

VENERATION

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Fine Arts

with a

Major in Art in the

College of Graduate Studies

University of Idaho

by

Kassie Smith

Major Professor: J. Casey Doyle, M.F.A.

Committee Members: Val Carter, M.F.A; Alexandra Teague, M.F.A.

Department Administrator: Sally Machlis, M.F.A.

April 2016

AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT THESIS

This thesis of Kassie Smith, submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Arts with a Major in Art and titled "VENERATION," has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates below, is now granted to submit final copies to the College of Graduate Studies for approval.

Major Professor: _____ Date: _____
J. Casey Doyle, M.F.A.

Committee Members: _____ Date: _____
Val Carter, M.F.A.

_____ Date: _____
Alexandra Teague, M.F.A

Department Administrator: _____ Date: _____
Sally Machlis, M.F.A.

Abstract

My works walk the line of intimacy. Vessels can harbor some of our most intimate interactions on a daily basis. The connection is not just visual— it's tangible. It is a base for introspection, not necessarily conversation. This understanding of functional vessels is an essential element of my sculptural practice; I rely on the vessel as a vehicle for communication, as it fosters an approachable and accessible language. Pots are universal and everyone has some sort of relational understanding of them, whether it be the everyday brown Betty, special occasions only, or locked in a glass curio never to be touched.

My work is about the physical experience of occupying a human body. The abstracted body parts that I create are not necessarily meant to be trompe l'oeil, rather they should call physical awareness to a viewer's own body through alluding to skin, folds, rolls, orifices and dimples, as well as genitalia, all characteristic of human physiology. My intention is that my sculptural works become meditative or contemplative objects— where viewers can reflect on their regard and treatment of their own and others' bodies

Acknowledgements

Addy Hamilton, who introduced me to the magic of clay and convinced me to go to college, (which caused me to happen upon ceramic artist, Kevin Schoffstall, completely altering my art trajectory) followed by RaeAnn Woodcock who, among many other things, showed me the Saginaw Valley State University light, thank you.

Sara B. Clark, who taught me everything I know and for whom words are inadequate, thank you. Thanks to Blake Johnson, for recognizing the teacher in me and recommending The University of Idaho and Moscow as being an excellent fit. Hideki Kihata, you always exhibited the perfect balance of skepticism and encouragement. I would not be where I am today without the phenomenal instruction of a well-rounded and extraordinarily intellectual group of people that comprise the SVSU Art Department.

Casey and Val— thanks for never giving up on me, putting up with my occasional whining and perpetual stubbornness, giving me pep talks, and sharing your invaluable knowledge. Alexandra, thank you for having the confidence in me to squeeze me in to your already packed schedule and for adding your unique and instrumental voice to the dialogue that has led to the fruition of my thesis exhibition.

I would also like to acknowledge the unwavering love and support of my family, without whom this accomplishment would not have been possible, and the comradery and support of my fellow graduate students; through this experience we will be eternally bound in friendship. To all of my friends, *partners in crime*, who have had a hand in my success (*and you know you have*), thank you.

Finally, this thesis, in content and form, would not exist without the genuine kindness, encouragement, and support from the ladies at Sanctuary Yoga. You have all played a part in teaching me the value of a dedicated practice, on and off the mat. You are the absolute epitome of strong women.

Table of Contents

AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT THESIS	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures.....	vi
Chapter 1: making and manifesto	1
Chapter 2: fleshy and uncomfortable, kind of confrontational	9
Chapter 3: ceremony and ritual	15
Chapter 4: to inhibit or not to inhibit.....	25
Chapter 5: summation.....	29
References.....	30

List of Figures

1	Mary Chase Perry Stratton, 1905.....	2
2	<i>Needed-Erase-Her #14</i> , Hannah Wilke, 1974.....	2
3	<i>Untitled</i> , Ann Agee, 1996-97.....	3
4	<i>Conduit</i> , Janine Antoni, 2009.....	3
5	<i>Recluse</i> , 7 ½"x 16 ½ " x 9 ½", Ken Price, 2009.....	7
6	<i>Long Leaf House 1</i> , 72"x 8" x 9", Christine Federighi, 1994.....	7
7	<i>Honeycomb baby II</i> , 6 1/2" x 11" x 7", Adrian Arleo, 2010.....	7
8	<i>Tranquility Set</i> , 8 ¼ " x 11 ½ " x 5", Matt Nolen, 1996.....	8
9	<i>Orifice #4</i> , 2016.....	12
10	<i>Orifice #6</i> , 2016.....	12
11	<i>Orifice</i> , installation view, 2016.....	12
12	<i>Objects</i> , 5" × 9" × 3.5", 2013.....	13
13	<i>Sometimes you want a little, sometimes a little more</i> , 10" × 12" × 12", 2014.....	13
14	<i>Cremation/Séance</i> , 2015.....	14
15	Sculptural frieze from the Khajuraho temple.....	19
16	Phallic forms with decoration, Paracas Culture.....	20
17	Fellatio scene with articulated female head, Moche culture	20
18	<i>Veneration (ritual)</i> , installation view, 2016.....	20
19	<i>Veneration (ritual) #7</i> , 2016.....	21
20	<i>Veneration (ritual) #4</i> , 2016.....	21
21	<i>Veneration (ritual) #5</i> , 2016.....	21
22	<i>Veneration (ritual) #6</i> , 2016.....	21
23	<i>Veneration (litany)</i> , 2016.....	22
24	<i>Veneration (ceremony) #1</i> , 2016.....	23
25	<i>Veneration (ceremony) #2</i> , 2016.....	23
26	<i>Rite</i> , performance still images, 2014.....	24
27	<i>Governance</i> , 50.75" × 29", 2016.....	28
28	Detail, <i>Governance</i> , 2016.....	28

