your gender has influenced your art?”

*Yes. I have constantly explored the process of change observable throughout the natural world, and my relationship to it. My own psychological, spiritual, and physical changes as a female are part of that world. My art is a manifestation of my inner journey. It is the result of, as well as part of, my self-examination and exploration. I feel very strongly my identity as a woman living in this particular time and space of this universe. My spiritual self has no gender, but I produce work as a tangible form in the physical level of existence, and I believe I respond from the very core of myself as a woman.*

On her use of craft-like materials, I asked, “Do you feel that your gender plays a role in the materials you use?”

*Yes. I was very conscious of using materials and techniques that traditionally are the domain of women—fabric, dye, stitch, collage, skin as clothing the body, therefore structuring a garment.*

*I worked with collage plus knitting where I screened the chequer boarding structuring onto net, too. Then cut and collaged onto that, then amalgamations of drawing, collages, sometimes knitting. I knitted onto really large knitting needles and I thought I would stretch this knitting onto something, but actually, I just printed it. They don't look obvious, as if they are highly observed pieces of work [Figures 25 and 26].*

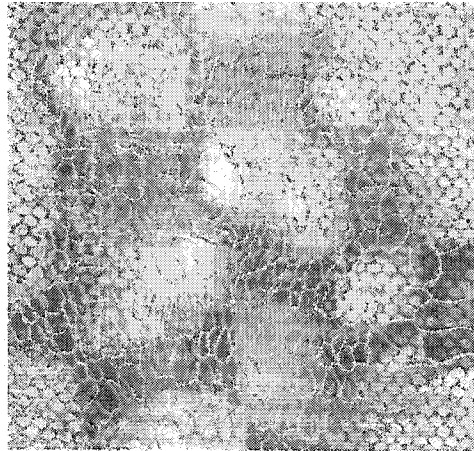


Figure 25



Figure 26

As a final question, I asked Aitken about the attitudes of her family and teachers when, as a young women, she declared that she wanted to become an artist. She replied that her father did not want her to go to art school, since being an artist was not a



profession for women. It was only when her high school teacher explained to her father that she could become a teacher that he agreed to allow her to attend art school. She said that her father thought teaching was a good profession for a woman.

Of her time at Slade, Aitken said,

*When I was a student we were not guided; we just got on with it and produced with little advice or instruction. At the time, the Royal College of Art, and other important art establishments, were a majority of male students. The Slade was half and half, and when asked about this, a professor—an important professor—said it was because it formed good, good wives for artists. It was a good background for artist's wives.*

### ***Carol Beer***

In my first e-mails to Aitken, I outlined who I was and what my interests were. I expressed that, for me, there is no line of separation between being a woman and an artist, and that both are mutually enriching and an essential part of my life experience. As an artist, I work with mixed media and prefer sculpture and installations, and as a woman, I am drawn to materials considered craft-like. I often use fibres and fabrics, and work with techniques like embroidery and beadwork. The concept of using traditional women's skills and materials, such as sewing and embroidery, in my art is connected to the idea of the threads used to join past and future; the threads of the past link the threads of my life to that of women before me. I see my art as being about change and transformation, on both a personal and social level, and this dictates the changing materials and media used in my work.

During the making of “Memories” (Figure 27), the process was an important part of the work. I related the step-by-step repetitive movements of preparing the stone for printing to the repetitive nature of women’s work. Lucy Lippard (1999) states that “Only in repetition does an isolated act become ritualised...” and it is this ritualisation that responds to personal and communal needs, and links the past to the present for women artists. The final image was printed onto hand-stitched silk organdy; the hand stitching linked me to my lived experience as a young girl and woman.



Figure 27

In the work “1970, 1999,” I made the older breast by wrapping hemp, a traditional material, historically used by women for weaving, and thus, linked the breast to women on a historical and embodied level. Lucy Lippard (1995) states that women’s work has always been utilitarian and that women artists are “rehabilitating the stitch-like mark, swaddling and wrapping techniques and materials of traditional art and work.” So, along with a predisposition for “women’s art,” it is the nature of my work and where it comes from within me that determines my choice of materials. Germaine Greer (1991) suggests that an artist’s language is her medium and that a woman will be a prisoner of stereotypes

until she tells her own story. As a woman and artist, I feel that it is important, almost obligatory, for me to genderise my art by giving my work a voice that can be recognised as feminine.

