

# Piped Dreams: An Exploration of Decoration, Identity and Porcelain

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## **Abstract**

Piped Dreams began as an investigation into the emotional response evoked from my collection of childhood ornaments, and the ways in which identity and memory are often imbued upon cherished toys and personal souvenirs. This paper investigates art making practices with a focus on ornament as the main form of construction, using experimental ceramic techniques to develop a way of building sculptures that consist purely of decorative embellishments. This use of the decorative has become the most important element of my research over the course of this project, as it has connected my art making practice to the historical discrimination of decoration through the rise of modernism in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, and the use of craft practices in contemporary art today.

I explore historical precedents and contemporary examples that have informed my practice and challenged the established perceptions of cultural and artistic practices that were coded as feminine, and thus insignificant, in the rise of America as the cultural centre in the post-war era. The research project explores how ceramic sculpture can be utilised to explore feminine sensibility and women's autobiographical narration of self while engaging with personal and collective experiences of gender construction. Drawing from my own experiences in childhood and adolescence, I explore how socially imposed gender stereotypes and categories have shaped my life as a young woman, mother, wife and ultimately as a person.

I will investigate the marginalisation of the decorative and its association with femininity, how decoration has been used as a vehicle to make art in the twentieth century, and how the contemporary art practices today illuminating why the use of porcelain and decorative practices of Louise Bourgeois, Kathy Cavaliere and Lynda Draper have illuminated and expanded my use of porcelain and ornament.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Dedicated to the memory of Jacoba Postma and Carmen Zahra.

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree at the National Art School or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the exegesis.

I also declare that the intellectual content and visual record of studio work of this exegesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

Signed

Date

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Abstract</b>                         | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b>                 | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Declaration</b>                      | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b>                     | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1- Researching the Field</b> | <b>10</b> |
| <b>Chapter 2- The Medium</b>            | <b>18</b> |
| <b>Chapter 3- The Theory</b>            | <b>22</b> |
| <b>Chapter 4- The Hierarchy</b>         | <b>26</b> |
| <b>Chapter 5- The Edible Woman</b>      | <b>34</b> |
| <b>Conclusion</b>                       | <b>42</b> |
| <b>List of Figures</b>                  | <b>45</b> |
| <b>Figures</b>                          | <b>46</b> |
| <b>Bibliography</b>                     | <b>73</b> |

## **Introduction**

Ceramics, craft and decoration have become the basis of my research, and strong associations can be drawn between them and all that have suffered the same fate of being marginalised since the nineteenth century. Ceramics has had an unsteady relationship with fine arts while decoration has been described as a feature best expunged in order to attain critical attention through its derogation as feminine and irrelevant.<sup>1</sup> Craft often equates with 'hobby level kitsch' where the role and identity of craft is subjected to interrogation.<sup>2</sup> All three have been coded as feminine.<sup>3</sup> I will investigate the marginalisation of the decorative in Western art history, the historical association of women and decoration, how decoration has been used as a vehicle to make art in the twentieth century, and contemporary art practices today that illuminate my practice by expanding the use and value of porcelain and ornament. Through this research project the symbiotic relationship between women, craft and decoration has influenced my art practice and I will draw references to this throughout the paper.

I began my Masters project focussing on notions of nostalgia and desire imbued in collected objects that create, store and retrieve a sense of past. The porcelain piping techniques shifted my practice to look beyond these objects. I developed an experimental construction method and new visual language to produce sculptures made solely of piping, a technique usually reserved for the cake decorating craft of royal icing. This allowed me to incorporate confessional and autobiographical elements into my artworks, recreating my own lived experience through a feminised craft, exploring the gendered territory of female childhood and adolescence. In Susan Stewart's book of essays, *On Longing*, she suggests the souvenir or object is used most often to evoke childhood memory.<sup>4</sup> She explains that, however, this is not the true childhood experience but a manufactured memory constructed from its material remnants and evoking nostalgic desires connected to loss.<sup>5</sup> This theory has helped

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund De Waal. *20th Century Ceramics*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 191.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Fariello and Paula Owen, *Objects and meaning: new perspectives on art and craft*, 1<sup>st</sup> Paperback. ed, (Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Sue Rowley, *Craft and Contemporary Theory*. (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1997) xix.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (1st Paperback ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 145.

<sup>5</sup> Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 145.

me to understand how my childhood objects embedded with memory and connection to people take on an identity that is integral to creating a sense of self. The idea that my collected objects help me to build identity and connect to memory but also provide me with a way to conceal or protect me from trauma have led me to take my practice past the objects and into a more complex personal dialogue with the past and present, seen and unseen, reality and fantasy. I recognise similar themes in the work of Louise Bourgeois, Katthy Cavaliere, Lynda Draper and Tracey Emin. The focus of *Chapter One* will be this initial area of research that has paved the foundation for my current practice and has led me in a new direction, looking past the collection of souvenirs and collected childhood objects to find a new way of communicating my visual language.

In *Chapter Two*, I discuss the magical properties of porcelain and its unique abilities. Its delicacy, malleability and remarkable strength alongside its notoriously demanding reputation as a medium presents unique challenges for the maker. Demonstrating the way in which I have developed an experimental construction method with porcelain to produce sculptures made solely of piping, a technique and process usually reserved for the culinary craft of cake decoration: albeit without the foundation of a cake or form. The history and connection between cake decorating and the production of porcelain in the Western world will also be discussed, I investigate the use of Royal Sugar Sculpture as an elaborate and important aristocratic artform from the fifteenth century and its eventual replacement by porcelain sculpture. Both mediums experienced dramatic changes to their status due to political and social change. The associations between porcelain, desire, luxury and the feminine are all drawn on in my work. These inherent associations binding the material of porcelain, sugar and the concept of femininity has helped me understand and research how sugar is highly provocative when associated with women. Sugar's implied use ranges across being a term of endearment, restrictive femininity, claims to woman's innate 'goodness' and equally, woman as vice, temptress, as Eve with her sweet, ripe apple.<sup>6</sup> As Caitlin Hines writes in her essay, 'Rebaking the Pie: The Woman as Dessert Metaphor', women are often reduced to the status of sugar: as a

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<sup>6</sup> Kathryn O'Regan, "No girl so sweet: An Introduction to SUGAR", accessed August 31, <https://kathrynoregan.wordpress.com/2015/08/31/no-girl-so-sweet-an-introduction-to-sugar/>

harmless, inessential frivolity lacking in substance and illustrative of both pleasure and vice.<sup>7</sup> This is manifested in the use of decoration as a metaphor for femininity in my work.

*Chapter Three* explores the significance of craft-based processes and materials which have been used creatively and conceptually in twentieth century art practices. In particular the traditional modes of craft reproduction that subvert or play with expectations of gender and experience. The shift in valuing the significance of the handmade object within contemporary art practice has changed dramatically in recent years.<sup>8</sup> This adoption of craft practice can be seen as a way that artists have rejected the expectations of the art world set by the writings of twentieth century critics like Clement Greenberg who deplored decoration and criticized craft: giving it a secondary, base position in the hierarchy of modern art.<sup>9</sup> Ceramics suffered from this kind of classification: coded as the decorative, applied art, or feminine. This relates directly to my art practice as I use a traditional craft techniques to create sculptures out of decoration practices in a medium that has been ignored by history and critical study.<sup>10</sup> I aim to directly challenge the hierarchical relegation of ceramics by uniting the medium, technique and concept together drawing on the shared history and marginalisation which emphasises how all have been linked to the derogation of the feminine and discrimination of decoration.

In *Chapter Four* I discuss the way that decoration and ornamentation has been denigrated in Western art history, often consigned to an inferior position by the grand narratives of modernism and rendered feminine and subjected to a lowly status as craft, hobby or kitsch. I explore the critical role that artists such as Mariam Schapiro, Judy Chicago and Lynda Benglis have played in the critical re-evaluation of artists processes and forms that use craft and focus on women's traditional crafts as a means to make contemporary art. These artists have pushed the boundaries of the

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<sup>7</sup> Caitlin Hines, "Baking the Pie: The Woman as Dessert Metaphor", in *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*, ed. Mary Bucholtz, Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang, Laurel A. Sutton (Oxford University Press, 1999) 145.

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft*, (English ed. Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2007), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch", accessed November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>

<sup>10</sup> Rowley, *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, 84.

art worlds critical and curatorial frameworks and the critical narrative of contemporary artistic production, choosing to celebrate feminised craft practices and the traditional matrilineal crafts that are passed from generation to generation in their artworks and practices. This reclaiming of identity through craft and retaliation against the masculine projections and representation of art through the modernist grand narratives has informed my practices and this project.

*Chapter Five* discusses marginalised craft language and its use in confessional and autobiographical art.<sup>11</sup> Working with principles of sculpture and craftwork my research expands ideas of combining feminine sensibility, decoration (low art) and sculpture (high art). Combining ceramic sculpture with the practice of cake decorating provides me with the tools to manipulate porcelain into words typically seen on celebratory cakes, a cultural practice used for birthdays, weddings and anniversaries. Using text has allowed me to incorporate narratives into my sculptural forms, this technique has provided me with a vehicle in which I can express and illustrate my personal experiences and memories or rather versions of them. Utilising text in my practice is a direct way to connect and interrogate the construction of my own identity through the complex relations of family life that informed my own childhood and adolescence. Where this project began as a study of the objects collected in my childhood that worked as mnemonic devices, I have now begun to incorporate confessional and autobiographical art practices into my artworks. Recreating my own lived experience through a feminised craft exploring the gendered territory of female childhood and adolescence. This project concludes as a form of discourse constructed from, but not identical to, the experiences it recalls.

## **Chapter One – Researching the Field**

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<sup>11</sup> Glenn Adamson. *Thinking through Craft*. (Bloomsbury Academic, 15 Dec, 2007), 162.

Inanimate domestic objects can accrue value and hold emotional investment. They are signifiers of time and place and help to form an identity, a sense of self and a personal narrative that is carried through life. Through my collection porcelain figurines, dolls and music boxes I explore personal memories, daydreams and fantasies focusing on the complex relationships between these objects and aspects of my experience. Identity and memory are often imbued upon cherished toys and personal souvenirs, these objects embedded with memory and connection to people take on an identity that is integral to creating a sense of self. These intense feelings that I connect to my objects are explained in the writing of Jean Baudrillard where he suggests that in the family home humans and objects are 'bound' together and objects can attain symbolic and emotional value, Baudrillard argues that '...what gives the houses of our childhood such resonance in memory' is that within its 'interiority' of the home objects and humans are bound together in a collision in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value.'<sup>12</sup> In my early childhood, I moved many times. Each house became a home and within it, I claimed my space. In my bedroom I installed my collection of objects (fig. 3)

. These were the things that made me feel at home, that made my space familiar and gave me ownership to a corner of the world. A traumatic episode in my childhood was when I was removed from the family home for an approximate period of a year. During this time, I did not have access to any of my possessions. The absence of my favourite doll, Minnie, was very disturbing and its subsequent return I remember with overwhelming joy (Fig. 2). As an adult these objects are possessed with nostalgia, they are keys to remembering the now lost childhood space and imaginary games that filled my fantasy world. Evoking comfort, intimacy and security while also revealing secrets and the mixed emotions of living in a dysfunctional domestic unit. I cannot escape the feelings of distress that are connected to these objects and how they simultaneously evoke happiness and nostalgic loss.

In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard wrote about childhood spaces in the home.<sup>13</sup> He described the home as a protective space for the child, with nooks

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard. *The System of Objects*. (Radical Thinkers ; 3. London; New York: Verso, 2005), 96.