Chapter 1: making and manifesto

Preface

I am not a sociologist, psychologist, or anthropologist. I am not a philosopher or theorist. I am an artist. I am not neglecting the hundred years of evolutionary psychology, Freudian philosophy, or objectification theory that has been amassed on the subject of the female experience. I am purposefully avoiding it because I feel it tends to remove the raw humanity from the study of humans, in a characteristically human, elitist, way. I am an artist. I'm not here to tell you what it is, draw you a diagram, or illustrate how to fix it. I'm here to show you how it feels. I am well aware of the fact my way as a female, and as an artist, has been paved by the generations of females who came before me, carrying similar experiences.

Influence

Pewabic Pottery is Michigan's only historic pottery, still in operation as a non-profit, and their distinctive style is exemplary of the Arts and Crafts Movement. In addition to founding Pewabic Pottery, Mary Chase Perry Stratton (figure 1) established and subsequently taught in the ceramics department at the University of Michigan. As one of very few women in a male dominated field, she successfully operated as both a potter and a businesswoman. Although I am now rooting down in the West, my time in Michigan was essential in shaping the way I view and tackle my world. I can only hope to represent and continue the legacy of such a titan of a Michigan woman as Mary Stratton. My Pewabic Pottery coffee mug (glazed in a stoneware version of a low-fire Mary Stratton signature color) is a favorite and a constant source of encouragement. Ann Agee (figure 3) is a contemporary ceramic artist and self-proclaimed feminist. She is known primarily for her use of traditional technique and form (blue and white porcelain) while subverting imagery and meaning. Agee is one of many ceramic artists from whom I've learned conventions for engaging an audience in an approachable manner, while still holding tradition and veneration for the history of ceramic arts in high regard.

Hannah Wilke was one of the first feminist artists to create what was (and still is) considered explicit imagery of the female vulva in her art. During the Women's Liberation Movement in the early 1960's, Wilke began creating vaginal sculptures from terracotta clay. Figure 2 is an example of one work in a series depicting what may be interpreted as female vulva. Her art works in self-portraiture were often said to be counter to the feminist movement because of her natural beauty.

Janine Antoni is a contemporary artist working in various media. Her work often centers around themes of the body and the culture of femininity. Janine Antoni has been especially influential to me— through her work, I've gained an understanding and appreciation for both conceptual and installation art. I am especially fond of *Conduit*; it's a serious statement but presented in a kind of cheeky manner, parallel to the way I feel comfortable presenting my work (figure 4). Other female artists continue to work alongside me in tandem, and we, in turn, are paving the way for the females to come, and to share their experiences.



Figure 1 (left). Mary Chase Perry Stratton, founder of Pewabic Pottery in Detroit, 1903 (photograph taken around 1905).
Figure 2 (right). *Needed-Erase-Her #14*, Hannah Wilke, 1974



Figure 3. *Untitled*, 1996-97, Ann Agee



Figure 4. *Conduit*, Janine Antoni, 2009

Manifesto

I am a sucker for functional objects. Until about 150 years ago clay was almost exclusively used as a functional or decorative material and was not recognized as a “fine art” material. It was used for dishware and cookware as well as for ritual and funerary objects. By continuing to make functional pottery, I am honoring the tradition of the material.

My work tends to walk the line of intimacy. Drinking vessels can harbor some of our most intimate interactions on a daily basis— not only do you touch and cradle the vessel with your hands, you feel it with your lips. Being the creator of that intimacy is one of the most fulfilling aspects of my artistic practice. The connection is not just visual— it’s tangible. It is a base for introspection, not necessarily conversation. This understanding of functional vessels is an essential element of my sculptural practice; I rely on the vessel as a vehicle of communication, as it fosters an approachable and accessible language. Pots are universal and everyone has some sort of relational understanding of them, whether it be the everyday brown Betty, special occasions only, or locked in a glass curio never to be touched.

I have always felt a strong connection to the natural world; I find both macro and micro ecosystems riveting. The cooperative dynamic of pack and swarm animals is also captivating; humans are the most social of all animals. The use of natural materials in my work (aside from clay) such as nests, fur and hair, bones, rocks, and sticks have a correlation with my veneration for the natural world but are not causal. I am in no way attempting to make environmental statements through my work, but my interest in the environment prompts the use of natural materials and imagery.

