

RESEARCH ESSAY

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**AN EXPLORATION OF FEMALE PHYSICALITY AND PSYCHE
AND HOW THESE INFORM ART-MAKING**

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" In the day we are social creatures, but at night we descend to the dream world where nature reigns, where there is no law but sex, cruelty and metamorphosis. Day itself is invaded by daemonic night. Moment by moment, night flickers in the imagination, in eroticism, subverting our strivings for virtue and order, giving an uncanny aura to objects and persons, revealed to us through the eyes of the artist. "

INTRODUCTION¹

This thesis proposes that female physicality informs the psyche and thus in turn, art-making. My argument will be shown to be apposite and informative to the discussion of the work of Paula Rego, Jenny Saville and Cindy Sherman. Furthermore such an understanding is helpful to a reading of my practice. In examining issues of identity, which contribute to the formulation of a distinctly female psyche, I will base my critique on the philosophical positions of Sartre, de Beauvoir and Paglia.

The most obvious starting point is an analysis of the female body and its functions. These must be contrasted with the form and function of the male in order to justify an argument for the role of the psyche. The concerns of women are therefore different to those of men and thus their art must be viewed accordingly. With the maternal body being the site of the abject, I will look at how, in certain women's work, the over-proximity of the abject is experienced and expressed. I will also argue that art functions as an apotropaion. If male structure is a device used to create distance from the abject, I will be looking at the manner in which women utilize this structure in order to explore the very condition it seeks to ward off. It must be noted that the aim of this thesis is not to argue that female artists should be looked at only within these parameters, but rather that this is a useful and interesting framework for the exploration of various tensions and subjects in the work of certain women artists.

¹Paglia p.4

CHAPTER 1.

A woman's puerperal destiny means that her body is an instrument and vessel for the perpetuation of the species. Women's reproductive organs are hidden. The womb and the vagina are internal and unseen. Complacent and passive, women's bodies are not shaped for pursuit but for reception. Between puberty and menopause, the body is subject to regular hormonal periodic cycles. This cyclic body pattern is a reminder of the constant influence of the abject female body on the psyche. It is possible that because man is not subject to this kind of intense hormonal flux of menarche, his mind has a greater degree of autonomy from the influence of his body.

It may be that women have a different experience of the kind of discrete dualism that plays such a role in the masculine psyche. Women, because of their biological destiny, are closer to their corporeality and to the abjectness of the maternal body. If men's perceptions are more projected, linear and external and that the female paradigm is solipsistic and cyclic, then it is possible that women psyches inhabit a liminal zone, whose boundaries are more diffuse and shifting than those of the male.

In *Sexual Personae* Paglia's hypothesis on the cause of Western civilization starts with gender disparity as she distills the origin of culture to the physical make up of men and women. In the early beginnings of mankind the unpredictability of the dangerous elemental forces of Nature forced the imperative that man should protect himself, erect a barrier between him and capricious Mother Earth and against women, who were symbolically linked to the earth. It is possible that earliest man did not make the connection between sex and birth, thus women were considered as manifestations of nature because of their propensity to seemingly magically produce offspring. This is what Paglia terms "belly-magic". When man took the first steps towards erecting his defenses, the locus shifted from "belly-magic" to "head-magic" or Apollonianism, the beginnings of the rise of Western culture. If woman was seen as the embodiment of Nature, possibly as a result of her enigmatic and cyclic fecundity, she may have become symbolic of all the inhuman and erratic destructiveness as well as

of the overwhelming mysteriousness of inexplicable forces.²

If Western culture, with its philosophy, mathematics, government, art and architecture and all its other male structures, was a result of this shifting of loci, then it may be that patriarchal systems are apotropaic: they are warding off the object, which may be sourced in the maternal body and thus the psyche.