<sup>13</sup> Gaston Bachelard and Jolas, M. *The Poetics of Space*. Penguin Classics. New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2014, 4.

and crannies that a child could hide in and imagine other realities away from reason and adult understanding.<sup>14</sup> Bachelard connected these childhood spaces to the adult and how the dreams and flights of fancy of childhood experienced in these spaces are inscribed into our adult selves where we can mentally return later in life to relive those memories. He also discusses how childhood is invested with fears and anxiety and the spaces of our childhood homes can take on sinister aspects. As adults Bachelard writes that we revisit our childhood imaginings by descending into ourselves. My use of these collected childhood objects provides me with a means to investigate my intense emotions connected to the loss of the family home as a safe place and a unit of comfort. 'By dreaming on childhood', Bachelard claims 'we return to the lair of reveries.'<sup>15</sup>

Drawing on Bachelard's idea of childhood experience inscribing adulthood Louise Bourgeois (1911 - 2010) wrote 'All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood. My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, and it has never lost its drama.'<sup>16</sup> She was an artist tormented by fears and insecurities which originated in her family environment. Considered as the creator of confessional art, her work has an autobiographical approach that emphasises the significance of her childhood, a period in which magic, mystery, and family drama intermingled in a crucial way in her life.<sup>17</sup> Raised in a family that ran a tapestry restoration business, as a child Bourgeois assisted in the workshop alongside her mother in the role of 'dissinateur', redrawing sections of the damaged and missing parts of the tapestries in preparation of their repair and reweaving.<sup>18</sup> Weaving, for Bourgeois was a healing process, a restorative activity that returned the damaged object to a condition of beauty. Bourgeois work with fabric and weaving in the last two decades of her art practice is of particular interest to me

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*. (Boston Mass.: Beacon Press, 1971), 102.

<sup>16</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the father. Writings and Interviews, 1923-1997*. Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. London, Violette Editions, 1998, Accessed October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <https://bourgeois.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/did-you-know-that>.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Dormant. "Louise Bourgeois Invented Confessional Art" United Kingdom, The Telegraph, 01 June, 2010. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/7794168/Louise-Bourgeois-invented-confessional-art.html>

<sup>18</sup> Louise Bourgeois, Germano Celant, Emilio Fondazione, Vedova Annabianca, *Louise Bourgeois : The Fabric Works*. 1st ed. Milan : Venice: Skira ; Fondazione Emilio E Annabianca Vedova, 2010.

especially as she utilises a craft that is predominantly handed down through the matrilineal line, with women learning techniques and skills from their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. The gendered experience as daughter, wife and mother are central to works exploring the psychological and emotional effects of human relationships and interactions. Bourgeois uses fabric and weaving as a site of female experience, recovering aspects of her childhood and family life and exorcising the anxiety and pressure associated with her childhood memories. Her *Cell* series consisted of room like structures and incorporated a variety of materials, from found objects, to sculptures and mirrors creating voyeuristic spaces of unease.

In her artists statement for *Cell (You Better Grow Up)*, 1993 (Fig. 4) she connects fear and nostalgia stating 'In our refusal to confront our fear, we retreat into nostalgia.'<sup>19</sup> She goes on to describe the artist as child, passive yet no longer innocent and unable to liberate themselves from the unconscious. This analysis of the artist in a reoccurring game of acting out lived trauma in a self-involved and pleasurable way helps me to understand my use of nostalgic imbued objects from my childhood to exorcise my childhood fears. Acknowledging the trauma endured in her life, the physical art of making work acted as a therapeutic activity and the end result was connected to exorcising and repairing the damage inflicted by life.<sup>20</sup> Bourgeois stated that,

'Art is restoration, the idea to repair the damages that are inflicted in life, to make something that is fragmented -- which is what fear and anxiety does to oneself -- to be whole.... I start with an emotion first, an emotion that I want to re-live because it was pleasurable or an emotion that is painful that I want to get rid of'.<sup>21</sup>

I identify with Bourgeois and her obsession with the reliving pleasurable and painful memories, due to the range of emotional experiences in my childhood. Having a parent with a mental illness I have never been able to piece together a consistent story of my childhood. There are gaps in my early years that now serve as mysteries

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<sup>19</sup> Louise Bourgeois, Charlotta Kotik, Terrie Sultan, Christian Leigh, Brooklyn Museum, *Louise Bourgeois : The Locus of Memory, Works, 1982-1993*. (New York: Brooklyn Museum in Association with Abrams, 1994), 70.

<sup>20</sup> Louise Bourgeois, interview by Jan Garden Castro, 'Vital signs: A Conversation with Louise Bourgeois', New York City in December 2004, transcript, accessed October 13, 2019, [http://www.jancastro.com/\\_Pdf%27s/JGC/Louise%20Bourgeois.%20Vital%20Signs.%20cover%20stor y.%20Final.%202023%20jan%2005.pdf](http://www.jancastro.com/_Pdf%27s/JGC/Louise%20Bourgeois.%20Vital%20Signs.%20cover%20stor y.%20Final.%202023%20jan%2005.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* 3.

I cannot solve. I have been told so many stories and given so many explanations to the events that occurred I no longer know what is fact and what is fiction. During the times spent separated from my family unit I would create elaborate stories to hide the truth from others or to calm myself from my fears of never returning home again. I recognise this in the bulk of Bourgeois' art where she has referenced the betrayals she endured in her childhood and how she spent her life trying to come to terms with them as an adult.

Gaston Bachelard's chapter in *The Poetics of Reverie* resonates deeply with me.<sup>22</sup> Reveries towards childhood connects the lost past of childhood memory with the rediscovered image. Accessed and reimagined this can form an ideal memory, this combination of memory and imagination within reverie creates a new experience, one that can often hide a traumatic experience.<sup>23</sup> I felt this acutely when as a young woman I found myself outside a catholic convent overwhelmed by an intense feeling of déjà vu. After meditating on the memory of the building and the feeling of familiarity, I realised this was a place I once lived during an absence from my family home. After researching the building, I found it was a women's refuge. My artworks based on grottos are shaped from lines of piped porcelain to create a hollow womb like form. This shape creates a space for personal contemplation, somewhere sacred and private to place an object of importance or in my case the feelings I carry inside that are connected to loss (fig.8). Grottos are often used as devotional shrines and places of worship, as a child I loved the grottos in the convent garden of my family church and would recreate them in my garden. Artist Katthy Cavaliere (1972 – 2012) also found inspiration in Bachelard's theory on childhood reverie; using found objects from her life she created performative installations.<sup>24</sup> Transforming banal domestic materials and the labour they embodied into poignant environments charged with meaning pertaining to personal experiences of love and trauma.<sup>25</sup> Her theme was often centred on her childhood experiences and the memories of the spaces she inhabited, isolated and solitary, as an only child of an immigrant family and a history

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<sup>22</sup> Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*. (Boston Mass.: Beacon Press, 1971).

<sup>23</sup> Bachelard. *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*,

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Cunningham, *Katthy Cavaliere*, (Brown Paper, and Museum of Old New Art. Australia, 2016), 9-15.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Cunningham, *Katthy Cavaliere*, (Brown Paper, and Museum of Old New Art. Australia, 2016), 9-15.

of parental mental illness.<sup>26</sup> She felt alone, escaping to her bedroom where she made her private universe. This can be connected to Bachelard's earlier writing in *The Poetics of Space* (1958): 'For our house is our corner of the world... it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word'.<sup>27</sup>

The interior world of the bedroom opens up the space for private reverie creating the meandering and dreamlike space for imagination. Cavaliere made work exclusively about her bedroom and her possessions from her childhood and adolescents for a substantial part of her career.<sup>28</sup> Cavaliere saw these objects as a portal to the moment of experience, referring to them as a time machine, her artworks recount childhood memories using found objects embedded with evocations of the past.<sup>29</sup> It would appear that she was obsessed with youth, and the growing out of girlhood by the constant repetition and rehashing of her personal items and recreation of her childhood spaces. Her ideas were simple and poetic, her abiding theme was herself and her childhood exploring broken families and searching for an identity.

The performance installation *Katthy's Room* (Fig. 5) in 1998 recreated her childhood bedroom in an oversized cardboard box. The inside of the room could be viewed only from above via a set of stairs and a small viewing platform.<sup>30</sup> Inside, the artists relived her childhood rituals, interacting with the environment composed of real and poignant materials from her life. This confined space with no exit acts like a time capsule and a cell. Here the adult playacts like a child, an inversion of the infant's desire to emulate adults through the role play of dress-ups. The use of a cardboard box to simulate the child's bedroom connects to the collection and storing of childhood items in adult life where memories are relegated to a cupboard or garage, boxed up and stored. Exploring the space of childhood for me is connected to the objects that bring about memories – imbued objects that connect me to moments in time that have created my identity and sense of self. Bourgeois and Cavaliere take us back to the space of childhood by using objects as mnemonic devices. In the beginning stages of this

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, 9-15.

<sup>27</sup> Gaston Bachelard, ed. M. Jolas. *The Poetics of Space*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Cunningham, *Katthy Cavaliere*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Cunningham, *Katthy Cavaliere*, 9.

investigation my collection of objects were explored to evoke memories and aid the return to childhood reverie and spaces of security in my adult life.

Artist Lynda Draper explores her own personal collection of souvenirs in her 2007 series of work *Wonderland* (Fig. 6). Draper talks of the souvenir acting as a muse, 'The initial 'muse' for this series of works was a small plastic toy bunny.<sup>31</sup> This small ceramic work, hand coiled and modelled stands 18cm tall. It is glazed in an opaque white matt finish that gives it a milky thick coating. Upon the top of a central mound sits the press moulded rabbit made from the plaster cast of the original plastic toy bunny. Below the bunny the mound is covered in protrusions that resemble flowers and organic forms but are underdeveloped in their detail. They add to the overall uncanniness of the sculpture; they are familiar yet somehow disconnected or incomplete referencing the way that details in memory can be difficult to articulate. The absence of colour and the thick layer of glaze gives a ghostly quality to the figure of the bunny sitting atop the artificial hill of unnatural foliage in a ghostlike manner. This work also references the connection between porcelain and confectionary as Robert Bell in response to *Wonderland*, observed:

'Wonderland by Lynda Draper takes us on the crystalline and fragmented world of memory. While its imagery conjures 19<sup>th</sup> century Parian porcelain grave ornaments and disconnections of Lewis Carroll, this work also delights through its evocation of the more transient art of the confectioner in preparation for Easter.'<sup>32</sup>

For Draper, the rediscovery of the souvenir triggered a longing for the maternal comfort of home, of lost childhood innocence and past family life. It also evoked a melancholy for the disappearing spaces of childhood.<sup>33</sup> She references toys and childhood objects as touchstones through which we can access a disappearing past providing us with a dialogue, which our senses seek to remember, and are answered in part by these objects.<sup>34</sup> Draper's work was my introduction to the connection between sugar and porcelain. In my previous ceramic work I had

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<sup>31</sup> Lynda Draper, "Wonderland", accessed October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <http://www.lyndadraper.com/artwork2006.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Lynda Draper, Home Alter, accessed October 15<sup>th</sup> 2019, [http://www.lyndadraper.com/MFA\\_thesis\\_home\\_alter.pdf](http://www.lyndadraper.com/MFA_thesis_home_alter.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Lynda Draper, Artist Statement *Wonderland*, 2006, accessed October 13, 2018, <http://www.lyndadraper.com/timeframes.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Fiona Edmonds- Dobrijevic, "Cakes, Dolls and Dreaming: Affect and the Past in Australian Contemporary Practice," in *Past in the present* (Glasgow: International Conference Glasgow School of Art, 2007).

attempted to use a piping bag to decorate childhood ornaments, a continuation of my practice as I left it after graduating at Monash University in 2005. I had unsuccessfully attempted piped decoration with slurry and now wondered if porcelain would work. This link between sugar and porcelain was very intriguing, I research it in more detail in *Chapter Two*.