Every time I think about the journey clay has taken in the hands of man, I am bewildered. It is absolutely fascinating to me that ancient peoples on every continent ubiquitously developed uses for fired ceramic vessels as well as the technology to reliably create them. History, officially, begins with clay. Yes, clay. The first evidence of any written language, or 'history,' is found in Sumer: cuneiform, on clay tablets. Ancient peoples held their clay vessels in such high regard that they were charged with carrying their most symbolic and physically precious earthly items to the underworld. The Egyptians created ceramic canopic jars to carry their organs to the afterlife. Talk about important. It's fascinating. The development of clay technology allowed humans to create settlements, to abandon their previously nomadic lifestyles. Ancient peoples were able to use clay to store and cook food, to carry water, to ferment alcoholic beverages. Sumerian beer, known as kash, was fermented and stored in clay vessels. The brewing instructions and recipes were written on clay tablets. In Peru, a special, ergonomically designed ceramic backpack-vessel called an Urpu, was used to transport chicha (corn beer). Civilizations all over the world used adobe brick (yes, clay) to build their homes. Adobe brick? Let's fire it! Wild, it gets hard. Firing clay brick is what allowed ancient Rome to expand without its cities continuing to burn to the ground every few years.

Glaze? GLAZE???. How did these people, all over the world, separately, without sharing knowledge, figure out glaze chemistry? Not just glaze formulation; it's hard enough to get a glaze to fit a clay body, to make it stable, to get it to mature; how the hell did they figure out color chemistry?

The Egyptians developed the first glaze. And guess what. It was actually an incredible, astonishing, fascinating, self-glazing clay material. Somehow, they dug this material out of the ground, in naturally occurring deposits, figured out that if they processed it in a certain way, let it dry in a certain way, and fired it in a certain way, the magical mystery material would create its own, brightly colored, vitreous glaze layer. And we're going to slap some acrylic paint on our clay and call it a day? For shame.

The Korean, Chinese, and Japanese dynasties can all be defined exclusively by their ceramic forms and glaze. Emperors had their own, personal, pottery families that were commissioned to make wares ONLY for the Emperor and their family. It was only ever made then, by that potter family, for that Royal family, period. Decades of glaze, clay, and firing research *defines* an entire period of time. Bam.

Ceramics and glaze drove an ENTIRE WORLD economy for almost 300 years. That's the existence of America as a country. European nations poured their entire national wealth into the research and development of porcelain and ceramic pigments—MULTIPLE ENTIRE NATIONS OF WEALTH. And now what, we disregard it as “crafty,” and “retired women’s hobbies.” For 300 years all of Europe was in a violent race to develop the perfect clay body and the perfect decorating pigments; glaze chemistry and technological innovation at its finest. And now; oh well, let's just spray paint it.

The fact that earth, in nearly any composition, can be gathered up, heated to a high temperature, and transformed into something completely new is fucking magical. Trees can turn into glaze. Our bones can become glaze. Unreal.

Paint is paint. No matter what it goes on, it's there, it is what it is. It doesn't change, it doesn't transform. What you see is what you get. I have no qualms with taking a fired surface to its limits and continuing to enhance that surface with other, non-fired materials. It's an absolute disgrace to completely rely on them. Using heat, the power, magic, and versatility of naturally occurring earthly elements is exposed in a magnificent transformation! Disregarding this ability to transform, denigrating a ceramic object by using only non-heat transforming elements on the surface such as paint, is like telling a genie in a magic lamp “oh no, you can go back inside. I just want the lamp.” Fuck that. I WANT ALL THE MAGIC.

Ken Price (figure 5) was a ceramic artist who stopped using glaze for the last 29 years of his career in favor of layers upon layers of acrylic paint. Price started as a painter, and switched to clay after studying under Peter Voulkos. He is recognized as one of the first artists to bridge the gap between craft and fine art, bringing ceramic sculpture into the forefront of the art world. This only happened, however, after he began applying paint— a material traditionally recognized as fine art, to his clay sculptures. His paint application technique was meticulous and calculated, resulting in hypnotic surfaces that completely masked the ceramic surface beneath. If the goal is to completely remove evidence of the clay, why not use a different material, such as sculpey or plaster?

Examples (not so good, pretty good & phenomenal)

Christine Federighi was a ceramic artist who, like Ken Price, painted her clay sculptures. In contrast to Price, she used oil paint, and allowed the translucency and luminosity of the paint to enhance the clay surface beneath, rather than mask it (figure 6). Like oil paint, encaustic is another non-fired technique that ceramic artists use to enhance the fired clay surface. The translucence of the wax allows the fired or glazed surface to be visually highlighted while creating a finish that cannot be attained using ceramic materials alone (figure 7). Matt Nolen (figure 8) creates mesmerizing painterly surfaces using the majolica technique of renaissance Italy. To achieve this surface, mason stains and metal oxides are painted over a tin-based, opaque glaze, then fired.

I am for an art that venerates, that pays homage to all that came before. I am for an art that continues to carry the spirit of innovation and exploration forward. I am for an art of rules and limits. Because it shouldn't be entirely self-indulgent if you're sending it out into the world as 'art.' No cop-outs. Try harder. There is a way. Your spray painted piece of trinket fuckery may have been fun for a minute, but it's a brazen slur against the incomprehensible human beings who made it possible for you to call it art in the first place. Peter Voulkos and Paul Soldner didn't work their entire lives to bring clay into the realm of fine art for it to be degraded with paint.