The detachment created by these structures has given rise to philosophical deliberation. In imagination the mind can be free to consider the logical consequence of this trajectory of mental discipline unfettered by the constraints of matter. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, De Beauvoir describes Sartre's concept of the "lack of being in order that there might be being."³ She refers to his assertion of the desire to be something that we can never attain - ie.- to be perfect. To exist in a state of perfection would be to negate the process of striving for perfection. It is this process of striving which forms existence or being. The impossibility of attainment of perfection is the despair of existentialism or what is termed the Sartrean Failure.

The Apollonian aim - to win the wrestle with nature by forsaking it - is Sartre's unattainable goal: the desire to be God or the attainment of a state of perfection. But this could only happen if we were not acted upon by Nature-ie- if we could be freed of the drag of matter and thus abjection. De Beauvoir states of man: "It is not granted him to exist without tending towards this being which he will never be. But it is possible for him to want this tension even with the failure which it involves."⁴ She suggests that the failure should be acknowledged and assumed; this she terms the "Existentialist Conversion."

² Paglia 10

³ De Beauvoir 11

⁴ De Beauvoir p11

Descartes' statement "I think, therefore I am " proposes that the state of existence, or being, is reliant on sentient awareness of this state. The unchosen, blind autonomy of the destiny of the female body can be seen as the lack of being. It has no consciousness, it is not self-aware. The reason for her probable "greater realism and wisdom"⁵ is because woman is better equipped for what I perceive as existentialist conversion; that is, to acknowledge and integrate her Sartrean Failure.

Cixous writes: " ...it is woman who benefits from and opens up within this bisexuality beside itself, which does not annihilate differences but cheers them on, pursues them, adds more: in a certain way, woman is bisexual - man having been trained to aim for glorious phallic monosexuality." ⁶ I believe that this is a result of women's more intense experience of her corporeality.

"Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other - which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being." ⁷

In the process of individuation the child separates itself from the mother. A boy realizes his difference to the mother, whereas a girl recognizes her latent potential - that she will become physically identical with the mother. Nevertheless, resistance to this recognition must occur in order for individuation to take place. It is in this space of loss that imagination and Sartre's "striving-for" are formed, alongside the knowledge that our bodies will seek the maternal imperative - whether we bear children or not.

This dual experience is a uniquely female condition and is, I believe, the source of de Beauvoir's concept of Existential Conversion, Cixous' idea of woman's bisexuality and Paglia's solipsistic

⁵Paglia p10-11

⁶ Sellers 41

⁷ Phelan 13

pregnant woman. These theories all refer to a female dualism where consciousness is invaded heavily by the abject, where the pull of the Dionysian is far stronger and more closely and fully experienced than it is by men. Women struggle harder for identity and gain certain insights and strengths as by-products of this experience.

"It is precisely in advanced western society, which attempts to improve or surpass nature and which holds up individualism and self-realization as a model, that the stark facts of woman's condition emerge with painful clarity. The more woman aims for personal identity and autonomy, the more she develops her imagination, the fiercer will be her struggle with nature - that is, with the intractable physical laws of her own body"⁸

The rise of feminism has opened up the patriarchal arena to women. At this time more than any other, women are pursuing active careers in an Apollonian environment. Many women artists have accessed powerful archetypal body-memories. by using their experience to recognizing and incorporate the dual aspects of their being. Motivated by education (and an ensuing aggression) the territory between mind and body is excavated to uncover deep and ancient psychic landscapes. For the first time in history the work of women artists has been accorded an equal status to that of art produced by men. This allows a multiplicity of viewpoints and insights into the female psychic landscape. We are presented with a visual representation of the way women live, feel, dream and fear.

CHAPTER 2.

INFLUENCES:

⁸ Paglia 10

In visual terms Jenny Saville, Paula Rego and Cindy Sherman do not initially appear to have much in common. Saville's painterliness is in contrast to Rego's hard-edged narratives, which in turn, differ from Sherman's constructed photographs. Yet, all three women have been trained within a Western aesthetic paradigm and their content is figurative and largely autobiographical. Each deals with aspects of muliebrity as a difficult and sometimes overwhelming state. Each artist is working from a position of solipsism and a resultant anxiety and fragility. By translating this self-examination into art, they are working apotropaically; using art as a format to fix and contain their representations of the abject.

