

...like a decay in our bones

By

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...like a decay in our bones

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Abstract

My art practice is a blend of academic research and installation of large-scale figurative ceramic pieces within sacred architectural environments. My work is a reaction to the fragmented representations of women in the Catholic Bible. Popular culture, political legislation and network news outlets have adopted the tactics of the Bible to continue the control of women. The figures are manifestations of the effects of biblical rhetoric on the lives and psyches of Catholic women, and those who have survived sexual trauma. I use pornography, pop culture, and biblical narratives to inform my sculptures and installations. I distort these works to conflate the grotesque and the enticing in ways that are similar to the representations of women within the biblical narratives. Below, I will expand on how ...*like a decay in our bones* uses this research.

Acknowledgements

My Family, encouraging me and for buying me art supplies.

My Partner, for moving to Kansas and believing I can do anything.

My Committee, for guiding and informing me.

My Friends, for understanding and supporting my dreams.

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“The death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably
the most poetic topic in the world.”

Edgar Allen Poe

“If the female body offends you, cut it up.”

Cheryl Exum

I. The Life of a Catholic School Girl

I was raised in a larger suburban city located North of Chicago. I was part of a nuclear family, of one male and one female parent, with two daughters, myself as the younger. I was raised to honor and worship not only my parents, but my older sister, and a character named God I had never met. We attended a local Catholic Church almost every Sunday, and my sister and I attended the adjacent Catholic School for nine years each. Meals and holidays were punctuated by prayers of thanks, worship and asking for assistance. Social events, extracurriculars and slumber parties were interrupted by early morning Church. My sister and I both attended the city's public high school. The change in school atmosphere had a significant influence on my religious practice. When I began my sophomore year, my religious behavior dissipated, before completely stopping in my senior year. Although I do not practice within the faith any longer, the effects of Catholic rhetoric on my relationships and self-image has continued.

There are moments within my elementary and middle school experience I can specifically recall that created a sense of doubt and hyper self-awareness. In Kindergarten, George distracted me from lessons with inappropriate behavior.¹ When I mentioned my disappointment, Ms. Dutch stated he probably just liked me. In second-grade, Ms. Brickman pulled me aside during class and warned me she could see my shorts underneath my jumper – shorts I was already wearing to hide my underwear.² In third grade, the bus driver Ms. Greene, blamed me when I was punched in the stomach by a boy. And in eighth-grade, Ms. Carter stated, “Some people dress certain ways for attention,” a comment on my very loud and unique attire for “Free Dress” day.³

¹ The behavior of this student continued until 5th grade when he left the school. But there were others who behaved in similar ways and I received little help from authority.

² The length of my jumper was approved by the school uniform policy. I wore bike shorts under my jumpers and skirts as an extra preventative measure. More policing of my own body.

³ Names have been changed for anonymity.

From a very early age I was taught to see my appearance and my behavior as so impactful that it could affect boy's (and later men's) behavior, both good and bad. The most important element of this, was the idea that it was always my fault. The boy in Kindergarten liked me which made him behave the way he did (me existing, the cause of his behavior). I was not being conscious enough of myself and the ramifications of my body, as I was "exposing" a private area (my lack of self-awareness). The way I liked to dress for myself was only for attention, yet another new variation on the "asking for it" point of view.

This was a common occurrence in the Catholic School setting. Many young girls were reprimanded for their behavior or appearance, but never the behavior or appearance of our male counterparts.⁴ Girls were forced to embarrassingly check the length of their skirts and jumpers by kneeling in front of administrators. Girls were forced to remove nail polish from their fingers in the hallway outside of the office for all to see (and smell). It was mandatory for girls to wash their faces of makeup in the bathroom and return to the teacher or administrator for approval. I was even told to button up my polo shirt higher, despite boys pulling up their shirts to use as towels. When I started high school, I talked with my classmates who had attended public schools, none had such strict rules about a girl's appearance, and many dress codes were the same for boys.⁵

This atmosphere during a crucial developmental period cultivates an overactive sense of self-consciousness, which then breeds ideas about who is at fault for inappropriate behavior and forces one to question what I can change to alter another's behavior. I felt I could take control of

⁴ One boy in my class wore a skirt to school and was not sent home or asked to change like girls often were, not sure if this was progressive or selective ignorance.