I am for an art that is a story. I want a gut wrenching, gritty narrative. I want to feel *something*. I don't want a depiction. I don't like superfluous bullshit that exists for the sake of existence, to take up space, to sit in a gallery pretending. I don't like self-important, enigmatic, esoteric puzzles. I don't want the 1+1 formulaic farce that is designed to make you feel stupid because you can't figure it out. Because you *can't* figure it out. I don't want a thousand vacuous symbols with "meaning" put together like words to form a sentence that is informative. I don't want your size queen knickknackery. Big isn't impressive, isn't good. I want to feel it. I want to squirm. I want to cry. Tears of joy. Shivers. Goosebumps. I want a lasting sensation; one that endures, resonates, and howls in my soul long after we've parted. I am for an art that haunts.



Figure 5. *Recluse*, 7 ½"x 16 ½" x 9 ½", Ken Price, 2009



Figure 6 (left). *Long Leaf House 1*, 72"x 8"x 9", Christine Federighi, 1994



Figure 7 (right). *Honeycomb baby II*, 6 1/2" x 11" x 7", Adrian Arleo, 2010



Figure 8. *Tranquility Set*, 8 ¼ " x 11 ½ " x 5", Matt Nolen, 1996

Chapter 2: fleshy and uncomfortable, kind of confrontational

This isn't about Kassie Smith. Her experience is not unique.

She has the work of another artist hanging on the wall in her apartment. It's one of the first things her guests see as they enter, aside from the shockingly small space she occupies. The drawing is an unpretentious nude. Simple, expressive line work. Nearly every person who encounters the image reacts with something along the lines of "whoa, what's wrong with her boobs?" and "something about her tits doesn't look right," because she isn't a drawing of an artificially enhanced model from a Victoria's Secret catalogue. Because the drawing doesn't have the physique of a porn actress. She wants to scream! "THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH HER TITS!" because someday, her nipples will also have a slight down-turn.

She's been taught to shame her body, relentlessly, since she was old enough to understand her reflection in a mirror. It's vain and conceited to admire something about yourself, physically. It could always use improvement. "If you can pinch an inch, it's fat," her dad would say.

She was a chub-a-lub-lub fatty cakes, awkward teen. Her thighs used to rub together, as most post-pubescent teen girls' do. The constant friction while she walked would rub holes right through her jeans, in the inner- upper thigh. Her dad once boldly scolded her for "cutting your jeans" in that spot, because "it's slutty." As if being uncomfortable in her awkward, flabby body wasn't enough, her awkward, flabby body was causing her to be slut-shamed by her own dad; the first major model of male behavior most girls encounter.

All that's taught about puberty is that it's miserable. Your body will change, you'll start to smell, your hair will grow in weird places, and people will make fun of you. You'll be moody, sweaty, greasy, hairy and smelly. It was up to our peers to educate us on "everything else." Words like "pussy, loose, easy, and bush" entered the lexicon, not as casual descriptors, but as specifically female, with negative connotations. She doubts any of her male friends in the 6th grade had ever seen a "bush" or understood what "loose" actually referred to. All she knew was that she definitely didn't want any of it. She found out she was supposed to "shave

her fat bush” before she was even permitted to shave her legs or armpits. Who was going to see it, anyway? Who was going to know? It didn’t matter. Having one was disgusting. Her body was disgusting. Her fatty, hairy thighs were rubbing holes through her non-name brand jeans just under her fat hairy bush, which had a jelly belly roll hanging over the waistband so she’d have to suck it in. She wore over-sized men’s t-shirts so no one could see her fatty belly and armpit rolls, pinching next to her awkwardly shaped and uneven boobs. She would sweat profusely. Her teeth were crooked, only slightly but crooked nonetheless. She had acne and a big ass. She didn’t look like the girls in the magazines, on TV, in movies. Her experience was far from unique.

It’s difficult to reconcile being born with a piece of anatomy that, within the last 60 to 100 years, was still considered a detriment to civilized society, (and at points in European history within the past 500 years, of a mark of witchcraft and of being possessed by the devil, which would result in execution) and so would be surgically removed. I speak, specifically, of the clitoris (Ryan & Jethá, 2010). I am supposed to understand that this natural, physiological piece of my body, (evolved over a few million years to perform a specific function) is considered by society to be, not only unnecessary, but immoral. I am supposed to not only deny any urges that initiate from that physiological point, but pretend altogether that they do not exist. I am a coy female. I reserve my body, mind, and soul, for only the most worthy man. To do otherwise would contribute to the denigration of the nuclear family; the foundation of all humankind for all of history. It is difficult to reconcile being born with (and carrying for life) a piece of anatomy that is so instilled with the power to destroy all of humanity but simultaneously dismissed as functionally “unnecessary,” “unimportant,” and as Freud would argue, indicative of the lack of maturation in a female. Females were even denied the mere notion that they could experience something called an “orgasm” until the 20th century.

(I should note as a consolation, that for a short period during the Middle Ages, men who experienced impotence were also assumed to have been possessed by the devil— or worse, cursed by a witch (Roach, 2008). Even though men were also targeted for sexual abnormality, it was still tied back to, or blamed on deviant women.)

Of course, I could go on a long, somewhat related tangent about the medical condition of “hysteria” and the centuries old practice of physicians engaging in the act of “vulvar manipulation” of patients to relieve the symptoms, still, denying “orgasm” and natural female libido. (I cannot and

will not deny that sexual repression of the human male has been present at various stages of history, yet it has not been present to the point of widespread and consistent genital mutilation, unless you count circumcision, which hardly compares.)