Like Cavaliere, Draper also writes of these souvenirs becoming mnemonic devices, linking her to her past and keeping a connection with repressed memories.<sup>35</sup> It is these repressed or fragmented memories that I also explore in my studio practice. Sigmund Freud discusses the construction of childhood memory, believing that the reproduction of our lives in memory begins ‘only from the sixth or seventh year onwards – in many cases only after the tenth year.’<sup>36</sup> Prior to this, our memories are often unrelated, fragmented and intense. The phenomena Sigmund Freud termed as ‘screen memory’ illuminates my reflections on childhood as ‘an imagined memory of a childhood experience (which) hides another of distressing significance.’<sup>37</sup> Freud compared screen memory to dreams in their visual representation; how these memories return as “mnemonic traces” in the form of “dream thoughts”.<sup>38</sup> This has helped me to understand how I have used my figurines and ornaments from my childhood as tools through which I create a personal narrative that perhaps never truly existed or disguise the truth. My use of Grottos as a form is a direct representation of this seen in *Piped Dreams: Pink and White Grotto with bows and roses*, 2019 (Fig. 7). Grottos are connected to my Catholic upbringing in an immigrant family. I attended a Catholic school with an active convent complete with nuns in habit. During church services as a child my main focus was on the sculptures in the cathedral. I was in awe of the Madonna and the

grottos in the convent garden that housed the Virgin Mary. Grottos are places of secrets and worship. I create empty grottos as a way of saving a space for the

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<sup>35</sup> Lynda Draper, “Wonderland”, accessed October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <http://www.lyndadraper.com/artwork2006.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Sigmund Freud, Alan Tyson, James Strachey and Angela Richards. *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. (The Penguin Freud Library ; V.5 1991 Reprint. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1975), 224.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, 224.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, 83.

feelings of loss I have connected to my childhood and the damaged relationships in my family. The empty internal spaces hold my dreams, fears and secrets that I harbour inside.

Freud also suggests that it is on reflection as adults that we construct the memories of our childhood in the response to present needs and desires.<sup>39</sup> Exploring this need to recreate the memories of our childhood, or even the memories relating to our childhood has been a key focus in the works of Bourgeois, Cavaliere and Draper. The autobiographical nature of these artists and their connection to childhood and imbued objects is a strong focus in their practices. They have helped me to understand my need to care and protect my personal collection, and have shown me a way in which artists have used objects and materials to create narratives within visual art that explore feelings reflecting their experience and childhood memories. This has become the departure point for my practice. Where once I was reworking the objects, now I create environments to hold memory and make space exploring personal narrative and construction of identity (Fig. 9).

## **Chapter Two – The Medium**

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<sup>39</sup> Freud et al, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 88.

As I began working with the material of porcelain, building mounds for my recreated figurines to sit upon, I started decorating these pedestals with piped porcelain. I had attempted to use this technique in 2014 unsuccessfully. I was working with stoneware then and imitating the ballerina birthday cake from the Women's Weekly Birthday Cook Book from my childhood (fig.10).<sup>40</sup> I had been persuaded to use porcelain by my fellow Masters candidates and was amazed at how well this material responded to the techniques and process of cake decorating. When fired it resembled icing so closely it was hard to believe it was not the material it was imitating.

Porcelain and sugar are linked together in history and this relationship between them has become an important role aspect of my practice, as it connects the historical role both materials have had as artistic mediums and their associated reputation of desire, luxury and connection to royalty.<sup>41</sup> The implied connotations of luxury, desire and consumption were not known to me when I began experimenting with the technique and medium of porcelain at the beginning of this project. I was drawn to the use of royal piping as a technique and process as I recognised that many of the objects in my collection were originally cake decorations. I had always found birthday cakes, wedding cakes and decorative flowers captivating, not only for their beauty and craftsmanship but as something symbolic and out of reach: edible but untouchable. As mentioned earlier sugar is association with women, often implied as a term of cloying endearment to woman's innate 'goodness' and equally, woman as vice or temptress personified by the role of Eve's role in the Bible. My mother has kept the top tier of her wedding cake in a plastic cloche since 1978. As a child I would study it, like a mini monument celebrating the significant union that led to my conception. However, like the rotten and vermin infested cake of Miss Havisham's wedding feast it also acted as a reminder of the dysfunctional relationship my parents lived in reality. Nevertheless, I was attracted to the decorative fantasy that it evoked and spent hours looking at the cake decorating books owned by my mother, and like a sacred object this cake stood as a shrine to better time and the socially inscribed promise of the perfect nuclear family. This is where I believe my obsession with cake

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<sup>40</sup> The Australia Women's Weekly, Children's Birthday Cake Book, APC Publishing, Sydney, 1980

<sup>41</sup> Ivan Day, Royal Sugar Sculpture: 600 Years of Splendour, The Bowes Museum 2002, 31.

decorating began, this saved cake decorated with red sugar roses symbolising the promise of love and happy ever afters.

As I started treating the clay like it was icing and whipping it up to form a thick dense paste with the intention of making tests for my cast objects to sit on the icing replaced the objects as the focal point of my artworks I was producing. This led me to research the history of porcelain and that is where I discovered that it was first used to imitate the sugar sculptures of the European court where in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the genius and skill of the confectioner was highly valued.<sup>42</sup> I found that sugar sculpture was valued as the highest art form in European culture at this time and its initial use was not considered a “craft” as it is today.<sup>43</sup>

Across Europe from the fifteenth century onwards, elaborate table decorations were an important aristocratic art form. Sugar sculpture was used to display power, style and political views (fig. 11).<sup>44</sup> Ever-present at lavish feasts, weddings and diplomatic encounters, exotic worlds were created including figurines, temples, palaces and parks moulded into miniature forms from sugar or wax and by the eighteenth century, porcelain (fig. 12).<sup>45</sup> The middle of the eighteenth century saw a dramatic change in European taste, as the upper classes moved from rococo frivolity to neo-classical seriousness.<sup>46</sup> This period known as the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason sought to reform society by promoting science and intellectual exchange.<sup>47</sup> The idea of advancing knowledge through reason emerged in response to new technology and the ability to exchange information easily thanks to mass printing, and also out of a backlash against previous systems, which valued the church and tradition above all else.<sup>48</sup> The Enlightenment has long been hailed as the foundation of modern Western political and intellectual culture, and set a precedent of conflict between the

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<sup>42</sup> Ivan Day, *Royal Sugar Sculpture: 600 Years of Splendour*, The Bowes Museum 2002, 31.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, 31.

<sup>44</sup> Howard Coutts and Ivan Day, *Sugar Sculpture, Porcelain and table Layout*, accessed July 12<sup>th</sup> 2019, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/4618934/sugar-sculpture-porcelain-and-table-layout-1530-1830-howard>

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/4618934/sugar-sculpture-porcelain-and-table-layout-1530-1830-howard>

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/4618934/sugar-sculpture-porcelain-and-table-layout-1530-1830-howard>

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/4618934/sugar-sculpture-porcelain-and-table-layout-1530-1830-howard>

<sup>48</sup> “The Enlightenment,” Lumen Learning, accessed October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-arthistory/chapter/the-enlightenment/>

decorative and the minimal.<sup>49</sup> Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) in his *History of Greek Art* singled out porcelain for criticism, describing it as a 'beautiful material' (shone materiel), that nonetheless was insufficient to produce a "real" work of art, and that most porcelain was 'in childish taste' and the figurines made for the table were 'idiotic puppets'.<sup>50</sup>

By the twentieth century the artistic skills of the confectioner were diminished and the only traces of the artform was iced cakes.<sup>51</sup> This shift from artistic medium to decorative craft evolved over 200 years and due to the ephemeral nature of the medium its history was scarcely recorded. Once firmly fixed to a cake, sugar had transformed from a modelling material, comparable to wax or clay, into what we now know as *Piping*. Porcelain's aesthetic status also devalued. Monumental marble and bronze sculpture contrasted the fragile, diminutive and ephemeral nature of porcelain rendered it in the territory of the feminine. The standing of porcelain sculpture began its decline from high art to the vernacular of kitsch.<sup>52</sup>

In the 2019, Foundation Bernardaud's exhibition *Ceramiques Gourmandes*, artist Jessica Stoller (fig.13) uses sugar to invite the grotesque and baroque in her feminist sculptures.<sup>53</sup> Making direct alliances between bad taste and beauty she states, 'I'm interested in clay, particularly porcelain, for many reasons. Its history is extensive and full of contradictions. Porcelain was first emblematic of imperial taste, then considered decorative, thus 'feminine'. The material is bound up with seduction, consumption, and desire.'<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-arthistory/chapter/the-enlightenment/>

<sup>50</sup> Howard Coutts and Ivan Day, "Sugar Sculpture: Porcelain and Table Layout 1530-1830", Yumpu, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/4618934/sugar-sculpture-porcelain-and-table-layout-1530-1830-howard-11>.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/4618934/sugar-sculpture-porcelain-and-table-layout-1530-1830-howard->

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/4618934/sugar-sculpture-porcelain-and-table-layout-1530-1830-howard->

<sup>53</sup> Olivier Castaing, Julie Esteve, *Ceramiques Gourmands*, (Foundation de Enterprise Bernaraud, Limoges France, 21 July 2019 – 22 March 2020), accessed July 11, 2019, [https://www.bernardaud.com/system/file\\_system/files/attachments/000/000/825/original/Fondation\\_Bernardaud\\_-\\_Dossier\\_de\\_presse\\_-\\_Exposition\\_Ceramiques\\_gourmandes\\_2019.pdf](https://www.bernardaud.com/system/file_system/files/attachments/000/000/825/original/Fondation_Bernardaud_-_Dossier_de_presse_-_Exposition_Ceramiques_gourmandes_2019.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> iOlivier Castaing, Julie Esteve, *Ceramiques Gourmands*, (Foundation de Enterprise Bernaraud, Limoges France, 21 July 2019 – 22 March 2020), accessed July 11, 2019, [https://www.bernardaud.com/system/file\\_system/files/attachments/000/000/825/original/Fondation\\_Bernardaud\\_-\\_Dossier\\_de\\_presse\\_-\\_Exposition\\_Ceramiques\\_gourmandes\\_2019.pdf](https://www.bernardaud.com/system/file_system/files/attachments/000/000/825/original/Fondation_Bernardaud_-_Dossier_de_presse_-_Exposition_Ceramiques_gourmandes_2019.pdf)

American sculptor and performance artist Anthony Sonnenberg also capitalise on porcelain's connection with consumption and luxury. Sonnenberg creates sculptures using found tchotchkes covered in sensual glazes, imitating over-the-top decadence and deteriorating desserts. In a 2016 interview for *Fanzine*, Sonnenberg describes his attraction to porcelain:

'Porcelain has a specific luxuriousness to it. It's also got a certain expense associated with it, but it's not like bronze or gold. It's not a high-high material. So, it's a real sweet spot where you can talk about luxury and expense, but there's room to move around with it since it's not so loaded and hierarchical.'<sup>55</sup>

It is in this space between porcelain's connection to royalty and the arcanum qualities that made it so longed for by the Western world and revered by the Eastern.<sup>56</sup> This contrary position porcelain's reputation bears and its marginalised demise during the eighteenth and nineteenth century enhances the material's resonance. The inherent qualities of luxury, consumption and desire combined with its connection to femininity and the denigration of the decorative make it a loaded material. Through my use of porcelain, gold lustre and decorative elements used to maximum effect I wish to harness all of these inherent qualities that are existing in the material and contrast them with the craft technique of cake decorating that is a traditionally feminised practice.

### **Chapter Three – The Theory**

Researching the historical connection between sugar and porcelain and their shared fall from grace in the society of the time was only the beginning of what has become

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<sup>55</sup> Sarah Rose Etter, 'The Sensual and the Intellectual: The Art of Anthony Sonnenberg' *Fanzine* March 29, 2016, <http://thefanzine.com/the-sensual-the-intellectual-the-art-of-anthony-sonnenberg/>.