⁵ During my first teaching experience at a public high school in 2014 I began to notice these strict dress codes for girls and women in the secular realm. Girls were sent home for exposing their collarbones or for shorts that were too short, while male students wore muscle shirts that regularly exposed their nipples through the extended arm holes. Similar guidelines can be seen in many professional settings for women. I was once required to wear skirts and panty hose for a part-time job.

myself and curb other's behavior by taking a virginity vow. If I made a promise to God, he would protect me, and my fate would be in His hands. I took my vow at the age of thirteen. This protected me from acting in a sexual manner and acted as a shield to men. I was going to stay a virgin and anyone who attempted to take that from me would be a fault. I made sure to make it clear to those around me until the age of seventeen. At that time my faith diluted, and I could no longer use it as an excuse to avoid relationships and sexual behavior. I realized I took the vow to protect me from sex, not to honor my family or God. The fear that led me to make the vow kept me from making real friendships and close relationships.

It wasn't until I was much older that I realized I had experienced sexual trauma in my youth. This was a hard thing to accept, but it put much of my feelings and the effects of the Catholic School into perspective. I was practicing a religion that characterized me as damaged and I did not have the knowledge in my youth to protect myself from its rhetoric. I was a prime victim to fully internalize my womanly guilt and shame. While no one at school would have been aware of my trauma,⁶ the language and rhetoric would have amplified an already severely damaged sense of self-worth and identity.

This experience and self-realization is the impetus behind ...*like a decay in our bones*. The work reflects an exploration of this stage of my life and how it has manifested into my adulthood. From the language we use to describe women to the tropes that are used over and over again in popular culture to the media portrayal of sexual assault victims, much of it comes from the stories and the rhetoric of The Bible.

⁶ My parents were unaware until I was 18.

II. The Bible Tells Me So

Several female archetypes have dangerous effects on women. The characters of the Catholic Bible can be the most damaging for women. Men are represented as complex. They are given names, backgrounds, family lineage, and plots lines that depict them overcoming hardship or confirming their faith. Contrastingly, women characters are substantially limited within Biblical tales. They are treated as less than or barely treated at all. Several are not even given a voice or a name, despite being a vital part of the story. Women are limited in their representations to mother, wife, daughter, or whore. By exploring examples of these limited figures, their effects on women will be evident.

Becoming a mother is the highest form of power a woman can achieve in the Biblical texts, but mother is still subordinate to men. In the Genesis story of Sarah and Abraham, Sarah is barren. God has made a covenant with Abraham and because of this Sarah will bear a child. However, Sarah is not worthy to hear this news for herself. Sarah's fate is kept from her; only Abraham can have this knowledge.⁷ Sarah is reduced to a vehicle for the promise God made to Abraham, without her consent. Abraham even so far as gains the power to rename his wife from Sarai to Sarah.⁸ The theme of mother/woman as vehicle continues through Abraham's descendants. Rebekah and Rachel are also sterile women whose wombs are opened by God, fulfilling further the promise to Abraham.⁹

The story of the Levite's wife, or concubine, has a very different tone. It is unclear why this man's wife runs away to her father, but she has broken a promise to her husband, instantly

⁷ Exum, "Fragmented Women" 102-107

⁸ Fuchs, 49

⁹ The women in the Genesis stories are often pitted against one another. Before Sarah has a child, Abraham is pressured by Sarah to have a child with their maid Hagar. Hagar is presented as less than Sarah. She is foreign, unattractive and is cast out with her son once Sarah births a son. This theme also continues with Rebekah and Rachel, always with the women compared placing the maids as lesser and inferior. For me, this is the first instances of female rivalry in entertainment.

placing her at fault.¹⁰ The Levite and his wife leave her father's too late and must stop and rest at another man's home. The home is attacked, and the assailants attempt to have intercourse with the Levite. Instead his wife is offered as sacrifice. Multiple men rape and beat her over and over throughout the night. When her husband finds her in the morning, she is near death. He becomes so enraged that he punishes his wife by dismembering her body. Pieces are attached to several oxen and scattered.¹¹ This tale is a clear depiction of the attempt to control women's sexual autonomy and agency. No matter why this woman runs away from her husband, it is an act that can be construed as woman's agency. This is threatening to the patriarchal agenda and must be cut down both metaphorically and literally. She is punished by sexual abuse and then her sexuality is symbolically mutilated.¹²