The sculptural ceramic pieces collectively titled *Orifice* (figures 9 through 11) are designed to incite hyperawareness of viewers' physical selves. Similar to the discussion on ceremonial vessels that follows, these are not meant to be anatomically correct representations of genitalia. Rather, they reference and allude to various areas of folds and orifices that are characteristic of human physiology. Their placement on the wall suggests that they should be assessed. Their proximity to each other suggests that each should be evaluated individually, but that they rely on each other contextually.

This theme, depicting the psychological impact of objectification, of incessant subjection to images of digitally manipulated, perfect, women has been reoccurring in my work over the past 3 years. Figures 12 and 13 are two examples of a more literal, or illustrative approach. I used representational imagery of figures, manipulated in a somewhat grotesque way. The *Objects* were left bare; the lack of surface treatment places emphasis on the form, the object. They are drinking vessel-sized; this allows viewers to understand how the objects might feel in the hand without actually being touched. The forms in figure 13 were barrel fired; I used a year's collection of Victoria's Secret catalogues as fuel. This event was meant to be a sort of séance, ridding myself of the symbolic catalogues while leaving a permanent scar on the deformed clay bodies. I don't feel that these works are unsuccessful, but they are very female specific, and negative. I don't want to perpetuate negativity. The new forms (figures 9 through 11), while they may be interpreted as specifically female, can also be viewed as ambiguous orifices. This gives them a level of approachability that figures 12 and 13 did not have. Placing them on the wall gives the *Orifices* a confrontational quality that demands further investigation.



Figure 9. *Orifice #4*, 2016



Figure 10. *Orifice #6*, 2016



Figure 11. Installation view, *Orifice*, 2016



Figure 12. *Objects*, 5" × 9" × 3.5", 2013



Figure 13. *Sometimes you want a little, sometimes a little more*, 10" × 12" × 12", 2014



Figure 14. *Cremation/Séance*, handspun cotton yarn, ashes from 1 year of Victoria's Secret catalogues, 2015

Chapter 3: ceremony and ritual

Bodies are taboo. Naked bodies are more taboo. And nothing is more taboo than two (or more) naked bodies touching. Don't say the sex word. It's not real. We're not going to talk about it. As little as 60 years ago, the vaginal and surrounding structures were so dismissed, and therefore so misunderstood, that instances of urethral damage in females was rampant. This damage often resulted in life-long incontinence. Way to make having a vagina even more uncomfortable! Upon marriage, 'sex information' pamphlets were provided to new couples, with tips and tricks on how best to conceive; female anatomy was so enigmatic, *even to females*, that urethral penetration, rather than vaginal, was not uncommon (Roach, 2008).

Everything she knows, she learned from porn. The WWE of sex. Only, nobody has ever told any of us that it isn't real. We all have bodies. We are humans. Without bodies, we wouldn't exist. We all have sexuality. We all have a drive to touch and be touched, in some capacity. But for some reason, America, and undeniably, most first world, or civilized societies, have decided that we aren't allowed to talk about it. She can't have a reasonable or casual conversation with another human being about her body, their body, or their sexualities.

She eventually, sort of, outgrew her physically awkward body, though the psychological experiences continued to compound. The older she became, the more naked movie scenes she saw, the more ads for feminine products. Make-up, tampons, razors, bras and lingerie; even non-gender-targeting ads like toothbrush commercials were packed with gorgeous, perfect, sexy women who looked nothing like her.

The language of sex continued to increase around her. Out of curiosity, she started peeking into nudity, and eventually, like all of her peers, into porn. Her body didn't look like theirs.

The Western medical practice of clitoral removal as a means to repress female sexual desire was instigated by British gynecologist Isaac Baker Brown around 1858. He happened to be the president of the Medical Society of London, therefore, infallible. The practice was generally accepted for about 100 years before eventually being condemned in the medical community. Shortly after, it experienced a revival, *for cosmetic purposes* (Ryan & Jethá, 2010).

Many women still have limited familiarity of their own vulval anatomy, and due to the absence of vulval imagery in the media and even textbooks, they are clueless as to what a 'normal' vulva may look like. The naive opposition to proper sex education (abstinence-only programs) further hinders the information available to both women and men on the vaginal structures and variation in labia. Additionally, digital alteration of vulval imagery is not uncommon in pornography; some countries, such as Australia, have censorship laws that require the size and shape of the labia to fit a certain, unrealistic standard of appearance (Freedman, 2010). As reported in 2011 by the British magazine, *The Observer*, "Medical experts have sounded the alarm over soaring rates of labiaplasty, as the preliminary findings of a study show women are increasingly turning to private providers to pursue 'designer vaginas'."

The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery noted that in 2013, over 10 million "below-the belt" cosmetic surgical and non-surgical procedures were performed. Labiaplasty surgeries increased by 44% over the course of the year 2013 alone (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2014).

As if she wasn't self-conscious enough of her own accord, all the guys she dated, likewise, learned everything they needed to know from porn. Her butt wasn't perky enough, her boobs weren't big enough. The word 'beef curtains' made her want to vomit every time she heard it casually thrown around. (Like 50% of women, her labia minora wasn't tucked up all nice, tight and tiny into her labia majora, which meant she was a loose, dirty whore by default. You're welcome.)