JENNY SAVILLE:

Saville introduces the paradox of the all-consuming Great Mother and the symbolic inaccessibility which provides her autonomy. This inaccessibility is ritualized in the postures of her women and the "veiling" techniques that Saville employs. The spectator can only view the painted image, whilst the physical subject of the painting remains inaccessible. In *Propped* this situation is further emphasised by the text, which makes the picture plane more evident. The text also acts as a visual barrier which is placed between the viewer and the body. The subject sits with her arms crossed on her lap and her legs together: there is no access to the womb. In *Branded* words scored into the paint of the flesh act as a visual and conceptual veil: the pubic area has been cropped from view. The veils are more literal in *Strategy*, knickers and bras. In *Plan* the breasts are shielded, clasped to the model in a strange self-contained embrace. The pubic area is almost the closest thing to the viewer, but in spite of its proximity, it is not open to us. The curl of pubic hair hides the pink inner whorls, which in turn bar the way to the womb. The arms in *Prop* pull the breasts in towards the subject, who is looking away. Should this appear to offer a chance to scan the body without the censure of the sentient gaze, a great, out-thrust knee bars access.

The incorporation and juxtaposition of the Apollonian element, the thankful escape from cloying corporeality, is made manifest in the heads of Saville's subjects. Atop gargantuan female bodies, that both serve and belie us, sits the tool of our nous, our means to identity, our will-to-power; it is the sentient mind. With the enmeshment of our intrinsic biology with our consciousness comes muliebrity.

It determines the way we think, conceptualize and dream. It forms and informs the way we function, interact and respond.

The heads in *Propped*, *Plan*, *Branded* and *Strategy* are tiny, perched on top of bodies viewed from a low angle. The sentience with which they are endowed with causes a shift in the experience of viewing. It extends an unease between the viewer's desire to scrutinize the body as an object and the discomfiture caused by the gaze of this "being". The heads mark the difference between the viewing of a painting of a large body and contemplation of a state of being. By observing, one is in turn observed, reflecting the gaze back at the viewer and introducing the possibility of self-assessment on the part of the viewer.

When Saville originally exhibited *Propped* at her Degree Show, this piece was hung opposite a large mirror. In the process of reading the inverted text of Irigaray's which is scored into the picture plane, the viewer placed themselves between the painting and the mirror, incorporating themselves into the image as both image and observer. For Lacan, "the mirror image represents the moment when the subject is located in an order outside itself to which it will henceforth refer." And "...within the Lacanian model, our subjectivity takes place in relation to the gaze of the (m)other. And that gaze (the mirror) is always located within a cultural space."⁹ This relation of object to subject is a cipher to the acknowledgment and integration of our dualism, for it suggests the origin of the anxiety of individuation and the beginnings of the process of existential conversion.

The text in *Branded* reads: "If we continue to speak in this sameness, speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other again." Within the traditionally patriarchal discipline of painting, it seems ironic that this quote appears written onto the picture plane. However, the content of her images delves into the realm of female experience, as does the text from which the quote is taken. Concentrating on objectification, the consequences of the male gaze and the subsequent

⁹ Rose 31

internalization of this, Saville's work appears as an ideological web of gaze and counter-gaze, abjection and cultural space, recognition and the sublimation of identity. In the format of an order outside itself, female experience is narrated through the means of a masculine construct which is essentially apotropaic.

In contrast to her other work, the photographic images in *Close Contact*, - made in collaboration with Glenn Luchford - are of the body only. The head is absent. She manipulates her own body, squeezing and pulling the flesh to the point where it becomes so distorted and mangled as to be monstrous. If the tension in her work resides primarily in the boundaries that shift between gross matter and incisive gaze, these images have condensed the tension into violent physical struggle. In one image it appears that she is about to tear her own breast, an ancient gesture of overwhelming emotional panic. These images are suggestive of the anxiety produced by the relentless impact of the maternal body, its chronic influence on imagination and autonomy. The formats are claustrophobically loaded, the torsos thrusting hard against the glass as if for release or relief. The contortions of parts of the flesh read as intestinal and with the near rending of the full breast, these images suggest the inside coming out. There is a sense of both the fragility and resilience of flesh and of the delicacy of borders, of how close the contained is to formlessness and of how the discrete identity of a woman can be overwhelmed or even sublimated by the anonymity of matter. Even the title implies the nature of the tension implicit in these boundaries.