There are several instances where a woman is used as a symbol for proper womanly behavior. Similar to the two discussed above is Bathsheba, a married woman David watched while bathing and then took for himself. The narrative does not blame David. There is a question if Bathsheba was unaware of David watching her or if she intentionally made herself more desirable. Despite God being displeased with David's behavior,¹³ he punishes those around David. His ten wives are raped (including Bathsheba), his daughter Tamar is raped by her brother, and finally his sons are killed. Women are held responsible for men's desires and punished when men act on them.¹⁴

Stories of women used for punishment are common. Women are equated to land and property such as in Hosea 9 and Isaiah 3, placing them at a lower status and owned by men. In the

¹⁰ Exum, "Fragmented Women" 170-201

¹¹ Exum, "Feminist Criticism"

¹² Exum, "Fragmented Women" 176-184

¹³ God is displeased with David taking another man's wife. He may be misogynistic, but he hates infidelity.

¹⁴ Exum, "Fragmented Women" 172-176

story of the women of Zion, women show independence and desire of their own and they are punished as a whole. They bring punishment to the entire city. Women endure the removal of their hair and their genitals are exposed. Women are to blame for the downfall of an entire city. When the Bible compares a city to a woman there is often the relationship of husband (God) and wife (city) employed. When the city is defiant, the wife has wronged her husband. God relinquishes his harshest punishments to the women of the city, conflating real women with the personified woman city. This includes humiliation, physical abuse and sexual abuse. During all of this the women take their punishment complacently. They expected it and wholly internalized it. This creates the idea that women deserve this punishment, often affecting women's self-esteem and self-worth.¹⁵

The effects of Biblical representations of women on women are lasting, just as I have experienced in my own life. These stories set up an obvious gender binary. It is clear on many occasions that women are inferior to their male counterparts and portrayed as property.¹⁶ This imagery conveys to women that to be “good women” they must long endure suffering, be selfless, obedient, passive, and must not give into bodily desires of any kind. This mentality reinforces ideas that women are unworthy of respect, they must obey to be allowed to live or receive affection, they must sacrifice for the family unit, and their own needs are dangerous to themselves and those around them. All of this makes their security and self-worth dependent on external validation, particularly male validation.¹⁷ In elementary school, authority figures justifying inappropriate behavior of a boy by his fondness for me implies that I must be passive in the situation and accept his unsettling actions as affection.

¹⁵ Exum, “Plotted, Shot, and Painted” 101-114

¹⁶ Waters, 274-283

¹⁷ Manlowe, 85

This rhetoric is extremely damaging for women who have survived sexual trauma. Women often associate themselves with either Eve, a woman of sexual lust, or with the Virgin Mary, where they most likely disassociate with their sexuality entirely. Identifying with these archetypes sets women up for failure. They are either seen as wrong and sinful, or shamed because they can never be like Mary.¹⁸ Any other biblical character would elicit similar feelings of lower self-worth and self-image. Ms. Carter would have considered my attire to be similar to the behavior of Bathsheba.

Biblical stories are not on the side of the survivor of sexual assault and trauma. Many of the stories and the interpretations of biblical narratives belittle the impact of rape. Biblical discourse continues ideas such as there is no rape, rape is a normal act, and when it is committed women are to blame for the behavior and become “damaged goods.” Many criticisms of the Bible emphasize the male point of view and places blame on women by overlooking the act and siding with the rapist.¹⁹ This side choosing continues through the representations of the rapist and survivor in news media. The survivor is criticized mercilessly, and the reputation of the rapist takes precedent.²⁰

All of this re-enforces the power separation of men and women. And all of this is re-enforced to women through the stories and woman characters of the Bible. The confusing notion of women as mother and women as sinner creates a conflicting view of self, particularly for trauma survivors. Constant reassurance of women’s inferiority from patriarchal ideology never allows women to connect to themselves or others; the experience can be isolating and harmful. Biblical texts still justify current behaviors and mentalities around rape and women. Rape is a power issue.

¹⁸ Manlowe, 85

¹⁹ Waters, 274-283

²⁰ Consider the case of Brock Turner of Stanford in 2015. He was witnessed raping an unconscious woman behind a dumpster. The judge was reluctant to convict him because he attended a prestigious school, was a successful swimmer and too young to deserve the conviction. His father and news commentators used these attributes to gain him sympathy with the public. He ultimately received 6 months in prison with 3 years of probation. The mental state and future of the survivor was minutely considered in the hearing and the sentencing. But her state at the time of the rape was crucial to the hearings, attempting to place blame on her instead of Turner.