<sup>56</sup> Edmund De Wall, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Ceramics*, Thames and Hudson London 2003, 132.

an investigation into a 200-year strong discrimination and anti-craft values. For the purposes of this study and practice I am particularly interested in how these materials and their connection to ornamentation and decoration came to be regarded as feminine and trivial. In the early years of the twentieth century, art historians, critics, and architects, such as Adolf Loos and Clement Greenberg, aligned the decorative with cultural regression and kitsch.<sup>57</sup> The modernist avant-gardes tended to devalue the decorative as frivolous and art-for-arts-sake, especially during the atmosphere of war, where aesthetic beauty seemed out of place.<sup>58</sup>

In 1908 Adolf Loos published *Ornament and Crime* where he connects cultures evolution with the removal of ornament.<sup>59</sup> Loos demoted the decorative from its use as a feature of Modernist aesthetic to feminine ornamentation and a demonstration of mass culture, commodity and Kitsch.<sup>60</sup> 'Detail' in the Western aesthetic was divorced from the field of fine art and delegated to the applied arts, which fostered strong associations between femininity and anti-craft values. Jenny Anger explores this in *Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory*, 'Modernism has thus defined itself against the Other, an Other which has often been equated discursively with femininity.<sup>61</sup> Anger critiques the Modernist conception of ornament and decoration as a feminine, sensuous embellishment, devoid of meaning and the patriarchal associations of femininity as surface over essence, and style over substance. She argues that in the opening years of the twentieth century the decorative was transformed from that of a positive feature of the Modernist aesthetic to antithesis through the discrimination of mass culture, ornament and femininity in the writings of Karl Schffler and Adolf Loos.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Edmund De Wall, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Ceramics*, Thames and Hudson London 2003, 132.

<sup>58</sup> Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft*, (English ed. Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2007), 6.

<sup>59</sup> Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20<sup>th</sup>-century Architecture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975), 20.

<sup>60</sup> De Wall, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Ceramics*, 82.

<sup>61</sup> Jenny Anger, 'Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory, 1900-1915', *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, Edited by Christopher Reed, 1996, 138.

<sup>62</sup> Elissa Auther, "The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg." *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 341-64.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107990>, 339.

Modernism reduced ornament and decoration to sentimental feminine effect. Due to these repeated judgments the concept of the decorative was paid less scholarly attention in the twentieth century. Clement Greenberg wrote numerous critiques of art that denigrated decoration to the 'low' of art production and aesthetic value contrasted with the 'high' of Modernist grand narratives. Suppressing the decorative supported the hierarchy between the purity of abstraction from the mere decorations of craft and the surface which was being established in the art world of the early twentieth century. In 1939 Greenberg published 'Avant Garde and Kitsch' making the distinction between superior fine art and mass culture of the middle class.<sup>63</sup> His disdain for decoration was stated repeatedly in his critique of a number of artists over the mid to late twentieth century. His gendering of decoration is apparent in his critique of Alexander Calder's work where Greenberg describes Calder's art practice as feminine, wistful, playful and derivative of decoration.<sup>64</sup> Greenbergian Modernism feeds into the construction of gender discrimination between the arts and connects the feminine with craft practice, production and material associations.

Since the rise of Second Wave Feminism in the 1970s and its use of women's craft practices in contemporary art, craft materials and processes have infiltrated the contemporary art world. For decades now artists have explored craft mediums and incorporated craft process and techniques into their practice, Cindy Sherman's use of collage and paper craft with her '*Dolls Clothes*' 1975, Jeff Koons life size gilt porcelain figurines, Mike Kelly's knitted toy paintings and Janine Antoni weavings projects are all examples of this.<sup>65</sup> This popularity to use craft as a concept rather than as a way of making capitalises on the historical context of "Craft" and its connection to social regulated norms.

I create ceramic sculptures using techniques borrowed from cake decorating in order to comment on the construction of gender identity and feminine sensibility. Ceramics, craft practices, decoration and gender performativity underpin my practice. I have come to rely heavily on the history, associations and assumptions that are connected

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<sup>63</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avent Garde and Kitsch", accessed November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>

<sup>64</sup> Greenberg, Clement. '*Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture*', 1947, *Arrogant Purpose*, (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 167.

<sup>65</sup> Edmund De Wall, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Ceramics*, Thames and Hudson London 2003, 132.

with these materials, techniques, processes and concepts. 'Crafts' inferiority might be the most productive thing about it, Glenn Adamson states as his central argument in his 2007 *Thinking Through Craft*.<sup>66</sup> I also see the inferiority of my chosen medium and the marginalisation of craft and of women as mutually constitutive. I use craft practices as a way of layering the meanings inherently associated with women and decoration since the late eighteenth and nineteenth century and how gender stereotypes have been interwoven with class and hierarchy in regards to the arts. I endeavour to incorporate the negative connotations that have linked women and decoration, frequently dismissed as meaningless, superficial and lacking in intellectual rigor as a subversive tool to explore this symbiotic relationship. Judith Butler's notions of gender as performative offers insight into ways that crafting is performative and communicative act.<sup>67</sup> She argues that 'gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts ... the gendered stylization of the bod.'<sup>68</sup>

I see craft as one such "sustained set of acts", clearly a "gendered stylization," through which women perform class and gender.<sup>69</sup> As a form of feminist expression, the use of craft as a medium that engages overtly with subversive or oppositional themes, text and imagery has long been used in contemporary art. Artists such as Miriam Schapiro, together with Judy Chicago and Faith Ringgold, broke new ground in incorporating patchwork, quilting, lace and embroidery into their very political and contemporary artworks in the early 1970s.<sup>70</sup> The concept of the *Femme*, a technique of feminist assemblage in which women purposefully reposition and recontextualise images and symbols in ways that are meaningful for them was established by these Second Wave Feminist artists.

Women have traditionally employed decoration to reveal themselves. Historically confined to the home, where their primary concern was child rearing, Virginia Woolf noted 'for women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the

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<sup>66</sup> Edmund De Wall, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Ceramics*, Thames and Hudson London 2003, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge Classics. New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, xv.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*, xv.

<sup>70</sup> 'Women's Work', Brooklyn Museum, accessed September 15<sup>th</sup> 2019, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/womens\\_work](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/womens_work)

very walls are permeated by their creative force.<sup>71</sup> Seamstresses, knitters, crocheters - the women in my family were all makers in the more traditional sense and craft was a daily part of my life. The Feminist art movement and *femmage* had not transformed or even entered the suburban immigrant homes of my parents. Craft was not a subversive medium or even a leisure activity. The women in my family ran micro businesses with their skills – these craft activities were valued and also acceptable for the women to pursue especially when it contributed extra funds to the family income. This ‘creative force’ shaped my early childhood. I remember being surrounded by women who were trying to find their voice and craftwork seemed to be a way of speaking and being heard. Creating something from nothing occurred in the makeshift home studios set up in spare bedrooms, on dining tables and kitchen benches. Often my mother would work with my aunts and vice versa, collaboratively supporting each other in their goals. My cousins and I would share school holidays together while our mothers made and ran party plan events to show their wares to women in the neighbourhood. My favourite of my mother’s endeavours was the applique bat wing tops covered in embroidered flowers and glitter paint: bedazzled with jewels and tizzed up with puff paint. Some of my most treasured items come from these matrilineal activities, my Grandmother crocheted Afghan blankets and my Nunna’s hand embroidery was completed on the ship as she migrated from Malta to Australia. This provided me with an artistically nurturing environment to grow in but as I grew, I realised that it was also out of necessity that the women in my family used craft as an alternate form of income. The women in my family were unskilled, often uneducated past the tenth grade and married with children by their early twenties. Craftwork was a tool with which they could assert their independence and form an identity that was theirs alone.

#### **Chapter Four – The Hierarchy**

Challenging the hierarchical relationship between art and craft that was established by Modernism’s critique, women artists practicing in the 1970s often used traditional female crafts as a medium to interrogate their exclusions from the artworld

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<sup>71</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (London: Grafton Books, 1977), 87.

reinserting themselves back into the cannon. Miriam Schapiro (1923- 2015) was at the forefront of this movement in North America in the late 1960s just as the Women's Liberation Movement was forming.<sup>72</sup>

Beginning her career as a second-generation Abstract Expressionist in the late 1950s in America, Schapiro was a pioneer of the 1970s feminist art movement.<sup>73</sup> Her art practice challenged the dichotomy of "high" art and "decorative" art with artworks that incorporated traditional women's craft techniques and pattern, one of her earliest femmages, *Beauty of Summer*, 1973–1974 (fig. 16) demonstrates her use of incorporating found fabric used for the craft of patchwork quilting. She was one of the founding members of the Pattern and Decoration movement, a reaction to the cold anonymity of Minimalism and the denial of visual pleasure in Conceptualism at the time.<sup>74</sup> This movement saw artworks produced with all-over decoration, celebrating traditionally secondary aspects of artmaking that were virtually absent in modernist art making practices. Schapiro dedicated herself to redefining the role of women in the arts and elevating the status of pattern, craft and the anonymous handiwork of women in the domestic sphere.<sup>75</sup>

In 1972 Schapiro, Judy Chicago and twenty-one of their students from the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts created the installation *Womanhouse*. This project was held in an abandoned Hollywood mansion.<sup>76</sup> Contributing artists and students used icons of domestic work to explore the processes and history of gender construction, linking women's cultural heritage with progressive feminist expression. In 'A Re (Re) (Re) – telling of the Narrative of *Womanhouse*', Stephanie Crawford describes the project as exploring, 'the complex relationship between a woman and her home by both embracing the creativity that

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<sup>72</sup> 'Miriam Schapiro', National Museum of Women in the Arts, accessed September 15<sup>th</sup> 2019, <https://nmwa.org/explore/artist-profiles/miriam-schapiro>

<sup>73</sup> *ibid*, <https://nmwa.org/explore/artist-profiles/miriam-schapiro>

<sup>74</sup> Press Release '*Surface/Depth: The Decorative After Miriam Schapiro*', Museum of Art and Design, New York, accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019, <https://madmuseum.org/press/releases/mad-presents-groundbreaking-feminist-collage-paintings-miriam-schapiro-conversation>

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*, <https://madmuseum.org/press/releases/mad-presents-groundbreaking-feminist-collage-paintings-miriam-schapiro-conversation>

<sup>76</sup> Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Co-directors the Feminist Art Program, '*Womanhouse*' Original Catalogue Essay, accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2019, <http://www.womanhouse.net/originalessay>

women have exhibited in decorating maintaining their homes, as well as questioning certain gender roles as normative.<sup>77</sup>

*Womanhouse* was an exploration of a woman's relationship to the home. The twenty-five installations and six performances chose to depict this theme in several ways. Some chose to celebrate the inherent creativity that women put into decorating and keeping their homes (*The Dining Room*). Others focused on representing the frivolity or forced nature of socialized gender roles (*Lipstick Bathroom, Aprons in the Kitchen*). These works disrupted traditional ideas about the home as a feminine realm. *Womanhouse* was the first female-centred art installation to appear in the Western world.<sup>78</sup> The artists used subversion and parody to undermine stereotypes about women that limited them to domestic roles, questioning the boundaries between essential and constructed meaning. Schapiro focused on neglected artforms and the decorative in her work from the 1970s. In the manifesto '*Waste Not Want Not*' 1977, Schapiro and her co-author Melissa Meyer wrote:

"Now that we women are beginning to document our culture, redressing our trivialization and adding our information to the recorded male facts and insights, it is necessary to point out the extraordinary works of art by women which despite their beauty are seen as leftovers of history."<sup>79</sup>

A number of guidelines were also listed identifying when a work falls into the category. The first and most important criterion is that the work must come from a woman.<sup>80</sup> Fabrics are a further essential element of the work. In addition, the subject should have to do with women's lives and contain an element of hidden metaphor.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Stephanie Crawford, *A Re (Re) (Re)—telling of the Narrative of Womanhouse, or In the Beginning there was a Woman with a Hammer*, accessed September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2019, <http://www.womanhouse.net/essays/2016/2/16/a-re-re-retelling-of-the-narrative-of-womanhouse-or-in-the-beginning-there-was-a-woman-with-a-hammer>

<sup>78</sup> "Women Artists Deconstruct Domesticity in Women House exhibition at NMWA", National Museum of Women in the Arts, accessed September 14, 2019, <https://nmwa.org/press-room/press-releases/women-artists-deconstruct-domesticity-women-house-exhibition-nmwa>

<sup>79</sup> Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, "Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE." *Heresies* I, no. 4 (Winter 1977-78), 66-69.