Saville, as a woman and through her role as an artist, becomes an articulate conduit for her exploration of muliebrity. Through these Apollonian skills, she provides visual access for the viewer of this exploration. For me, Saville's work embodies the difficult and female experience of the abject body. The naked biology of Saville's women is relentless. We know that it is inescapable. Her images are the result of her exploration of the essential biological and sexual nature of women. There is no projection or movement. The bodies are centered, static and complacent. Fatty, fluid and heavy, they exist for fecundity. They are the antithesis of male drive and the will to power.

These qualities are also made manifest through their nakedness. Eliade stated that: "All ritual nakedness implies an a-temporal paradigm, a paradisiac image."¹⁰ I would suggest that the a-temporal paradigm is Paglia's chthonian or Dionysian state. Once there is form, it is acted upon by time. The chthonian world has no time - it has no form. An individual body is form. The symbolic Mother's body belongs, however, to the a-temporal. The concept of Paradise is the place of pre-existence, the unindividuated time in the womb that is dimly remembered. Our origin is a-temporal, formless, in a place where there is no struggle for identity, autonomy, no wrestle with nature. I believe that this is the state that Man refers to as Nirvana, or more crudely, Heaven; a state of unindividuation, a oneness with everything, a chthonic oblivion romanticized or beautified by the Apollonian as a state of peacefulness and serenity.

Saville is able to convey the idea of the Temenos, or sacred space. "Woman's body is a secret, sacred space . . . In the marked off space of woman's body, nature operates at its darkest and most mechanical. Every woman is a priestess guarding the temenos of daemonic mysteries." Saville's women are impenetrable and indomitable. Pulling back into themselves, they are uroboroi, a visual analogy for the cyclic aspect of women's perceptions.

Through both process and product Saville represents, almost diagrammatically, the conflict between the burden of the maternal body and the sentience of the female mind, and the influence of one upon the other. Through the devices she uses, the corporeality of her women is given extra power and weight, analogizing the female experience of the over-proximity of the abject.

PAULA REGO:

" Art for her has exorcized fear: "In my art I try to give fear a face ", she has said. Primal states, or what she characteristically calls "raw" states, make us all the slaves of fear. The more so for her, child as she was of a fearful time and place - her terror of flies and

¹⁰ Eliade 158

agoraphobia existing in a world made uneasy by war." ¹¹

Rego's source material is largely derived from her memories of childhood, which for all of us is a murky area of secret fears and the terrors of nature. "Children are monsters of unbridled egotism and will, for they spring directly from nature, hostile intimations of immorality."¹² As a Portuguese child, she was exposed to that country's myths and stories, which are vastly more frightening and violent than our tame and diluted English versions. However she belonged to a culture and a family that expected very good behavior from children. The conflict of these influences and its resultant suppression must surely have concentrated her experience of the uncivilized and savage part of Nature and human nature.

This blatant juxtaposition of nature and culture, which continued into her adulthood, is clear in her work and in the psychological process of creating it. For her, the act of making these often abject images is apotropaic. "It is as though, without the mediating act of drawing, emotion returns to its earlier and as yet unformed, uncharted, disembodied and terrifying fluidity."¹³

Her early work, which is brutal and explosive, deals with violence, terror and nightmarish metamorphosis. *When We Had A House In the Country* is an incredible manifestation of her fear and her agoraphobia. Darkness and terrifying creatures crowd in on the infant in the pram. Two other early works - *Gluttony* and *Schmit's Restaurant* or *The Eating* deal with a sightless mindless ingestion in which form suffers annihilation through mastication. The mouth in *Gluttony* is merely a disconnected hole, red-rimmed and vaginal. In *Schmit's Restaurant*, surrounded by lurid colors and amorphous monsters, the gaping, heavily toothed mouth is the only feature in the head. These are