Raping a woman does not take away power from a man, therefore it is not an issue to be discussed or addressed in Biblical or social context.²¹

²¹ Waters, 274-283

III. Media as Religious Zealot

Popular culture, political legislation and news media continue to reinforce a similar ideology of biblical rhetoric. Through the marketing of pop stars, Abstinence Only education, abortion bills and network television and news, our society is promoting the fractured identity and lower self-worth of women. Much of this rhetoric and worldview comes from religious roots, and monotheistic, Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity, have encouraged stripping women of their rights and their autonomy.

The language and control that is used over women comes from the idea that they need to be protected and kept pure. The perfect woman is young, white, blonde, skinny, sexy, but not too sexy, a little dumb, and a virgin²² It is the job and the right of men to protect this ideal at all costs, and in some cases even create it.²³ I often fit into this ideal as a young girl and my self-worth was wrapped up personifying this unrealistic image. My virginity vow was my last attempt to hold on to this identification.

Popular culture has been at fault for creating and manufacturing this ideal for years, particularly through my own formative years. Pop Stars like Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson were acceptable and sometimes even promoted in my household and school. In second grade, I remember my PE teacher playing Britney Spears's first album during class. These beautiful, blonde, fit women were also very open, and proud, of their own virginity. Simpson, being the daughter of a minister, often advocated for girls to remain virgins until marriage, despite her own overtly sexual music and performances.²⁴ This was a very confusing message for many young girls. Conflating

²² Valenti, 27-30

²³ This ideal is racist and homophobic, I am aware. People of color are often seen as inherently sexual and therefore cannot be seen at the ideal, pure, virginal woman. It is wrong and extremely harmful to people of color and members of the LGBTQ-IA community, but it is what much of our popular culture conveys, especially in the early 2000's.

²⁴ Valenti, 27-28

youth, virginity and sexiness creates a message that women are only sexy in their youth. It makes youth disturbingly sexy and continues the rhetoric that a sexually active woman is used up and unworthy, much like the Levite's Wife after he offers her as means to protect himself.²⁵

Spears had a much different trajectory than Simpson. While she was promoted as being the perfect blonde, virgin-like young woman, her personal life was not as heavily promoted through a religious lens. The religious influences were much more subdued in Spears's representation. Her virginity was more implied. Her first music video portrayed her as a Catholic School girl, pigtails and all.²⁶ She was sexy and innocent all at once; an untouched youth ready to be taken.²⁷ As a young, blonde, Catholic School girl myself, it was difficult not to identify with this representation. Simultaneously being innocent and oversexualized became part of my identity.

Spears and Simpson were regularly compared to their youth as they aged, just as women are often compared to their younger selves or other women. Our culture as a whole is obsessed with youth and finding ways to fight aging. The number of ads to correct aging and the insurgence of younger and younger girls being presented as sexy is disturbing. This obsession with youth has created an unnatural sexual desire for young girls. When Billie Eilish released her first single in 2016, she was only 15, but many Internet comments were only concerned about her age and the age to consent.²⁸ Curiosity ensued about what her body looked like under her iconic baggy clothing. Spears and Simpson may not have experienced this as overtly being "of-age" at their time of fame and the Internet being fairly new, but the growing obsession with youth is clear.

²⁵ It doesn't take much to link youth to virginity and then sexiness to youth in American culture. We are obsessed with youthfulness, making grown women appear younger and younger girls sexier. This mindset and disturbing practice are grotesque and harmful to all women at all stages of life.

²⁶ I remember watching for the first time in second grade late at night on MTV. She quickly became my ideal.

²⁷ Valenti, 29-30

²⁸ Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen had a similar situation. A fan created a countdown website to the day they would be old enough to consent. Several entertainment news networks, and publication referred to them as "No Longer Jailbait." Miley Cyrus, Selena Gomez and Taylor Swift have all had similar experiences. This trend continues with young female celebrities to this day.