<sup>80</sup> Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, "Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE." *Heresies* I, no. 4 (Winter 1977-78), 66-69.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*, *Heresies* I, no. 4 (Winter 1977-78), 66-69.

Schapiro's fan *femme* series are a perfect examples of *femme*. Fans are typically associated with women, until well into the 20th century the fan was regarded as one of a lady's essential accessories. Elaborately painted, they became image carriers and some of them were precious status symbols.<sup>82</sup> The fan is gracious instrument for presenting and representing a woman, its fine subtle delicacy and sensibility conveys sensitive femininity. It is famous for being the communicative instrument of courtly love during the Rococo period.<sup>83</sup> In the artwork *A Mayan Garden* 1984 (Fig. 17), Schapiro's oversized fan shaped canvas (86.4 x 152.4 cm) combines the symmetrically structured ribs of the fan and a decorative overlay of fabric flowers collaged upon the Mayan inspired geometric background. The contrasting layers lend an energy to the work that draws viewers into the vibrant composition. The synergy between the geometric background and the collaged flowers create a contrasting, bold and formal energy with the improvisational layer of collage materials referencing a clear feminine source linked to quilting and wallpaper. The over the top embellishment following no formal aesthetic and maximalist philosophy<sup>84</sup> of less is more, conjures images of the hobbyist craze for *decoupage* of the 1980s craft scene and scrapbooking techniques. Schapiro celebrates femininity and decoration in her work and allows the viewer to be overstimulated with layers of embellishment.

In 1974 Schapiro began work on *The Dinner Party* (fig. 18), with the help of hundreds of collaborators it was completed in 1979.<sup>85</sup> Celebrating traditional female craft practices the installation incorporates weaving, china painting, embroidery, and sewing, all which have historically been framed as feminine pursuits or domestic art. This monumental installation is a massive ceremonial banquet, arranged on a triangular table with a total of thirty-nine place settings, each commemorating a woman from history.<sup>86</sup> The place settings consist of embroidered runners, gold chalices and cutlery, and china-painted porcelain plates with raised central motifs

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<sup>82</sup> 'Miriam Schapiro', National Museum of Women in the Arts, accessed 28<sup>th</sup> September 2019, <https://nmwa.org/works/mechanoflower-fan>

<sup>83</sup> 'Miriam Schapiro', Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019, <https://www.mumok.at/en/pink-light-fan>

<sup>84</sup> 'Less is a Bore', The Institute of Contemporary art Boston, accessed October 20<sup>th</sup> 2019, <https://www.icaboston.org/articles/ica-opens-major-survey-maximalist-art-and-design-june-26>

<sup>85</sup> Brooklyn Museum, accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/acknowledgement\\_panels](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/acknowledgement_panels)

<sup>86</sup> Brooklyn Museum, accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/acknowledgement\\_panels](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/acknowledgement_panels)

that are based on vulvar and butterfly forms.<sup>87</sup> All place settings are illustrated in styles appropriate to the individual women being honoured. The names of another 999 women are inscribed in gold on the white tile floor below the triangular table.<sup>88</sup> Recalling the *Womanhouse* project, Judy Chicago wrote in her book *Through the Flower*,

‘Women had been embedded in houses for centuries and had quilted, sewed, baked, cooked, decorated and nested their creative energies away. What would happen, we wondered, if women took those very same homemaking activities and carried them to fantasy proportions? Instead of making a pink-and-white, frilly, feminine but functional bedroom for one’s daughter, the space might become pinker and whiter and filmier and filled with more ruffles until it was a complete environment. Could the same activities women had used in life be transformed into the means of making art.’<sup>89</sup>

Chicago wrote this in 1975 as she was working on *The Dinner Party*. As I researched my own project, I realised that the work of Chicago and Schapiro along with the female artists who formed the Second Wave Feminist movement in art, had the agenda to legitimate female domestic creativity and to challenge presumptions that decoration and ornamentation lacked abiding aesthetic value. This incorporation of female imagery and female sensibility into a strategic feminist reclamation of craft and art that used traditionally feminine materials and techniques to celebrate female experiences and resist patriarchal standards. Almost 50 years after Second Wave Feminist artists began incorporating decorative modes this has opened up a space for me to work in the present day where I can critique, subvert, and transform accepted histories and trajectories related to craft and design, gender, beauty, and taste.

Lynda Benglis (b. 1941) is another artist who played a pivotal role in the 1970s feminist art movement and the revitalisation of decoration in the Western canon. In her sculptural work she utilises many materials to pleasurably challenge established perceptions of taste and artistic value. In her early career Benglis’ desired freedom

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<sup>87</sup> *ibid*, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/acknowledgement\\_panels](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/acknowledgement_panels)

<sup>88</sup> Brooklyn Museum, accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/acknowledgement\\_panels](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/acknowledgement_panels).

<sup>89</sup> Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My struggle as a Woman Artist*, (Authors Choice Press, 2006), 104.

from traditional artistic as well as social boundaries, her work focused on sensual surface embellishments and decorative arts.<sup>90</sup>

Strong elements of handicrafts are evident in her artworks especially the Lagniappes series of 1977 where she incorporated excessive amounts of craft materials including glitter and plastic jewels. Benglis has defended her attraction and use of the decorative and craft aesthetic numerous times and recently in a 2018 interview she said,

‘We’re inherently attracted to shiny, sparkly things. Our eyes are honed by millennia of evolution to see them. But as we become increasingly socialized, we’re taught to limit our appreciation for glitter. I grew up with sparkly things, like my dance baton and my bright pink girl’s dance costume, and I loved those things. I still do. Why should what we’re naturally drawn to be conditioned out of us?’<sup>91</sup>

This comment from Benglis in a 2018 interview seems fitting to an artist who has consistently pushed the boundaries of taste with her use of materials and techniques, I have drawn inspiration from her work this encouraged me to incorporate the decorative aesthetics I enjoyed in my childhood into my art practice.

Benglis’ ‘Knot’ sculptures (1972-1976) (fig. 19) are a series of relief wall sculptures based on a single motif: the knot.<sup>92</sup> They are formed from long tubular pieces of aluminium screening covered with a skin of cotton bunting that is embedded with plaster and adorned with a variety of decorative materials and dime store aesthetics. These sculptures are studies in structure and surface ornamentation, and demonstrate Benglis’ ongoing interest with taste and value where she flirts with different aesthetic sensibilities, from elegance to the grotesque and the push pull between beauty and vulgarity. The eclecticism of the conceptual approach that Benglis wilfully encourages in her practice acts as antithesis to Modern arts purity of form and style.<sup>93</sup> The knotted relief sculpture, *Zita*, 1972 (fig. 20), one of Benglis’

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<sup>90</sup> Susan Richmond, *Lynda Benglis : Beyond Process*. New Paperback ed. London: I B Tauris, 2015, 1-23.

<sup>91</sup> Lynda Benglis, interview with Margaret Carrigan, June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018, transcript, artnet.com, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/lynda-benglis-on-the-pleasures-of-decoration-and-why-shes-very-uncomfortable-being-called-a-feminist-artist-1297064>.

<sup>92</sup> Richmond, *Lynda Benglis : Beyond Process*, 124.

<sup>93</sup> Susan Richmond, *Lynda Benglis : Beyond Process*. New Paperback ed. London: I B Tauris, 2015, 125.

works from her 'sparkle knots' series is formed from a twisted, clumpy knot of cotton tubes covered in liberally applied paint and glitter. The form is simultaneously pretty and crude, combining pastel colours and glitz with raw materials that have been twisted and tied into a knotted configuration. In *Zita*, the knot is double stranded and tightly looped creating a knuckle, the two underhanging ends are unpainted exposing its underlying material like a petticoat to a shimmering skirt. Its muscular physicality combined with the typically 'feminine' surface treatment and craft materials challenge gendered notions of taste and decorum in art. In *Zita* we see how Benglis conflates decoration with feminine subjectivity through use of a selected palette, its materials, and its execution.

Similarly, my execution, materials and palette also combine to create a juxtaposition between gender performativity of craft activities and feminine sensibility. My making incorporates a labour intensive and feminised art that simultaneously acts out and produces artworks that embody the decorative and feminine. This is a retaliation against my experience of the world as a girl and woman and a way of narrating the stories that formed identity. In the contemporary art community craft's labour has become a medium.<sup>94</sup> It is used as a complex and contradictory gender and class performance, one that serves as a form of communication and narrative, a language that both enables and contains oppositional and gender role explorations.<sup>95</sup> Where is the line before something becomes excessive, kitsch or overly sentimental? These gender and class connotations along with the aesthetic distinctions become subversive tools. I want my work to both explicitly and indirectly engage with this cultural and artistic aesthetic. Utilising a technique, process and material persistently coded as feminine and middle class just as Benglis was exploring in her 'Sparkle Knots' series in the 1970s and Tracey Emin's use of marginalised craft language in the form of embroidery and tapestry techniques from the 1990s which I explore in the next chapter.

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<sup>94</sup> Maria Elena Buszek, *Labour is my Medium: Some Perspective(s) on Contemporary Craft*, accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/4248803/Labor\\_is\\_my\\_Medium\\_Some\\_perspective\\_s\\_on\\_contemporary\\_craft](https://www.academia.edu/4248803/Labor_is_my_Medium_Some_perspective_s_on_contemporary_craft).

<sup>95</sup> Susan Richmond, *Lynda Benglis : Beyond Process*. New Paperback ed. London: I B Tauris, 2015, 125.

According to Lucy Lippard “a visually sensitive woman who spends day after day in the same rooms develops a compulsion to change, adorn, expand them.”<sup>96</sup> These words describe for me a familiar cultural environment of my 1980s suburban Australian upbringing. Matrilineal craft has informed my practice as an artist where I wish to interrogate the link between gender, craft, domesticity and traditional female craft. I sought a way out of the life I saw my grandmothers live. I wanted an education, a choice, my freedom. I endeavoured to make art my profession, to gain a degree and a career that would allow me to be in control of my own destiny. In the 1990s, my teenage years, I was fortunate to have the choices that were not presented to the women who raised me. I went to university after I completed secondary school, I even had a gap year where I explored the world and moved away from my family home. I did not want to be tied down, married or settled. My goal was to study art, gain a teaching qualification and eventually have a family on my terms. I eventually reached these goals, married and had children. Throughout my life I have reflected upon the difference in choices presented to me and the opportunities I have had in comparison to the lives of my grandmothers and mother. However, it has become increasingly important to me to carry on the traditions in making that I have learnt from the women in my family. With the recent passing of my maternal and paternal grandmothers I recognise how my relationship with them was fostered through the teaching of these crafts and the significance of the time spent learning these traditional skills binds me to my cultural heritage and background (fig. 21). I am now the mother passing them onto my own daughters and when I do, I feel strongly connected to memory of my grandmothers.

Women’s traditional arts were extremely important to Second Wave Feminists in establishing women artists, and women’s history, as legitimate and important.<sup>97</sup> Feminism was one of the many aesthetic and social forces that combined to undermine modernism. Second Wave Feminist artists Schapiro, Chicago and Benglis changed the landscape of the Western Art world and this is really only just now coming into focus and being rewritten back into the history of modern art. Third Wave

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<sup>96</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message?: A Decade of Social Change*, E. P. Dutton, 100.

<sup>97</sup> ‘Women’s Work’, Brooklyn Museum, accessed September 15<sup>th</sup> 2019, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/womens\\_work](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/womens_work).

Feminism saw artists embrace crafting as part of their generational identity by repositioning and recontextualising femininity which I will discuss further in *Chapter Five*.<sup>98</sup>

## **Chapter Five– The Edible Woman**

...she was afraid of losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer, beginning (that would be worst of all) to talk a lot, to tell everybody, to cry.

Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> 'Feminism(s) Plural and Evolving', Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, <https://acca.melbourne/12091-2-2-2/>

<sup>99</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, André Deutsch 1969, 225.