¹¹ McEwen 27

¹²Paglia 4

¹³Rosengarten 53

images of dissolution, culture giving way to gross, corrosive nature. Growing up in a bourgeois family, but in a country where she had been exposed to scenes of terrible poverty, her images of dissolution may well have arisen from an emotional position of terror at the proximity of the external reality of abjectness and a corresponding sense of violence and desperation in her own self, layered beneath a fragile but strict imposition of "good behavior".

Perhaps in order to circumvent her own internalized structures of cultural space and the impropriety of direct reference, Rego substitutes animals, vegetables and insects for human characters. The absurdity of viewing these personae in such a space stresses the detachment from the object that the construct of cultural space provides and, against this, the reality of the experience of inner surrealism, fear and savagery. Metamorphosis and brutality and the insidious machinations of family romance and domination are rank in the *Red Monkey* series which she began in 1981. In *Wife Cuts Off Red Monkey's Tail*, painted after *Red Monkey Beats his Wife*, the Red Monkey vomits in agony after an expressionless wife cleanly snips his tail off with a huge pair of domestic scissors. The white bear looks away anxiously, ignoring this familial scene of castration and revenge. The saga continues: *Bear, Bear's Wife and Son Play with Red Monkey*. 1981, shows the Red Monkey as diminished, disempowered and flaccid. The consequences of the object are clear. The apotropaion of cultural structure wards off the actualisation of scenes such as these and the apotropaion of art facilitates the detached visual representation of the psychic equivalent of the physicality of these images.

After the Red Monkey Series, but still working with non-human disguises, Rego painted *Monkey Hypnotising a Chicken*. Fantastic and surreal, this image is straight from the subconscious. The monkey is not the Red Monkey of before, but a demonic amalgam of human, simian, bovine and all-powerful devil. This creature holds the helpless chicken's head, having trapped him into the corner of the painting, and is about to do the same to him as he has already done to the unfortunate chickens in the background, who look more dead than hypnotised. Into this image could be read the grip of the object, which is both fascinating and revolting, and a warning of the point of shifting separation between abjection and consciousness.

Rego has great insight into the inherently violent nature of women. Her own spurts of violence when she was young make her aware of this in herself. The influence of her tutor, Dona Violeta, and the tutor's violence towards the young Paula cannot be underestimated. In both these cases of feminine violence, Rego realizes its context in the social. She was surprised at her own savage actions: she was normally a well-behaved little girl. And when her tutor used to hit her, she never told her mother. Violence and domination are inherent in her work. Even when her women are just practicing some form of petty spitefulness, it is an indication of greater cruelty, a raw uprising of the Dionysian in women.

This violence and destructiveness manifests itself in the interest she displayed in the *Vivian Girls*¹⁴ and in the resultant images she created around these characters. Dominated by cruel soldiers, the Vivian girls would escape to other lands or planets and wreak havoc of their own. For Rego this must have been an ideal analogy for her own secret life. These compositions are packed with strange and metamorphic beings. Superficially the images are frivolous and mischievous, but they are shot through by an undercurrent of sexuality, cruelty and abandon and a blind disregard by the Vivian girls of the consequences of their actions.

The emphasis changes somewhat in the *Girl and Dog Series*. Although Rego is still dealing with the hormonal, violent and mostly untempered nature of adolescent girls, their attention is fixed on an individual symbol of a man and becomes more tempered by a sense of nurturing (whether this is role-playing or sincere is ambiguous). The girls' total domination of their pet dog is, for me, a representation of nature's eternal stranglehold on us. We cannot escape this mistress any more than the dog can escape the machinations of the girls. She can support and feed us (*Untitled. Girl and Dog series*), commit violent acts upon us (*The Little Murderess*) or contrive to keep us in suspense of our imminent fate (*Girl Shaving Dog*)

¹⁴ The Vivian Girls are characters from a novel called *The Story of the Vivian Girls in What is Called the Realms of the Unreal or the Glandelinian War Storm or the Gaudico-Abbennian Wars as Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, which was written and illustrated by a hospital janitor named Darger, an "Outsider" artist.