### *3.4 Analysis and Comments*

When I began my search for a woman artist to interview, I set criteria in order to avoid age and cultural differences. I was looking for similarities and parallels born from socio-cultural expectations, and art that I felt responded to those expectations. I looked for a sense of the familiar, one that resonated with my own sense of being a woman and artist. Pauline Aitken's works had a feeling of *déjà vu* that resonated with my own life experiences.

As I listened to Aitken's narrative I heard words that I had often used, words that related to my own societal and physical status. There were moments when I felt that I was looking into a mirror; Aitken's experiences were my experiences. Later in re-reading the transcripts of the taped interview, I remember feeling that people would see the similarities and think I copied her words and her works, but for me this confirmed that although my art was created in isolation, I, as a woman artist was part of a whole. Lucy Lippard (1995) referring to women's art and "the personal is political," claims that when an individual is a member of a social whole, then the personal is political.

For both Aitken and myself, the period of marriage, child raising, and family responsibilities took precedence over art. As Aitken says, she did the "woman's thing and followed her man," giving up her teaching and art for sewing, knitting, and renovating the home. This is not to say she was any less an artist, Aitken never doubted her art, it was just that her medium and form of expression changed. I followed the same pattern as

Aitken, "I did what was expected of me." I married and had children. My art, too, became "women's art." I sewed, I quilted, I made stained glass, but unlike Aitken, I felt isolated. I doubted my art; I became more a "good mother" than artist, I could not be a wife, mother and artist. Whitney Chadwick (1996) reminds the reader of women artists' awareness of the contradictions between the role of artist and the demands of being a woman. In discussing Eva Hesse's personal narrative and her response to societal demands, Chadwick quotes a January 1964 entry from Hesse's diary, "I cannot be so many things. I cannot be something for everyone... Woman, beautiful, artist, wife, housekeeper, cook, saleslady, all these things. I cannot even be myself or know who I am" (p. 339).

Although Aitken's narrative gave me insight into her life as an artist and her struggles to accommodate her inner and outer societal roles, I wanted to know what in her work gave me this sense of knowing, a sense of familiarity with the art and artist. Aitken's "Forbidden Places" series were the images that had first drawn me to her work. The prints and watercolours had been made just before and during her menopause, something that I did not know when I chose Aitken for my research. At that time, I was not questioning *when* the art had been made; I was interested in its visual vocabulary.

Aitken's and my art seemed to intersect at the period of our unconscious entering into menopause and our conscious awareness of our ageing. It was at this time when we both felt the need to respond openly to society through our art, using our own visual vocabulary. We both felt the need to speak up through our bodies. Vocabulary that I had felt unique to my work, such as "bleed line," "forbidden fruit," and "secret places," is common to both Aitken and myself. Seeds, fruit, and body were used as a textual and visual metaphor for the physical and social changes that were part of menopause and

ageing. I began to understand that part of what I was experiencing as a visual text was also recognition on a bodily level of a shared lived experience. Mara Witzling (1991) quotes sculptor Barbara Hepworth as saying, "I sculpt from my body," and so claims that Hepworth created work that expressed the relationship between interior and exterior, like fruit and its skin. Although fruit, seed, and shell have been adopted, and may seem like clichés, for art done by women, Lippard (1995) claims that this is because there is a need for a visual and verbal language that expresses the way women's art and ideas are developed, allowing the individual artist to maintain her power within the collective voice. In her essay, *The Women Artists' Movement—What Next?* Lippard (1995) asks if there is an art unique to women? In response to her own question, she answers,

I, for one, am convinced that there are aspects of art by women that are inaccessible to men and that these aspects arise from the fact that a woman's political, biological, and social experience in this society is different from that of a man. (p. 82)

Although Lippard agrees that some characteristics of feminine art would also be shared by male artists and vice versa, she also posits that

There are certain elements—a central focus (often "empty," often circular or oval), parabolic bag like forms, obsessive line and detail, veiled strata, tactile or sensuous surfaces and forms, associative fragmentation, autobiographical emphasis, and so forth—found far more often in the work of women than men. (p. 82)

Autobiographical form, circular or oval shapes with a central focus relating to space, and tactile surfaces are shapes and metaphors for our lived experience that are common to both Aitken's and my art. We both hoped to create art that would talk to women, art that they could experience as women. Aitken had also responded to her son's accepting of society's stereotypes of ageing women as diseased and decaying. She knew that, for the male viewer, there could not be recognition of a bodily experience, but there

could be recognition of an experience where he was asked not to be a “voyeur,” but to live a visual experience that opens up to him a new language with a new vocabulary.