Abstinence Only education continues the notion of a perfect woman and idealizes youth, and in 2002 was regularly promoted by Pop Stars like Jessica Simpson. My personal consequence of this education was my own misguided virginity vow. Purity Balls, where young girls will promise themselves to God with their fathers as witness, Purity Rings, a wedding ring like symbol of a girl's continued virginal status, and literal Virgin Cards are used in Abstinence Only education regularly. Most of these practices rely on the girls to make the "promise" to not have sex, policing only women's bodies and behaviors. These programs are taught in public schools, reaching across the religious and secular line, establishing control over women and women's bodies at an early age and across cultures and beliefs. As the examples above of Simpson and Spears make clear, virginity and youth are the best way to be. But this creates confusing ideas about self and about sex. There is no medical definition for virginity, and there is no clear definition for sex either.²⁹ Virginity is also more often related to women than to men. It is the woman's responsibility to remain a virgin.³⁰ Women are expected to be pure, while also being the ultimate fantasy for men, a common representation in the Bible stories as well.

I fell prey to the pressures of my community and popular culture of 2002. Just before my Confirmation³¹, I took a personal vow to remain a virgin until marriage. I received an abundance of praise from my family, teachers, priests, and most notable the area's Bishop. He had never met me but was very impressed when I told him during my Confirmation ceremony. As an adult, I realized I took the vow out a fear. I was afraid of continuing as "damaged goods" after my sexual trauma and I was afraid of sex. I did not have proper sex or relationship education, so I planned to avoid sex and suppress my sexual desires like the biblical stories had taught me.

²⁹ The general penis/vagina penetration definition removes many, if not all, LGBTQ-IA individuals.

³⁰ Valenti, 33-36

³¹ A sacrament in Christian faith around the age of 13. It is a ceremony of confirming one's faith and becoming an adult in the church.

Much of political legislation in connection to women comes from the representations and expectations of women within the Bible. Men in power who are afraid of women's sexual autonomy and independence create laws that promote proper behavior or restrict women's rights.³² Many religious groups, particularly those that are deeply rooted in right wing, conservative views, have an unprecedented influence on political actions and legislation. The most notable example of this is Governor of Indiana, Mike Pence, a notoriously right wing, anti-gay, anti-choice politician. Despite his misogynistic and homophobic views, Pence became Vice President of the United States in 2016. This view also becomes clear with the fact that there is no official mandate on Sexual Education from the Federal Board of Education. How this subject is taught, and if this subject is taught, is entirely left to each state, with more than half having no standards or expectations for the course. The decision to teach and how to teach sex education is often left to individual schools. States that do have guidelines in place are heavily pushed to teach Abstinence Only education, which has been proven over and over to be ineffective in preventing teen pregnancy or the spread of STDs and STIs.³³

As recent as 2006, the CDC sent out the recommendation to women that they should always be treating and maintaining their bodies as "pre-pregnant."³⁴ This, in combination with Abstinence Only education and sexualized virgin pop stars, construct the idea that women's bodies are not their own. Just like the stories of Sarah, Bathsheba and the Levite's Wife, women are not in control of themselves or their world around them, and to divert from these expectations can have serious

³² Men without political power can also create a sense of control and reinforce these ideals. Any man with power over women; an abusive and controlling partner, a misogynistic boss, mechanics or other tradesmen who assume women know less and take advantage of it, can add to the "women are inferior" rhetoric and keep it established.

³³ Valenti, 38

³⁴ Valenti, 127

consequences. Fear can be a powerful motivator as my own experience with controlled behavior through misguiding authority figures and pressured virginity vows can attest to.

Politicians are still attempting to control women's behavior and bodies through legislation or examples of "perfect women", similar to the attempts of biblical narratives.³⁵ Government officials and news media have become the new source of control. Not allowing women access to full healthcare and requiring women to treat their bodies as "pre-pregnant" places women as vessel, like Sarah in Genesis. Women who actively seek sex or intimacy are condemned and seen as unfit for marriage, like the Levite's Wife. Women who express themselves and show independence are shamed by the news media, especially in cases of sexual assault survivors, like Bathsheba. Women who seek abortions are treated as if they don't understand their situation and must be shown the error of their ways. And finally, the idea that women who have had sex willingly before cannot be raped, promoting further the virginal ideal.³⁶ Many of these ideas were reiterated to me during my own schooling. Ms. Brickman would have seen my behavior as a kind of agency or autonomy, and it would have been threatening.

The language used to describe a victim of rape changes based on the view of the woman and her history. Many news networks participate in perpetuating victim blaming. Any survivor who was expressing independence of any kind, such as walking home, drinking in a bar or dressing in a way that any pop star would at any time, that behavior becomes the focus of the reporting and places the blame on the survivor. "Woman who drinks alone at a bar is attacked," is common as well as the warnings to all women immediately following the reporting.