In Rego's *Dog-Woman series*, her characters are more self-contained than the anarchic adolescent *Vivian Girls* and *Girls with Dog*, their inner landscape is written on their bodies and faces in gesture and expression and isolated in desolate and ambiguous environments. Their bodies and psyches bear the brunt of the fear of the abject maternal body. Although these raw images all refer to aspects of corporeality (and have little to do with mind) they also involve a burgeoning knowledge of family romance, intimate relationships and their consequences. Somewhere between the *Girls and Dog* and the *Dog Women*, a mirror has been held up and account taken of the transition from adolescence to womanhood.

Stripping these characters of their intelligence or ego-awareness allows pathos to enter. Part of woman is the archetypal all-consuming mother, the annihilating Dionysian force which men spend a lifetime trying to escape. "In sex, man is driven back into the very abyss which he flees. He makes a voyage to non-being and back."¹⁵ But part of woman is the individual experience of the sickening humiliation of a man reacting in fear to this, by beating, by dominating or contempt, by running; and this humiliation is borne in the face of knowing that their physicality is a permanent condition. This is woman reduced to her most humiliating dimension. In this agonizing series, Rego explores what it feels like to be a woman living in a world where men dominate women because they fear them.

CINDY SHERMAN:

All three of these artists have accessed the abject in their exploration of the female body and psyche, but Sherman is the most visually explicit in her use of grotesquerie and decay. Sherman uses masks within masks within masks. The potency of erotica is often heightened by the placing of barriers between the object and the viewer and Sherman also uses barriers to heighten the arcaneness of the abject. The abject can never be revealed in art because art itself is a barrier or a symbolic

¹⁵Paglia 20

representation of something, never the thing itself. However, abjectness can be referred to in a way which may cause the viewer to access her own dark psychic spaces which contain Sartre's nothingness, or Paglia's Dionysian. There exists in her work an interface between being and nothingness, Apollonian and Dionysian. She grasps the moment of intrusion of one by the other.

Transformation and flux belong to the Chthonian, and these we see in Sherman's representations of putrescence, of mangled and illogical puppet/real flesh bodies with exaggerated and repulsive sexual body parts, of strange prostheses altering the shapes of bodies, metamorphosing observed form into psychic nightmare. Sherman is examining the horror we see inherent in the female body, represented by these scenes of the grinding and unstoppable process of nature. This is manifested in the references to decay, dissolution, metamorphosis, in the fake body fluids such as menstrual blood, vomit, milk, shit and other viscera.

Sherman works games and conundrums by playing off the notions of Apollonian and Dionysian against each other. The format is Apollonian, and by this I mean the greater format of art as a means to control and contain. Within this, she looks at beauty or form as a self contained ideal. Beauty and form are Apollonian devices ¹⁶ which she plunders and profanes and plays off against deformity (*Fashion Series: Untitled #132*) or mutation (*Disasters, Fairy Tales Series: Untitled#140*) and lack of self-containment as madness (*Fashion Series: Untitled #138*) or as literal uncontainedness (*Disasters, Fairy Tales Series: Untitled #175 and Untitled#190*).

Untitled#132, creates the shocking feeling that a nightmare has intruded upon the conscious world. In her notebooks from the previous year, Sherman made notes on grossness such as vomit, snot, drooling, bleeding and on conditions such as dying and contortion, and also on the use of images emerging from "something water-like".¹⁷ All of these, I believe, relate to the horror of the female

¹⁶Paglia 57

¹⁷Cruz and Smith 124

body, which is the context she uses them in. The deformation of the face of the woman in *Untitled#132* and the ambiguous pleading/preying/cringing expression of this face as the figure emerges from an undefined murky green background is anchored in the conscious world by the lurid dress and the contemporary accessories - cigarette and canned drink. Horror is being brought to light.