Working with a maximalist philosophy and acknowledging method of creation as an act of self-contemplation, and introducing chance processes, the final pieces created in this project were developed with the insights and knowledge gained from this research. I have found myself making reference less often to the souvenirs and collected figurines from my childhood and more to the direct experiences that these objects recall (Fig. 14). These final artworks that have been created in the last semester of this project are more abstract and ambiguous at first glance. However, they are strongly linked to my experience and contain personal narratives that connect directly to my lived experience and identity.

Autobiographical and Confessional Art - a category created by Louise Bourgeois, and continued by Tracey Emin - focuses on an intentional revelation of the self, encouraging an intimate analysis of the artist.<sup>100</sup> As discussed in chapter one, Bourgeois' work is mostly autobiographical and frequently confronts feminist concerns through reference to the male and female body. Like Bourgeois, the work of Tracey Emin also concentrates on autobiographical subjects such as sex, abortion, and rape from a female perspective.<sup>101</sup> Emin's art is one of disclosure, using her life events as inspiration for works in a wide range of media including painting, drawing, video and installation, to photography, needlework and sculpture. She reveals her humiliations, hopes, failures and successes in honest and, at times, excoriating work that is frequently both traumatic and humorous simultaneously.<sup>102</sup> The popularity of confessional art is evident in the media frenzy and celebrity status that Emin has been subject to since her early artistic career in the 1990s as one of the Young British Artists to emerge out of the Royal College of the Arts.<sup>103</sup> Although she rejects any notions of her work being for a feminist greater good, her courage to be vulnerable and honest through her artwork blurs the line between life and art, exposing the consistent discrepancies between men and women's ability to critically and publicly engage with topics such as gender roles, abortion, sex and child abuse.

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<sup>100</sup> Christine Fanthome, "The influence and Treatment of Autobiography in Confessional Art: Observations on Tracey Emin's Film Top Spot." *Biography* 29, no 1 (2006), 30-42.

<sup>101</sup> Neal Brown, *Tracey Emin*, Tate Modern Art , Tate Publishing 2006, 36-48.

<sup>102</sup> Artist Overview, White Cube Gallery, accessed October 4<sup>th</sup> 20q9, [https://whitecube.com/artists/artist/tracey\\_emin](https://whitecube.com/artists/artist/tracey_emin)

<sup>103</sup> Young British Artists, Art Term, accessed October 4<sup>th</sup> 2019, , <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/y/young-british-artists-ybas>

This confidence in working with the personal owes much to the feminist artists who preceded her. The conviction that the personal is political cannot be ignored by contemporary artists working with identity and self-representation, neither in the 1990s when Emin was an emerging artist in Britain or now in the twenty-first century.

By re-appropriating conventional handicraft techniques – or ‘women’s work’ – for radical intentions, Emin’s work resonates with the feminist tenets of the ‘personal as political’.<sup>104</sup> Adamson uses Emin’s work as an example of a contemporary artist who recognises the marginality of certain media and process, as did the feminists of the 1970s which I discussed in *Chapter Three*.<sup>105</sup> Emin creates artwork as a way of dealing with her life experience. Her use of embroidery techniques and text, both speak directly to women’s experience, and recount her own lived experience.<sup>106</sup> Her use of this amateur craft as art medium recalls Roszika Parker’s *The Subversive Stitch*,<sup>107</sup> Parker argued that embroidery was a site of feminine self-expression over the course of many centuries despite the patriarchal and social-cultural expectations.<sup>108</sup> Although the woman as a domestic embroiderer conformed to patriarchal expectations between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries Parker talks about the ‘secondary gains women accrued from absolute conformity to the feminine ideal’, namely the quiet subversion of home decoration, recycling and re-use.<sup>109</sup> Emin’s use of amateur craft in the 1990s, at the end of the twentieth century in an increasingly digital and technology based world was a way of validating women’s traditional craft without ignoring the very real limitations and social-political circumstances of its production.<sup>110</sup>

Emin’s unashamed exposure of female sexuality, as well, as her deeply personal themes may be aligned with the ideas and issues associated with Third Wave

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<sup>104</sup> Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political” February, 1969, Notes from the Second Year, <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>

<sup>105</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft*, (English ed. Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2007), 32.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

<sup>107</sup> Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Woman’s Press, 1984).

<sup>108</sup> *ibid*, 13.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid*, 13.

\* I had found the novels of Margaret Atwood most illuminating on the themes of gender and identity

<sup>110</sup> Adamson, *Thinking through*, 32.

Feminism beginning in the 1990s.<sup>111</sup> During this time Feminism was redefined again, with a strong focus on the individual and personal narratives while also recognising gender and sexual non-binary women, and women of different cultural, racial, class, and religious backgrounds were previously marginalised by mainstream Feminism, but were essential to its ongoing legacy.<sup>112</sup> Issues such as equal pay and the fight against Rape Culture were still paramount. Third Wave Feminists saw any restriction of women's self-expression, from men or more conservative feminists, as unacceptable. Reclaiming derogatory terms like slut, bitch, cunt and whore, they also reclaimed what might be thought of as overtly sexualised 'looks' championed by lead singers Courtney Love of the Hole and Kat Bjelland of Babes in Toyland.<sup>113</sup>

This was a reclamation of the process of objectification of women – owning it and taking control/ power away from men.<sup>114</sup> During this decade I was a teenager and through art and literature. I started exploring a deeper understanding of my own femininity and sexuality, challenging the roles that were assigned to me by my parents and the general culture of my small-town community in southern Victoria.\* I studied Emin in my Bachelor of Applied Arts in 2000. As a young woman I recall her as an artist who redefined what it meant to be a woman, her defiant personality and graceless public persona rejected preconceived notions of feminine “genteel” behaviour, and I could associate my own experience more to her than that of the Second Wave Feminists or the women that raised me. I found this exciting and confronting, here was a woman making art rejecting the passive role expected of women in society and at the same time it was gaining her both endorsement and notoriety in the art world. Through the confrontation of personal experience and confession, Emin's art pushes the viewer to challenge and reassess innermost thoughts, assumptions and perspectives that they might not otherwise entertain, a main theme in the writings of Luce Irigaray.<sup>115</sup> By initiating conversation and pushing

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<sup>111</sup> 'Feminism(s) Plural and Evolving', Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, <https://acca.melbourne/12091-2-2-2/>

<sup>112</sup> 'Feminism(s) Plural and Evolving', Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup> 2019, <https://acca.melbourne/12091-2-2-2/>

<sup>113</sup> ACCA Education, Education Resources, Unfinished Business: Perspectives on art and feminism, accessed August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <http://content.acca.melbourne/uploads/2018/02/Femisms-3.pdf>.

<sup>114</sup> 'Feminism(s) Plural and Evolving', <https://acca.melbourne/12091-2-2-2/>

<sup>115</sup> Hilary Robinson. *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*. (London: I.B. Tauris 2006), 58-59.

the boundaries of female sexuality and gender constructs Emin's artworks question society's preconceived notions of female identity.

*Everyone I have ever Slept With, 1963-1995* (1995), a small dome tent stands erected in the gallery space, wired up and eternally emitting light. An artwork often sensationalised as an overt expression of female sexuality is about the intimacy of sleep.<sup>116</sup> Inside the tent the interior is appliqued with the names of Emin's sleeping partners (both sexual and platonic) there are also hand written stories and dates.<sup>117</sup> Hand sewn in a patch work of collected fabrics and large bold letters using embroidery as a medium suggestive of the labour not only in the making of the work itself, "but in the making of relationships, traditionally a feminine task".<sup>118</sup> This work is a confrontational autobiographical self-portrait, not only do we see the names of her lovers and her closest friends and family, the inclusion of *Foetus I* and *Foetus II* share the controversial confession of her abortions.<sup>119</sup> This unashamed owning of her choice to admit to the taboo of not one but two abortions was fiercely pro-choice.<sup>120</sup>

The making of this deeply personal and emotional work in what Adamson terms as a "marginalised craft language" demonstrates Emin's reliance on the essential association of craft as an formal language asserting her female subject position.<sup>121</sup> This deployment of the 'feminine' as a site of gendered identification both connects her in the autobiographical sense to the feminine and to the earlier practices of feminist artists working in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>122</sup> This emphasis of female subjectivity, autobiography and confession in a first person mode of address is echoed in her later exhibitions such as *'I Need Art Like I need God'* 1997.<sup>123</sup> In this

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<sup>116</sup> Mandy Merck, Chris Townsend and Tracey Emin, *The Art of Tracey Emin*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002) 33.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid*, 32.

<sup>118</sup> Rosemary Betterton, "Why is my art not as good as me? Femininity, feminism and 'life-drawing' in Tracey Emin's art." in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, edited by Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002). 33.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>120</sup> Lexi Manatakis, *Why Tracey Emin's work is so intensely personal, in her Own Words*, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup> 2019, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/43183/1/why-tracey-emins-work-so-personal-in-own-words-a-fortnight-of-tears-white-cube>

<sup>121</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft*, (English ed. Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2007), 162.

<sup>122</sup> Manatakis, *Why Tracey Emin's work is so intensely personal, in her Own Words*, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/43183/1/why-tracey-emins-work-so-personal-in-own-words-a-fortnight-of-tears-white-cube>

<sup>123</sup> "I need art like I need god", South London Gallery, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup> 2019, <https://www.southlondongallery.org/exhibitions/tracey-emin-i-need-art-like-i-need-god/>

show Emin included items of clothing and collected domestic objects for their personal resonance, such as her grandmothers chair which she also embroidered referencing a specifically female genealogy.<sup>124</sup> Similar to Emin, I embed my artworks with physical and non-physical references to my female genealogy, this takes shape sometimes in the objects I cast from my collection of childhood figurines (fig. 15) or the sugar flower making techniques I have learnt from my grandmothers cake decorating books (fig. 22).

As my initial attraction to the art of royal icing was influenced by my mother's observance of the time-honoured tradition where she carefully saved the top of her wedding cake and the collection of instructional cake decorating books in the family cook book collection, I aim to connect to the strong matrilineal craft line within my own family. The use of piping connects me in socially and gender specific ways to the feminist understandings of the late twentieth century and although my work is derivative of such practices, I have also come to this as a way of honouring the relationships with the women in my life. The incorporation of the crafts that I witnessed my mother, grandmothers, and aunts performing have now become the means for my own art production. The autobiographical and confessional aspects of my work are often veiled. There is a level of privacy for my inner most personal feelings that I wish to keep sacred. As I make the artwork, building up each layer of piped clay, slowly, I have to practise patience and care. At any point the work can collapse and if it does I am compelled to keep going piping on top of the damage. I choose to incorporate the collapse, cracks, fissures, air bubble explosions and transformative kiln outcome into the finished pieces. This speaks directly to the formation of identity where our traumas are inscribed upon us mentally and sometimes physically. In each piece I trace myself recursively, like the dendrochronological tree rings or geological formations that hold the secrets of history and evolution.

In the past, I have not been brave enough to expose myself like Emin and her predecessor Bourgeois. By admitting to the struggles, I experienced in my upbringing and the dysfunctional family I have begun to explore the resentment alongside the

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<sup>124</sup> *ibid*, <https://www.southlondongallery.org/exhibitions/tracey-emin-i-need-art-like-i-need-god/>

love and loyalty I have towards my parents. Through my art I explore these issues by making direct representation of my experience. The icing and decorations act as playful metaphors for my feelings of sadness and loss as I attempt to understand and piece together fragmented memories of my early life. My attraction to pink, frills, glitter and lace can be connected to my need to please and that acceptance by family and society was contingent on adhering to this feminised behaviour. I use them in a subversive way, acting out the feminine roles that were presented to me; my mother's wedding portrait and preserved wedding cake, the countless religious artefacts and Madonna figurines in my Nunna's house, the ballerina encased in my jewellery box and the porcelain angel presented to me at my baptism have all found their way into my art production. My art practice is a space where I explore my experience, acknowledging how my identity has been shaped by my family dynamics and the relationships with the individuals in it. My nostalgia and sentimental yearning for my childhood is connected to my desire to heal the pain caused in my family due to mental illness and the dysfunction that followed in its wake. As discussed in chapter one, I return to Susan Stewart's remarks in her book *On Longing* 'Nostalgia cannot be sustained without loss'.<sup>125</sup> these souvenirs from my childhood act only as a reminder of the loss I have experienced, between the promise of restoration and the reality that nothing will ever be recovered I attempt to reconcile my history and restore my future.