## Reflections on My Own Art Learning Experience

The feminist art historian Linda Nochlin (1988) responded to her now well-known question “Why have there been no great women artists?” by explaining, “[T]he fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education” (p. 150).

My own art education began at home, at a very early age. My father, who was an artist, introduced us to the world of the “masters,” the world of fine art. He collected art books and he shared with us the paintings and sculptures of artists he loved. We visited museums in London, and my father would become animated and excited when he shared his knowledge of art with us. It did not occur to me at that young age that, although I had seen many images of women, I had never seen art made by a woman. In fact, when, after viewing one of my father’s paintings in an exhibition, someone suggested my father painted like a woman, I knew that it was not a compliment. I did not know how women painted; the comment created tension in our home for quite some time. I gathered from my mother that the comment classified my father as an amateur. Whitney Chadwick (1997) states that qualities, such as amateur, precious, and decorative that are associated with women’s art, provide a set of negative characteristics against which to measure “high art.” Oddly enough, all the women in my mother’s family painted, but it was my paternal grandfather and uncles who were considered the artists.

Art history courses that I took as a young woman did not offer any enlightenment into the status of women in art. When, years later, I enrolled in the Concordia Bachelor’s degree in Art Education programme, I found little change. Examples of women artists were rare, or if they were mentioned, were usually categorised as the wife, daughter, or

student of a “master.” Where was I to look for role models or for support as a woman artist? I questioned the art I was making, and so I began my own research to look for art that validated my own process and status as artist.

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. (Rich 2001, p. 11)

In re-visioning my own artistic process and education, it is easy to see how I could doubt my artistic identity. I was taught very little about the history of women artists, and yet it is important for me to understand them and their personal and visual narrative, both real or implied, because it enables me to situate myself as an ageing woman artist.

In doing this research, I hoped that, by looking back at the lives of women artists, I could find a new language—one that can be spoken by and for women, a reinvention of a vocabulary containing metaphors and images that will, through the naming of women’s experiences, give power to their voices. What I have learned is that narrative art informs the viewer, opening up a dialogue that allows me as a woman to relate on an embodied level. As a woman artist, I have an obligation to create art that represents a woman’s lived experience, to make art with a visual vocabulary that informs women of women’s experiences.

Throughout the process of writing my thesis, I have questioned stereotypes, assumptions and beliefs about women. I have unlearned old truths and relearned new truths that resonate with who I am now, as a woman, artist and teacher: When I look at my own art now, I no longer asking whether it is good art and by whose criteria, but as art that is true to my embodied experience, a woman's experience. At the beginning of



my thesis I questioned where I could find role models as a student and woman artist. As an older woman and artist I do not fit society's stereotypes, nor in fact do many of the women I have met throughout this journey.

As a teacher and artist, I am a role model for my students. I ask my students to question, to revisit outdated assumptions and stereotypes, to reinvent language if necessary, to find their own voice rather than accept what is given as their own. Writing my thesis has been an experience that has liberated and strengthened by own beliefs in understanding of women as artists.

I am a firm believer in serendipity, and on the day before my thesis defence, I went to the hairdresser. The hairdresser, a young woman, asked me if I was having my hair done for a special occasion. I replied, "Yes, I am defending my thesis tomorrow and wanted to put all the odds in my favour, hence the hairdo" . She asked me what my thesis was about and I began to explain that it was about visual vocabulary, metaphor and symbolism and women and art. I told her that in my search for a visual vocabulary I had started with a pear. She immediately cut me off and said "Get away! I'm a fine arts graduate and my final project was a huge pear". She went on to explain that the pear shape, its fullness, the voluptuousness etc, was used in art to represent a woman's body. I let her finish talking about her piece and then I asked her if she was happy to be represented by a ripe fruit. She said, "Oh my god, no, that's not what I wanted". I told her that that was what my thesis was about: questioning and reinventing, not accepting old stereotypes, and finding a new visual vocabulary.

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