In *Untitled # 140*, the metamorphosis of woman into pig is treacherous and uncanny, a surreal journey into the permutations and monstrous imaginings that the deep subconscious throws up. The over-fleshed and fluid-spattered pig face with its human eyes and acidly-lit curly blonde hair exists in a dark unknown space, feeding itself with something unseen. Again, she has evoked the moment where the conscious mind reels back from sudden contact with or exposure to the abject.

Uncontainedness, the inside turned out, barriers dissolved: these are elements of the Dionysian where visceral fluidity threatens the control and structure of discrete Western philosophy. *Untitled#190* is abject in these terms. What initially appears as a heaving mass of maggoty viscera, reveals itself as an emerging nightmarish face, teeth bared and tongue lolling, eyes vicious, seemingly composed of the viscous elements it is surrounded by.

It is an image of decay and near formlessness, which prods our fear of annihilation, or existence by referring, in such a livid visual display, to flux and viscera, to the dissolution of barriers. Foster, in *The Return of the Real*, states that the abject is "a fantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it - too much so in fact, and this over-proximity produces panic in the subject. In this way the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, the fragility of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body (again the privileged realm of the abject) and the paternal law." ¹⁸ I understand Foster's "paternal law" to have correspondences with Paglia's Apollonian. These barriers are necessary in order to retain a hold on discreteness, identity and imagination.

¹⁸ Foster 153

Untitled#175 deals with psychic uncontainedness or madness, rather than visceral uncontainedness. It is a situation where mental barriers are dissolved, where awareness of self and other breaks down. Sherman uses images of decay and viscera again, but in a less fantastic manner. This time, however, the face is not some atrocious half-formed creature snarling at us, but a screaming, agonized blonde reflected and distorted in a pair of sunglasses which have been discarded behind a pool of vomit. These eyes take the place of our own as the viewer of *Untitled#190*. Sherman, then, places the viewer in an ambiguous situation: are we viewing her, staring into the well of her own horror, or are we at the site of horror, looking back up at her, or is she seeing her reflected self, watching herself teetering in the balance?

The depiction of madness is pushed further in *Untitled#138*, where the character is not faced by her vision of madness, but has descended into it. Odd elements of humour or the absurd, like the exaggerated, clashing tie, the strange hair and the foolish smirk are unsettling when seen alongside the fingertips which are smeared with a red substance. The environment suggests a sanatorium or questioning room of some kind, with its grey floorboards, stark light and uncomfortable iron-legged chair. This suggests a sinister interpretation of the fluid on the fingers. For me, the bloodied fingers are an evocation of Maenadic abandon, a descent into cruelty or barbarism or viscera. Whether this is intended to refer to another's blood or to her own (possibly menstrual) blood, the odd combination of props and expression are enough to infer a state of insanity. The woman appears to have no awareness of ego, no sense of her own boundaries.

The abject and the Dionysian are formless. These states of formlessness and meaninglessness cannot be experienced in a state of consciousness. Foster says of the maternal body: "This body is the primary site of the abject as well, a category of (non)being defined by Julia Kristeva as neither subject nor object, but before one is the former (before full separation from the mother) or after one is the latter (as a corpse given over to objecthood)."¹⁹ As I have previously stated, potency is heightened by barriers and each barrier that Sherman slots into place intensifies the sense of the inferred horror.

¹⁹Foster 149

Each veiling of overlying structure is apotropaic.

CHAPTER 3

OWN WORK:

"Art makes things. There are, I said, no objects in nature, only the gruelling erosion of natural force, flecking, dilapidating, grinding down, reducing all matter to fluid, the thick primal soup from which new forms bob, gasping for life. Dionysus was identified with liquids - blood, sap, milk, wine. The Dionysian is nature's chthonian fluidity. Apollo, on the other hand gives form and shape, marking off one being from another. All artifacts are Apollonian. Melting and union are Dionysian; separation and individuation, Apollonian. ... Every artist who is compelled toward art, who needs to make words or pictures as others need to breathe, is using the Apollonian to defeat chthonian nature."