The right way to do it was and is the porn way. Because her boyfriend saw it in porn, it was automatically what they were supposed to do it. Foreplay was for dick sucking. Wait, scratch foreplay, and just get down to business. "No, I'm not just 'wet all the time.' Sorry. You gotta work for that shit," was a pervasive thought that never dared escape her lips.

But she didn't know any better and neither did they. Sex was always an awkward, awful, uncomfortable several minutes that inevitably left her feeling even more self-conscious when it was over than when it started. She felt degraded. She was supposed to moan and scream, and like it when her ass was slapped. She was supposed to say strange, awkward and dirty

things. She was definitely not supposed to need a drink of water when all the heavy mouth breathing evaporated every last molecule of her saliva. That's not sexy.

(Thankfully, not a single one of her sexual partners ever knocked on her door pretending to be the dishwasher maintenance technician.)

It was not Kassie Smith that was having sex. It was a male-imagined projection of a fantasy person; what Kassie Smith was 'supposed to be.' That projection transcended every area of her life.

Her vagina never did her any favors. Men were manipulative and had sexual expectations. No doesn't mean no. No means "try harder, she's playing hard to get." Dinner and movie is payment for admission to Panty Land. "He brought you flowers, you owe him something," says *every girl's* Jiminy Cricket. She never blamed them; they're told by society to have expectations as much as she is told by society to have perfect teeth, tiny waist, tan skin and no pubic hair.

Although American males have an advantage over females in the sex/objectification, expectation game, they cannot be denied their side of oppression. I can't pretend that I understand the male experience, much less the male sexual experience. In the late 1800's a publication was released, citing masturbation as causing "impotence, blindness, heart trouble, insanity, stupidity, clammy hands, suppurating pustules on the face, acrid belches, a flow of fetid matter from the fundament, tongue coatings, stooped shoulders, flabby muscles, under-eye circles, and a draggy gait (Roach, 2008)." About a century earlier, it was established that semen carried what was believed to be a finite amount of a man's life energy. Engaging in casual sex or masturbation would cause a variety of ailments. To combat the possibility of the unsolicited spilling of vital life energy, contraptions of various complexity were invented, with the main objective being to prevent an erection altogether. The Penile Pricking Ring was a simple example, being a metal ring which, upon penile expansion, would expose a series of metal spikes. In theory, the sharp pain would awaken the sleeping male, and cause the immediate reduction of the perpetrating erection (Roach, 2008).

In many ancient societies, before the Judeo-Christian institution of monogamous, life-long, pair-bonding, sex was celebrated. Representations were placed on ceremonial ceramic vessels. From

the Moche of the Andes in Peru (200-600 CE), to the Hindi in India, the celebration of sex and physiology even infiltrated religions. The Moche depicted their erotic art, exclusively, on sculptural or modeled ceramic vessels, suggesting their ceremonial and representational importance (figures 16 and 17). Furthermore, the ‘sex pots,’ as they have come to be known, are found exclusively in tomb suggesting their religious importance (Mathieu, 2003). The Khajuraho temple in Madhya Pradesh, India is exemplary in the visual portrayal of the union of religion and the celebration of our physical bodies (figure 15).

Historically, ceramic vessels have served both utilitarian and ritual or ceremonial functions. Nearly everything we know about ancient civilizations comes from the remnants of their ceramics. Funerary and burial sites hold the most intact ware. It is a generally held notion among archeologists studying various cultures that ceramic objects with impractical forms, handles, or spouts are considered ceremonial. Either the object itself or its contents are assumed sacred. The handle is not meant to actually carry, the spout is not meant to easily allow the contents to escape. The forms the vessels take are often sculpted in a representational way or highly decorated with narrative imagery (as in most Andean cultures such as the Chavin, Paracas, Nasca, and Moche). The sculpted imagery and slip-painted designs were never arbitrary. Depending on the culture, they could depict a variety of objects, events, rituals, or religious figures and deities; regardless each element was an homage.

In my two ceremonial vessel/body series, *Veneration (ritual)* (figures 18 through 22) and *Veneration (ceremony)* (figures 24 and 24) I am attempting to draw attention to the vessels as ritual objects, or at the least, objects that hold some sort of importance, ceremonial or otherwise. Each vessel is endowed with various elements that reference the human body. In majority of these vessels, allusions to the anatomy of both genders exist, in harmony. The body parts are not necessarily meant to be specific or trompe l’oeil. They should call physical awareness to a viewer’s own body through alluding to skin, folds, rolls, and dimples, as well as genitalia. These pots aren’t about sexuality, or cultural gender constructs— they’re about the culture surrounding our physiology— taking something we denigrate as taboo, dirty, and deviant and celebrating it as a part of our natural anatomy. Like my protestation of painting a ceramic surface being required to bring clay into the fine art realm, surgical body modification is now almost necessary for a female body to be deemed appropriate to be viewed and fit our standards of, not just beauty, but normalcy.

My intention is that the *Veneration* pots become meditative or contemplative objects— where viewers can reflect on their regard and treatment of their own and others’ bodies. I construct them using traditional techniques, so that the forms are recognized as pots before viewers identify

the various anatomical structures. The simple and soft glaze combinations are comforting, even inviting. Once a viewer is lured in by the captivating form and surface, they are confronted with a realization of the content of the imagery sculpted into the pots. Viewers must then engage in an internal dialogue about their assessment of the ceramic pots.