³⁵ I do feel there have been major strides for women but considering the continued efforts to limit women's access to full healthcare and media portrayals of catty women, slut shaming and comparing women to one another there is still attempted control in place.

³⁶ Valenti, 132-138

An example of this can be seen in the Miss America and Miss USA pageants. While there are no virginity tests in these pageants, participants cannot be divorced or have had an abortion, easily a connection to the perfect, pure woman that is expected and rewarded in the Bible. It was “discovered” that a Miss USA attended night clubs, drank and dated regularly. When this information surfaced, Donald Trump didn’t strip her of her title, instead he publicly forgave her. She was forced to apologize nationally for her behavior and indiscretion. Once time had passed and the media had moved on, Trump proceeded to push the former Miss USA to pose for Playboy.³⁷ The Miss USA winner was expected first to be the perfect, virginal women (Mary) and then quickly shifted to a lustful fantasy (Eve). Trump was playing the role of Father, Pimp, Owner and Savior simultaneously. These events can be directly connected to the story of the Levite’s Wife. Miss USA (the Wife) displays autonomy. Trump (the Levite) must come to her rescue. To save himself, Trump throws Miss USA to the attacking men (the News Media). Miss USA is ultimately divided up and her body put on display for all to see (Playboy). We should not pity her though; this is the consequence of her partying lifestyle.

Popular culture, news outlets and politicians have been perpetuating these archaic ideas about women and women’s behavior from its inception. Much of popular culture, legislation, and current entertainment are twisted representations of the same stories. The stories and themes that originate in biblical narratives; women must be protected. They are too weak and feeble minded to understand more beyond their use of creating life. Any woman who would seek to divert from this path in life, must not understand their situation or should be condemned for not living to their only potential. Stay pure, assume your gender role and submit to men. You must be both the perfect, pure, “pre-pregnant,” skinny ideal, and also be every sexual fantasy for every man.