Over the years I have worked to heal some of the damage cause to the relationships in my childhood and also gained a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that came together in causing certain situations. It is hard to reconcile the actions of people who cannot control their behaviours when mental illness is not addressed or diagnosed especially when they are a parent or caregiver and you love them. As a child of a parent with mental illness you are always vulnerable to forces out of your control and as these bouts with imbalances in personality and behaviour occur in waves during the times of happiness and security (which were plentiful throughout my childhood) I would often be scared of when the bubble would burst. The use of text in a work such as *Piped Dreams: Duel Canyon* 2019 (fig. 1, 25 and 27) has

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<sup>125</sup> Susan Stewart. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. (1st Paperback ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). P 145.

brought the ability to include narration and autobiographical aspects to my artworks. In porcelain I pipe words or phrases used on cakes in celebratory events. Happy Birthday, Sweet Sixteen, Happy Anniversary and Bon Voyage name a few that have become synonymous with the art of cake decorating. This use of text illustrates the hidden message contained in the work and is a direct reflection of my feelings of anxiety that coincide with celebrations during my childhood when the secrets of our family could be made public and expose our dysfunctional domestic reality. Similar to Emin's unconventional self-portraiture that incorporates text and self-depictions of the trauma of memory she has experienced.

In his book, *The Art of Tracey Emin*, Chris Townsend describes this as located in the space of history that representation in the present cannot alone bridge.<sup>126</sup> He goes on to describe Emin's self-representation as a construction of the self through an interiorised difference- its transformation through history, rather than its apparent transcendence over history. I compare Emin's use of text and monoprinting techniques to the what French novelist Andre Gide described 1891 as *mise-en-abyme* known in the artworld as a formal technique in which an image contains a smaller copy of itself, in a sequence appearing to recur infinitely.<sup>127</sup> Emin's insistent use of monoprinting where she celebrates the inaccuracy of the mechanical process printing words backwards and letters incorrectly mirrored incorporate the strategy of altered representation and her imaginative reflections of the past. In *Terribly Wrong* 1997 (fig. 26) we see this diaristic approach that includes text and imagery created using the one-off technique of monoprinting to create a rapid and immediate expression. The self-reflexive embeddings of *mise-en-abyme* have influenced my piping technique where I begin a sculpture with the foundation of a term or a phrase that was used as an endearing pet name or description of how I should behave to obtain parental acceptance and love. These words are recursively piped in rose pink until they form a canyon and the colour along with the words eventually disappear. Pink bleaches to white and the letters combine and morph into layers reminiscent of a stalagmite structure. I view these as layers of identity performing my personality and the growing out of childhood ideals taught through a gendered upbringing it is

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<sup>126</sup> Mandy Merck, Chris Townsend and Tracey Emin, *The Art of Tracey Emin*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 92.

<sup>127</sup> Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1989)

also referencing the process of revealing that occurs in the Freudian process of psychoanalysis.

These sculptures become topographies, or geographical mappings of my experience. The slow act of piping porcelain and the transformative process that the clay goes through to become the eternal ceramic form has a therapeutic power. Like the work of Bourgeois and Emin, my work is self-referential but I attempt to encourage in the viewer a space to contemplate the realities of women's experience. Connecting to society's preconceived notions of female identity, sexuality and gender in a way that initiates dialogue.

## **Conclusion**

In this technology and digitally driven age Feminism is enjoying renewed public interest. Inequalities within the visual arts have been well documented. In 1989 American activist art group Guerrilla Girls found that less than 5 percent of the artists in the modern art section of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art were women,

but 8 percent of the nudes were female.<sup>128</sup> By 2012 these statistics had improved, but only slightly, to 4 percent women artists and 76 percent female nudes.<sup>129</sup> Art museums in Australia reflect a similar situation. These have been illuminated by Elvis Richardson's project *The Countess Report*, which is a benchmarking project and online resource on gender equality in the Australian contemporary art sector.<sup>130</sup> For Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago and Lynda Benglis, though their use of mainstream art techniques was as sophisticated as their male counterparts, they still found fewer opportunities. Their choice to use the "amateurism" of crafts marginalised language functioned, as Adamson suggests, 'as a rhetorical device – a reminder that the playing field was not equal – but also as a means of working through the particularity of a marginal subject position'.<sup>131</sup> Researching these historical artists and the technique of *femmage* has given me a way of incorporating and expanding older tropes of femininity alongside more contemporary gender narratives that are marked by the resurgence of interest in Feminism among Forth Wave Feminists today who recognise that many of the things previous waves fought against are still prevalent in our society today. This is evident in the Me Too and Times Up movements intended to combat sexual harassment and sexual assault and the gender gap, using internet, social media and hashtag culture to 'call out' abuses and injustices. I have explored women's traditional craft and *femmage* as a framework for the performative and communicative way women create cultural objects to reinforce their autonomy and agency while at the same time embracing and reproducing dominant narratives.

Beginning my artistic career during the third-wave of Feminism, when the presence of Feminism was taken for granted. Practicing in the much debated Fourth Wave of Feminism, which is, often criticised for not having a unified identity and a 'champagne activist' social media dependency, I realised I needed to explore its historical legacies. Exploring Feminism, feminist methodologies and contemporary feminist art practice in recent years gave my masters project a context and also explained many of the phenomena that I was aware of but could not explain. The personal is political.

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<sup>128</sup> 'Feminism(s) Plural and Evolving', Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup> 2019, <https://acca.melbourne/12091-2-2-2/>

<sup>129</sup> 'Do women still need to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?', Guerrilla Girls, <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages>.

<sup>130</sup> The Countess Report, accessed October 14<sup>th</sup> 2019, <http://thecountessreport.com.au>

<sup>131</sup> Glenn Adamson. *Thinking through Craft*. (Bloomsbury Academic, 15 Dec 2007), 143.

This Masters of Fine Art project involved making artwork that explored my personal collection, focussing on notions of nostalgia and desire imbued in these collected objects that create, store and retrieve a sense of past – this much I knew and could contextualise, I needed to further understand the political to open up my practice and explore a deeper understanding of the confronting, personal, and previously unconscious behaviours and responses I felt. The porcelain piping techniques shifted my practice to look beyond my childhood objects which held little interest as a form of communication beyond my own experience. Through the studio research I have developed an experimental construction method and new visual language to produce sculptures made solely of decoration. The development of this method has allowed me to incorporate confessional and autobiographical elements into my artworks, recreating my own lived experience through a feminised craft, exploring the gendered territory of female childhood and adolescence.

Porcelain's connection with sugar, femininity, consumption and luxury was a connection I was not expecting as I embarked on this project. The links between my medium, techniques, and context encouraged my maximalist use of decoration and ornamentation, which has become an important element of my research over the course of this project. My art making practice directly responds to the historical feminisation of decoration through the rise of modernism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the use of craft as a marginalised language in contemporary art today. I have created artworks using craft as a language that is self-reflexive autobiographical and confessional. My experience of the evolving waves of Feminism in the 1990s and now in the new millennia have shaped me as an artists. Today technology and social media platforms have given rise to a new venue for feminist narratives and the use of social media as a platform to achieve Feminism's objectives. I can link this development in my evolution as an artist to the shifting culture that I am living in, the reclaiming of gendered and repressive language by artists and activists alike has influenced my approach to using text as a device in my art practice. I am using my voice, without the fear of censorship by cultural and social expectations. These artworks function as a reclamation of power and honour the memory of my foremothers who crafted out of economic necessity, and have given me the opportunity and skill to study art at an academic level and work as an artist for creativity and personal fulfillment. Examining a broad range of historical themes, art

practices and theory has been invaluable to my development as an artist. It has provided focus, confirmation, structure and insight.

### List of Illustrations

| Description  | Page |
|--|------|
| Figure 1. Ebony Russell, <i>Piped Dream: Duel Canyon (Pink Ombre)</i> , 2019.<br>Piped Lumina Porcelain and Stain, 34 x 25 x 30 cm<br>Photo Credit: Karl Schwerdtfeger | 46   |
| Figure 2. Vintage Photograph. Minnie the My Child doll, 1986,<br>Artists Collection  | 47   |

|            |   |    |
|------------|---|----|
| Figure 3.  | Personal Collection of objects in studio at National Art School, 2019, Photo: Pete Morgan   | 48 |
| Figure 4.  | Louise Bourgeois, <i>Cell (You Better Grow Up)</i> , 1993. Painted wood, Marble, Steel, Glass and mirror. 210.8 x 152.4 x 152.4cm<br>Collection: Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh   | 49 |
| Figure 5.  | Katthy Cavaliere, <i>Katthy's room</i> , 1998, Performance installation<br>Cardboard box, bed, cupboard, dressing table, desk, shelves, chair, filing cabinet, personal belongings, wooden steps, lightbulb<br>209 x 230 x 300 cm<br>Collection: Museum New and Old Art   | 50 |
| Figure 6.  | Lynda Draper, <i>Wonderland</i> , 2007, Handbuilt porcelaneous stoneware, multiple glaze firings, 18 x 15 x 15 cm   | 51 |
| Figure 7.  | Ebony Russell, <i>Piped Dreams: Pink and White Grotto</i> , 2018<br>Piped Lumina Porcelain and Stain, 34 x 25 x 30 cm<br>Photo Credit: Karl Schwerdtfeger   | 52 |
| Figure. 8. | Ebony Russell, Collection of small artworks, 2019,<br>Piped Lumina Porcelain and Stain, variable dimensions<br>Photo Credit: Peter Morgan   | 53 |
| Figure 9.  | Ebony Russell, Stoneware cake, 2014, Stoneware ceramic and found objects.   | 54 |
| Figure 10. | John Michael Wright, 'An Account of his Excellence Roger Earl of Castelmaine's Embassy from his sacred Majesty James the Third' (London, 1688): plate 10 (placed after p.65) with an allegorical sculptures in sugar representing the return of Britain into the Catholic Church, as used for the banquet offered by the Earl of Castlemaine on 14 January 1687. 1687 Etching | 55 |
| Figure 11. | The Judgement of Paris, centrepiece, c. 1745, porcelain, 33.0 × 28.0 × 15.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Peter and Barbara Burton in memory of Peter and Yvonne Rowley through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2017   | 55 |
| Figure 12. | Jessica Stoller, <i>Untitled (Slip)</i> 2016, Porcelain, glaze, china paint, lustre, 12"x 10.5" x 7". Artists collection  | 56 |