Our bodies are rarely treated with respect, by ourselves or others. While our bodies should be used for fun, pleasure, enjoyment, they should also be treated as sacred. We should make a concerted effort to understand and appreciate the anatomical and physiological structures that our bodies have evolved. In what physical 'rituals' do we partake? Do we always revere them or do we disregard the 'ceremony' as unimportant? What effect does that have on our perception of self, both physical and psychological?

Figure 26 is a set of still images from a performance piece, attempting to convey an idea similar to what I've discussed above. I created an effigy of the Mesoamerican Great Goddess, held her over my bare chest like a cherished shield, while a male figure smashed her. I was then left to sweep up the shattered remains. The performance was invested with connotations of protection, destruction, devaluation, and the perpetuation of self-devaluation but ended up falling into the category of vacuous and formulaic 'art' that I don't hold in high regard. Like figures 12 and 13 above, it also perpetuated ideas of negativity.



Figure 15. Sculptural frieze from the Khajuraho temple, Madhya Pradesh, India, 950-1050 CE



Figure 16 (left). Phallic forms with decoration, Paracas Culture, Peru, 600 BCE

Figure 17 (right). Fellatio scene with articulated female head, Moche culture, Peru, 100 CE



Figure 18. Installation view, *Veneration (ritual)*, 2016



Figure 19. *Veneration (ritual) #7*, 2016



Figure 20. *Veneration (ritual) #4*, 2016



Figure 21. *Veneration (ritual) #5*, 2016



Figure 22. *Veneration (ritual) #6*, 2016



Figure 23. Veneration (litany), 2016



Figure 24. *Veneration (ceremony) #1*, 2016



Figure 25. *Veneration (ceremony) #2*, 2016



Figure 26. *Rite*, performance still images, 2014

Chapter 4: to inhibit or not to inhibit

She has felt a continuous struggle to find her place and opinion. She took advantage of the benefits of oral contraception and hormone manipulation for nearly a decade, and was glad for it. She had no real understanding of the risks and benefits; educational materials are from the drug companies that produce the pills, and anything else is from experienced-based blogs, written by self-righteous keyboard warriors. Her doctors offered limited advice; every body is different and every doctor has a different opinion. She will always wonder what future consequences she might encounter, and what the pills may have helped her avoid. When she decided to stop using the pill, after months, even years, of constant deliberation, she felt confident in her decision. There were aspects she missed. Her face went back to that acne covered nightmare, like she was reliving puberty and her teens again. She lost all control over the red devil, dear Aunt Flow, but her body started doing what it evolved to do.

Americans as a whole suffer from the oppression of sexual expression. Women, arguably, get the shorter end of that stick. I want us to make a more concerted effort to respect ourselves and others, our bodies and the bodies of others. Our range of emotion and ability to reason and experience at a high level set us apart from other mammals, but we are still animals. We are animals to the point that females unconsciously sense the immunobiological capacities of male DNA and instinctively choose a mate based on hormones that we cannot control or consciously sense. Our bodies are programmed to seek genetic diversity in mates, providing offspring with the highest chance for survival and proliferation. It's fascinating. We are animals to the point where a male can sense how likely he is to impregnate a female through analyzing the complexity of her copulatory vocalizations. Hint: they are most complex at ovulation (Ryan & Jethá, 2010). Disruption of these fascinating natural phenomena can be caused by the manipulation of hormones; the major perpetrator being oral contraceptives.

Oral contraceptives were first approved for use in the US by the FDA in 1960. This played an unprecedented role in women's liberation and sparked the sexual revolution. The Feminist movement roared, and fill in the blank with subsequent feminist history. Oral contraceptives have had and continue to have inarguable positive impacts on both society as a whole as well as individuals. I'm going to engage discussion on the micro impact of oral contraception on individuals. The possibility of a male, hormonal contraceptive could be viable in the near future, but for the past

56 years, decisions about contraception have largely been the internal struggle of the female with males feeling little impact.

The 30 second ritual performed every day, at the same time, of finding the pack, popping a pill out of its bubble, and swallowing it, is a minute spec of time dedicated to a cause that could have massive, life-long implications. We (women) are spared the emotional and psychological torment of, fingers crossed, praying to whatever gods will listen, our Aunt Flow will come knocking. It allows us to enjoy our bodies and sex more freely. It also contributes to the denigration of intimacy. But we are animals, and we have evolved to find sex pleasurable as well as productive.

Oral contraceptives can have additional positive impacts on the physical body. They can reduce, even eliminate acne. They have also been proven to aid in the prevention of ovarian cysts and certain types of cancer. They impact the way a woman's body carries and stores fat, in turn affecting her appetite. They can disrupt and inhibit libido. Artificial hormones can not only ease the discomfort of menstruation, but pin-point regulate it both in terms of time and menstrual flow, as well as reduce premenstrual syndrome (PMS). A woman taking oral contraceptives can choose not to menstruate at all. Whether partial or complete, subversion of a natural body cycle is still subversion of a natural body cycle. The cycle exists for a reason. Manipulating it can make our lives a hell of a lot more convenient, but at what cost? I don't know.

I'm not here to stand on a soapbox. I'm not here to tell other women what to do or think.