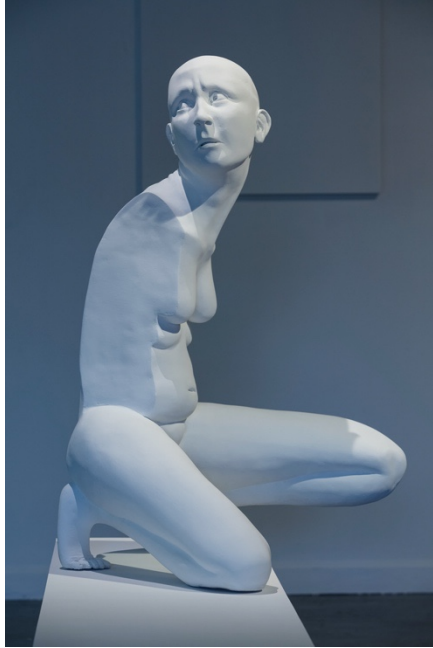
³⁷ Valenti, 29

IV. *...like a decay in our bones*

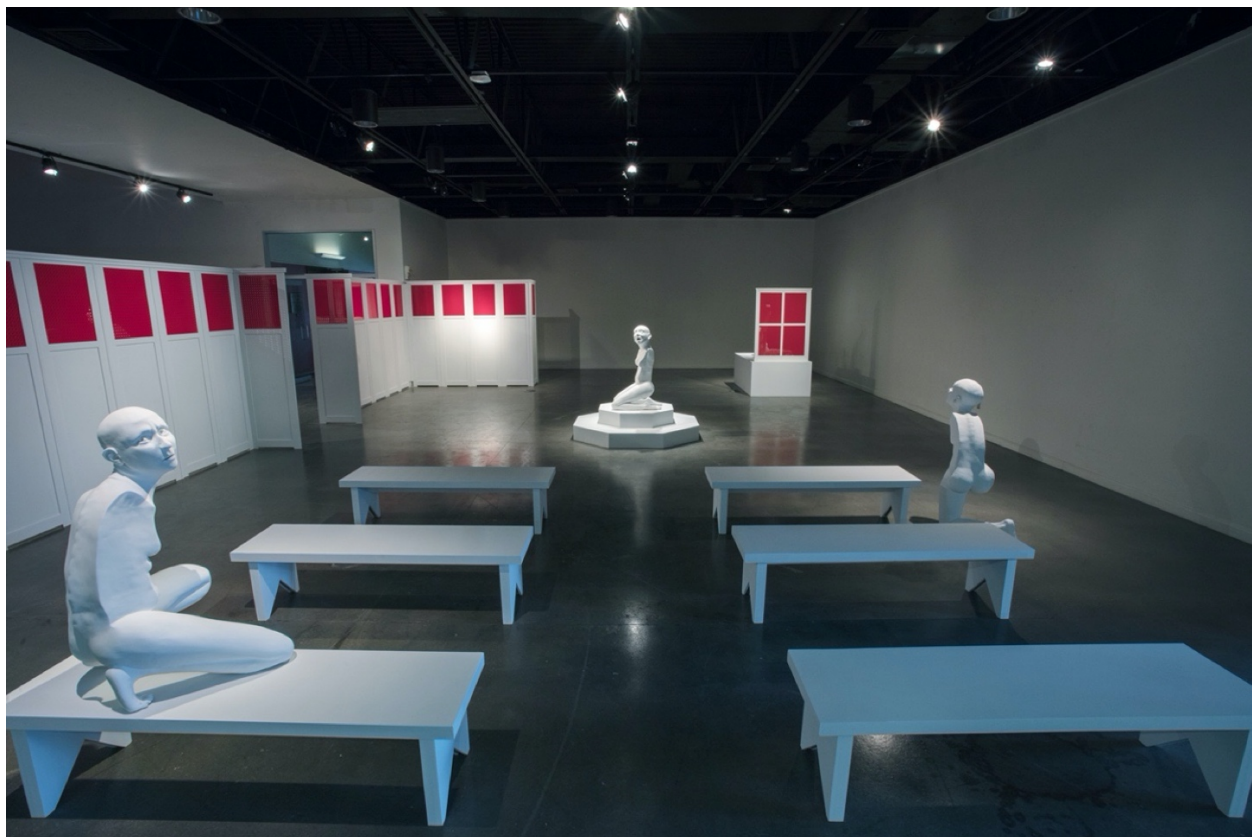
...like a decay in our bones, is an installation of the emotional strain a misogynistic religion can have on a woman, especially individuals who have survived sexual trauma. The ceramic figures are manifestations of the emotional state of these women. They have been stripped of their identity, sexuality and autonomy. They have become the embodiment of many physical punishments unleashed onto women in the Bible. They are bald like the women of Zion, their genitalia exposed like the women of Jerusalem and they are dismembered like the Levite's Wife. They are iterations of the same woman, each moment different, but feeling the same. Some feel almost defiant in their stance, but scared underneath. Others feel a strange sense of complacency; others feel almost enveloped in fear and shame.

The formal decisions for the figures of this exhibition create a visual representation of a fractured psyche. They are an imitation of the limiting nature of the Catholic Church and the Catholic faith. The figures arms were severed in a manner that resembles a supernatural effect. The slices along the torso indicate these figures cannot defend themselves. This is a representation of a loss of autonomy or agency. Without the means to protect or defend, they are vulnerable of those around them, constantly in need of assistance and at risk of manipulation.

The figures collectively illustrate a woman trapped within a mindset she cannot mentally or emotionally break herself of. There is a tension of desire, both for her own sexual needs, but also for a spiritual fulfillment. The religion she was raised in does not allow for both. She must choose and mourn the death of the other. This tension is created by using pose references from pornography and popular culture melded with expressions that convey awe or fear, also referred to as piety.



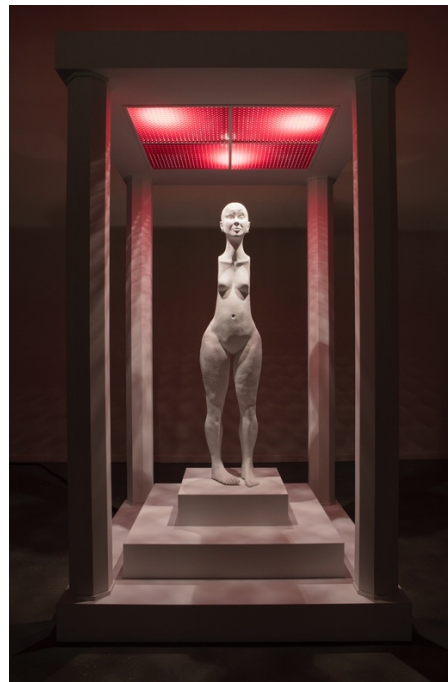
The environments each figure inhabits embody the religion at fault for these emotions and manifestations, but also reveal the emotional state of each figure. The figures among the pews are scared and concerned, but still seem to desperately want spiritual satisfaction from a religion that cannot fully provide to its woman parishioners. The figures that are placed on the canopy, the altar and the saint stand struggle with the notions of being presented two options of being; mother or whore. They are limited in what they can be and are consistently subject to judgement for their behavior. They are placed on display, for all to watch and judge, including the other women. Finally, the figures placed on the confessional and behind the screen seem to be the most fearful and shamed. They are heavily cast in the shadow of the confessional screens and will live there permanently, asking for forgiveness for something they do not fully comprehend or know to be sinful. These figures poses are on the defense. They attempt to fight back but feel contained by their faith.