- Figure 13. Anthony Sonnenberg, *Reliquary for Miss Kitty*, 2018, Porcelain over stoneware, found ceramic tchotchkes, under glaze, glaze, gold luster, feline cremated remains.  
19 x 19 x 12 inches, Artists own collection 57
- Figure 14. Ebony Russell, *Piped Dreams: Diamond Dancer* 2019, Piped Lumina Porcelain and Stain, 34 x 25 x 30 cm  
Photo Credit: Karl Schwerdtfeger 58
- Figure 15. Ebony Russell, *Piped Dreams: Golden Angle Grotto* 2019, Piped Lumina Porcelain, glaze and Particle Vapourisation Deposit treatment, 34 x 25 x 30 cm  
Photo Credit: Peter Morgan 59
- Figure 16. Miriam Schapiro, *The Beauty of Summer*, 1973–74, Acrylic, fabric on canvas. Firestone Gallery, New York. 59
- Figure 17. Miriam Schapiro, *A Mayan Garden* 1984, 86.4 x 152.4 cm  
Fabric and acrylic on canvas collage  
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville 59
- Figure 18. *Emily Dickinson Place Setting*, 1974-1979. Runner: Cotton/linen base fabric, woven interface support material (horsehair, wool, and linen), cotton twill tape, silk, synthetic gold cord, silk fabric, cotton net, lace, appliquéd needlelace mid-19th-century collar, silk ribbon, coffee dye, tea dye, thread Plate: Porcelain (or possibly stoneware), overglaze enamel (China paint), and possible additional paint, Runner: 54 x 33 1/2 in. (137.2 x 85.1 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of The Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10-PS-34. © artist or artist's estate 19
- Figure 19. *Lagniappe Bayou Babe*, 1977, Aluminum screen, cotton bunting, plaster, gesso, glitter, and polypropylene  
154.94 x 78.74 x 46.99 cm  
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 20
- Figure 20. Lynda Benglis, *Zita* 1972, Cotton bunting, plaster, acrylic paint and glitter over aluminum screen, 87.6 x 97.8 x 34.3 cm,  
RISD Museum 21
- Figure 21. Vintage Photo, Left - In my Grandmothers Garden 1982.  
Right – At a Wedding with my Nunna, 1984.  
Artists personal collection 22
- Figure 22. Ebony Russell, *Piped Dreams: Pink Tiara (Nothing Breaks like a heart)* 2019, Piped Lumina  
Porcelain, glaze and Lustre, 16 x 24 x 30 cm  
Photo Credit: Karl Schwerdtfeger 23

- Figure 23. Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* 1963 - 1995 1995  
Appliquéd tent, mattress and light  
122 x 245 x 214 cm  
Saatchi Gallery 25
- Figure 24. Ebony Russell, *Piped Dream: Duel Canyon (Pink Ombre)*,  
Detail, 2019 Piped Lumina Porcelain, glaze and Lustre,  
34 x 25 x 30 cm  
Photo Credit: Karl Schwerdtfeger 26
- Figure 25. Tracey Emin, *Terribly Wrong* 1997, Monoprint on paper  
582 x 811 mm  
Collection: Tate 27
- Figure 26. Ebony Russell, *Piped Dream: Duel Canyon (Pink Ombre)*,  
Detail, 2019, Piped Lumina Porcelain, glaze and Lustre,  
34 x 25 x 30 cm  
Photo Credit: Karl Schwerdtfeger 28

## FIGURES



Figure 1. Ebony Russell, *Piped Dream: Duel Canyon (Pink Ombre)*, 2019.



Fig 2. Minnie the My Child doll, 1986



Figure 3. Personal Collection of objects in studio at National Art School, 2019



Figure 4. Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (You Better Grow Up)*, 1993 (detail)



Figure 5. Kathy Cavaliere, *Kathy's room*, 1998, Performance installation



Figure 6. Lynda Draper, *Wonderland*, 2007, Porcelain, glaze.



Figure 7. Ebony Russell, *Piped Dreams: Pink and White Grotto with Bows and Roses*, 2018.



Figure 8. Ebony Russell, *Piped Dreams: Golden Angle Grotto* 2019



Figure 9. Ebony Russell, Collection of small artworks, 2019



Figure 10. Ebony Russell, Stoneware cake, 2014



Figure 11. Sugar centrepiece included in a banquet offered by the Earl of Castlemaine on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 1687, for James II



Figure 12. The judgement of Paris, centrepiece, c. 1745, Meissen Porcelain Factory,



Figure 13. Jessica Stoller, Untitled (Slip) 2016.



Figure 14. Anthony Sonnenberg, *Reliquary for Miss Kitty*, 2018.



Figure 15. Ebony Russell, *Piped Dreams: Diamond Dancer*, 2019



Figure 16. Miriam Schapiro, *The Beauty of Summer*, 1973–74



Figure 17. Miriam Schapiro, *A Mayan Garden* 1984



Figure 18. *Emily Dickinson Place Setting*, 1974-1979



Figure 19. *Lagniappe Bayou Babe*, 1977



Figure 20. Lynda Benglis, *Zita* 1972



Figure 21. Left - In my Grandmothers Garden, Artist and Jacoba Postma, 1982.  
Right – At a Wedding with my Nunna, Artist and Carmen Zahra, 1984.



Figure 22. Ebony Russell, *Piped Dreams: Pink Tiara (Nothing Breaks like a heart)*  
2019



Figure 23. Tracey Emin *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (1995). Exterior view

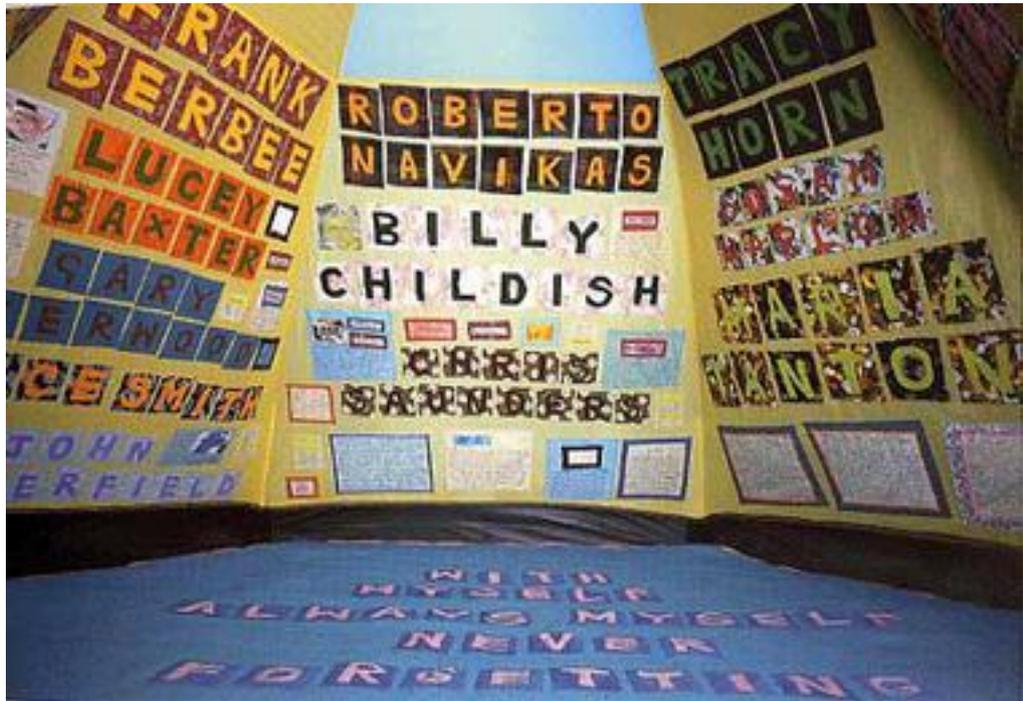


Figure 24. Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* Interior view



Figure 25. Ebony Russell, Piped Dream: Duel Canyon (Pink Ombre), Detail, 2019

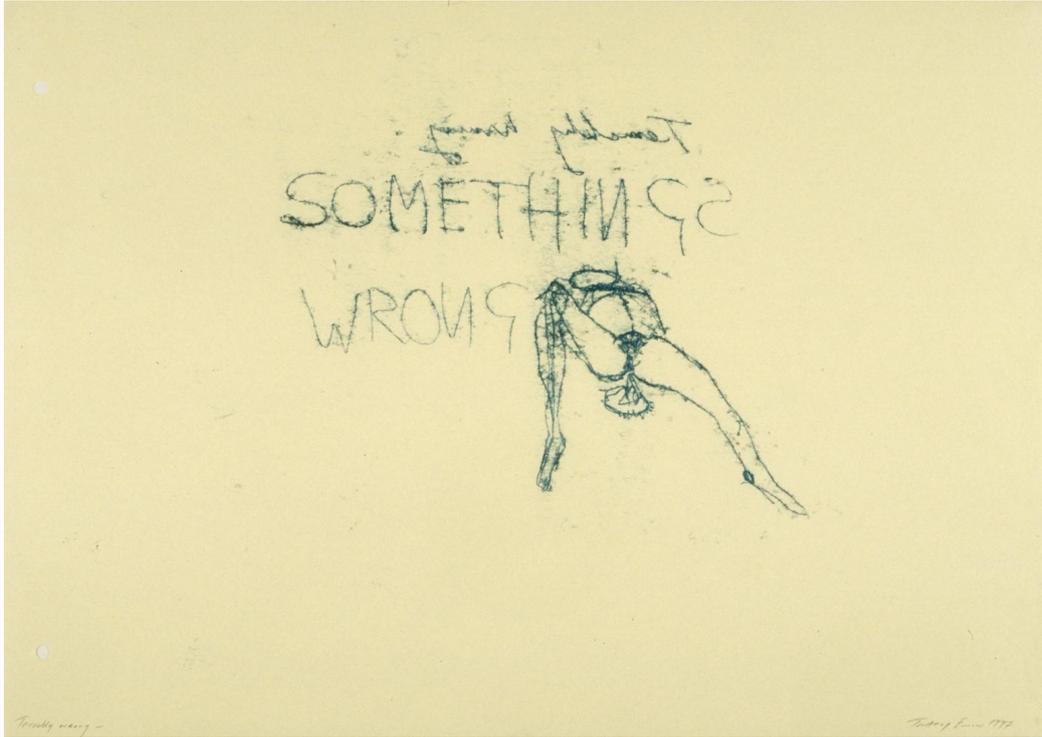


Figure 26. Tracey Emin, *Terribly Wrong* 1997

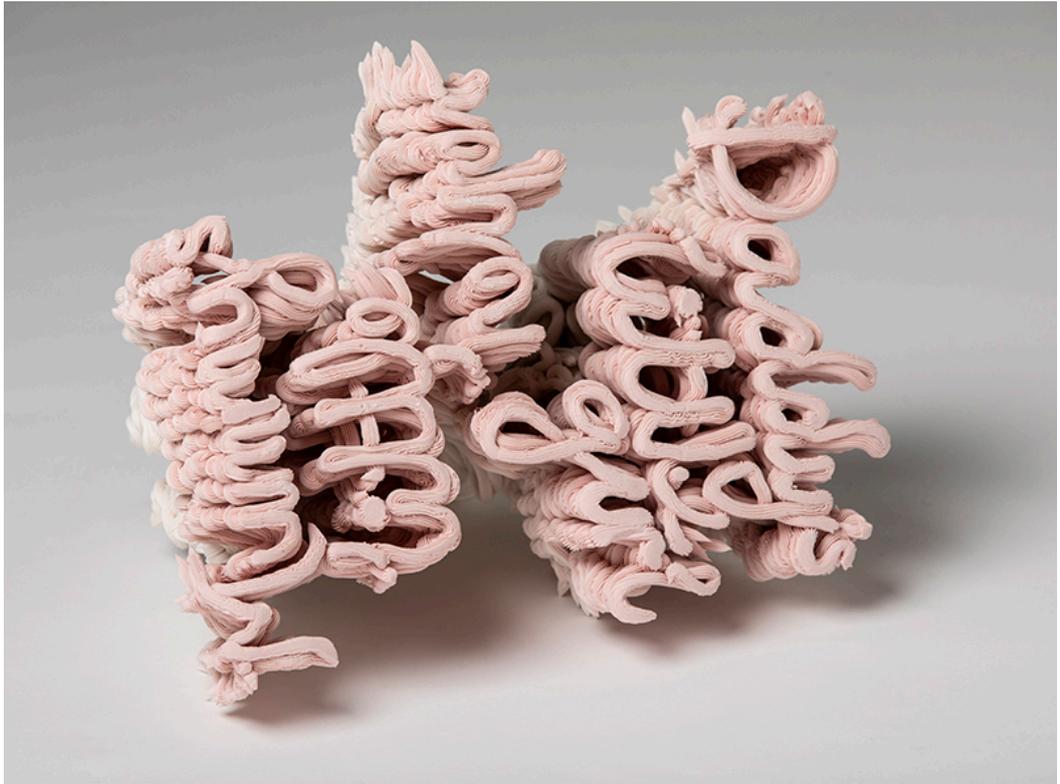


Figure 27. Ebony Russell, Piped Dream: Duel Canyon (Pink Ombre), Detail, 2019

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