Governance (figure 27) is a narrative of ritual. It is designed to take the 30 second ritual that 25% of American women participate in, every day, and make it more substantial, more contemplative, more reflective. It is easy to disregard an action that takes 30 seconds, as having no further impact than banning embryos from implanting on uterine walls. The average menstrual cycle is 28 days. 21 to 24 days of no bleeding with ovulation in the middle, followed by 4 to 7 days of menstruation at the end. Repeat.

Oral contraceptives are designed to exactly mimic this cycle. Using multiple design conventions, I have reinforced this 'calendar' in *Governance*. There are 28 plates, with 28 nests, each holding a decreasing increment of a 28 day cycle of oral contraceptive, occupying 28 framed boxes, in a grid reflective of the standard birth control pack (inherently, a calendar). Part of ritual is litany. My making process walks the line of ritual, and litany is always present. Litany is reflected in this work visually and conceptually.

The plates are porcelain, universally representing something we hold in high regard, which are often a small piece of a larger ritual or ceremony. They are also commercially mass-produced

reflecting the cookie-cutter solution to unwanted pregnancy that is the proliferation of oral contraception. They have different decal designs, which can reflect the range of individuals, though, all being female, are still the same. The boxes highlight the importance of Every. Single. Day. Every. Single. Pill. Additionally, as a natural material, they harken back to the natural world and natural growth, manipulated by humans for our convenience. (As opposed to steel boxes; although metal *is* natural, we recognize it as an industrial material because of the amount of processing that is necessary to make it functional.)

I collected abandoned wasp nests. The nests as objects are fascinating in and of themselves. The wasps have evolved to create nests by manipulating natural materials. They chew wood fiber and mix it with their magical waspy saliva. Using their mouths, they build celled-structures of incredibly durable paper. The paper has a natural resistance to water, it is extremely flexible and resistant to tearing. Like, whoa. Even though wasps are assholes, they're undeniably cool creatures. The nests function as a womb, where baby wasps are grown from larvae. They are provided with the necessary sustenance for survival and growth. The perfect image of a community effort toward sustaining a healthy and functioning population. When their job is complete, the nests are abandoned.

Many viewers see a dual image in the wasp nest, and also associate it with honeycomb; a welcomed interpretation. Honeycomb is, like a wasp's nest, a center for larvae, and sustenance for the occupying bee population. Bees work in an almost mechanical, clock-work, community. Fun fact: they use hormones to communicate. Bees consume flower sperm to feed their larvae, inseminating flowers as they collect their fare. The perfect picture of fertility; hence the adage "the birds and the bees."

I have coated the nests/comb with porcelain; a naturally occurring substance, like hormones, but unnaturally manipulated by humans. Coating the nests in porcelain subverts their function— they can no longer be used to harbor and cultivate larvae. They are barren. This is parallel to the function of oral contraception: to make the uterus unable to harbor an embryo. The yellow stain across each plate, and not within the nest where it would be used, is suggestive of the lack of natural functionality.



Figure 27. *Governance*, 50.75" x 29"



Figure 28. Detail, *Governance*, 2016

Chapter 5: summation

We, human beings, are not defined by one single event. Each individual is continuously shaped by the compounding of psychological and physical experiences. As westerners, we constantly work to shutter the connection between mind and body, to disconnect the psychological from the physical. Addressing the physical is too uncomfortable and taboo. We can occasionally engage in dialogue about healthy versus unhealthy, fit versus fat, but certain groups will always be offended, because their side is considered undesirable. Engaging in meaningful dialogue about genitals and the nature of human sexuality is deviant.

I was taught to hate my body, taught that it was never enough, in any capacity and that is how I've treated it. I've been taught that any desire emanating from the enigmatic and unclear structure between my legs is immoral, should be repressed, and regulated.

Bodies are uncomfortable. They make us feel strange, and often uncomfortably physically aware of ourselves. It's easier to try and disconnect our minds from our bodies than to seek understanding, reconciliation, and a healthy relationship between the two.

I've begun, over the last year, a pilgrimage, to learn and consciously practice *ahimsa*, or kindness and compassion for myself. A pilgrimage isn't about the destination. It's the journey to the destination that gives it meaning. I'm sharing my pilgrimage, my journey, through my ceramic work.

References

- American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery*. (2014, February). Retrieved from Press Center: www.surgery.org
- Bawden, G. (1996). *The Moche*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
- Davis, R. (2011, February 26). Labiaplasty surgery increase blamed on pornography. *The Observer*.
- Freedman, M. (2010, November 25). *Labiaplasty and Censorship*. Retrieved from MamaMia: <http://www.mamamia.com.au/why-australian-law-demands-all-vaginas-be-digitally-altered-nsfw/>
- Kleiner, F. S. (2011). *Art Through the Ages*. Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Mathieu, P. (2003). *Sex Pots: Eroticism in Ceramics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Miller, M. E. (2006). *The Art of Mesoamerica*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.
- Roach, M. (2008). *Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Ryan, C., & Jethá, C. (2010). *Sex at Dawn*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Stone-Miller, R. (2002). *Art of the Andes*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.
- Stuart, G. E. (1973). *Discovering Man's Past in the Americas*. Washington D.C. : The National Geographic Society.
- Wiley, G. R., & Sabloff, J. A. (1913). *A History of American Archaeology*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company.