The shadows of this exhibition were a welcomed discovery during installation. Walking through the space there are moments that are more impactful when the elements of this exhibition are seen as a whole. The laser cut red screens cast more shadows than I had anticipated. Sitting with the shadows, they are more and more ominous. Some stretch out over the floor and walls, with moments of double exposure. They cast onto several areas of the pieces that are not immediately noticeable, but beautiful and haunting when they are found. I often find myself trying to understand how the shadow is cast with very little success. These moments embody the impact of a religion and the religion itself as always looming and farther reaching than I, or many, are aware. The impact of the misogynistic stories and leadership may not always be easy to see, but its effects are strong and readily present, much like all the shadows in this exhibition.

White was a very deliberate choice for this work. Shadows cast so perfectly against a clean white surface, but white also carries an abundance of emotional weight. White is connected to

purity, to clean, and to new. White is connected to virginity and perfection. But white is nearly impossible to keep pure and untainted. It was the perfect color to use to create a sense of needing to protect and a fear of causing any imperfection. White surfaces are a metaphor for trying to control women's bodies and behavior. The use of white becomes a symbol of the stories told to teenage girls about how they are perfect until they have sex, by comparing them to depetaled flowers, tape that has lost its stickiness, or gum that has already been chewed. While installing this work, I identified further why white was the color I choose; it is another metaphor for perfection that cannot be upheld and is deeply harmful to women.



The red screens emphasize that harm, it brings the figures back to reality. Like white, red is an equally impactful color. It is aggressive and strong. It can be a symbol of the most intense passion and also the most violent rage. It is the extremes of emotions. It can mean life through blood, but also death. In Catholicism red is used to decorate the church during the time of Christmas. It is a celebration of Jesus's birth, but also a subtle reminder of his violent death. Red is also a source of shame for some women. Red can be menstruation blood, which is considered impure and

shameful in the Bible. But life, which is the most important thing a woman can provide, cannot happen without this blood.

The blending of these two colors and the shadows are a representation of growing up as a woman in the Catholic faith. I was meant to be pure; virginity pledges were expected and honored. But it was impossible to feel pure when I had already received a scuff on my white surface. The red becomes a representation of growing up and being trained in shame. It is a looming presence I continue to experience. I learned to conceal my body, to be ashamed of it and control it to protect others. Within the exhibition the red and the shadows alter the white surfaces. The red and the shadows make the white impure. For me, these moments of pink and shadow are the contamination the church has had on my self-image and self-worth. They are the beginning of an understanding of self and self-care in recognizing toxic rhetoric in one's life.



Completing this exhibition has developed my skills of editing and intentional decision making. The importance and impact of a singular color has become my focus. Leaving out the superfluous and dramatizing the simple is the space my artwork and ideas thrive within. The moments where I am able to achieve eye contact with the figures in their spaces are the most impactful, and the significance of those moments derives from the sculpting and the lighting. Being able to internalize the emotion of the expression on the faces and be in the space with the figures is amplified by the dramatic lighting, the cast shadows and the limited palette. Figures within the human scale, shadows that influence a space and stripping color and surface down to only their essential being is where my work will continue to develop. These formal qualities link the feelings of women and sexual trauma survivors and the effects of biblical rhetoric. Purity is unattainable and unrealistic. The limited representations of women in biblical narratives, popular culture and political legislation are fracturing both mentally and physically. Resisting a state of religious control of shame and doubt is the challenge of most women and survivors of sexual trauma.

V. Works Cited

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VI. Additional Images