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Art-making is my own method of making a break from my own biological imperative, to attempt to safeguard myself from dissolution into stasis but at the same time to be able to investigate and turn it to my advantage.

Water is an analogy for the chthonian aspect of muliebrity. Water is a medium for life. It is both a destructive force and a symbolic purifier.. It is substance without definition. It is a great equalizer. Water will return to its former equilibrium at the slightest opportunity. What water makes it also unmakes. As a destructive force and as an equalizer, it is Dionysian flux and transformative power, the flattener and negator of the individual, the projected and the concrete. "...the Waters ... dissolve

or abolish the forms of things.”²¹

The ritual of immersion in water in baptism and other rites of purification is a re-enactment of the birth experience. The experience of being in water is the closest we can get to a return to the womb. Like orgasm and death it is a surrender. A woman's experience of this is not, like a man's, to be drawn inexorably back to Symbolic Woman as something other, but to be drawn back into her own procreative fate.

We spend our first 9 months in amniotic fluid and are born, as Saint Augustine stated, "between faeces and urine". When we die we become effluvia and then nourishing matter. Our quest for life and knowledge is a necessary move away from this matter. But there is always a pull back to that oblivion, the desire to be unindividuated, to dissolve the ego.

The desire to dissipate is a direct antithesis of the will-to-power. The individualism inherent in Western culture is one born from struggle and competitiveness. The desire for the sublimation of the ego is a relinquishing of power and identity. Orgasm is surrender, a breakdown is surrender, trance is surrender, dreams are surrender. These are small deaths, *petit mals*, ways through to the dark unconscious of the chthonian, sometimes voluntary, sometimes not. These are dark visions into the murky world of Dionysus. In women, pre-menstruation or menstruation is also a surrender, a time when the biological imperative of the body overwhelms the Apollonian and Dionysian Hysteria sets in. Pregnancy is the complete takeover. The biological imperative is what women suppress in order to become Apollonian beings.

Immersion in water entails a dulling, transforming or suspension of the senses, a slow and blindly tactile experience. One's eyes are closed - or if open, sight is diminished, smell is impossible, taste usually insignificant, hearing distorted and muffled. Touch, however, is not so much diminished as transformed. It is similar to Nigro Sansonese's example of anyone whose foot has fallen "asleep":

²¹ Eliade 152

"...perhaps the falling asleep of the peripheral nervous system is actually removal of a neurological mask that veils a deeper connectedness between self and the world."²² Weightlessness and suspension give the body over to the domination of the element, so that physical control over the environment is mostly relinquished. With the sublimation of the awareness of external stimuli, the body feels, osmotically, as blind and amorphous as the water itself.

Due to the medium's greater density, motion in water is slowed, creating a removal from the normal speed of experience. With the slowing of the body's movement, its reaction to the environment naturally affects the mind through sensory input and after a while causes an altered state of consciousness. In another sense, the enveloping introversion that immersion submits the body to is analogous to the female orgasm - internalized, diffused and unprojected. In this state there is a sense of surrender, the dissolution of the ego, a symbolic death.

My work is formed by the disparate conditions of my being both Apollonian and Dionysian. I am subject to the laws of biology in that my physical being has one biological imperative: to reproduce. Being female this entails a cyclic and constant subjection to hormonal flux and that my body may be given over to long periods of pregnancy, parturition and recovery. Because of this, I am drawn closer to being part of the chaos, violence and flux of Nature. I have no choice in this gender, "which we have not chosen but which nature has imposed upon us."²³ My physical being informs my consciousness and my subconsciousness.

There is a rhythm of acquiescence to and struggle against this "chthonian miasma" in the images I produce - but most importantly, I have created them - ie. - the process itself is Apollonian. If the content is about mental dissolution and a state of melting flux, about osmosing back into primal matter and the swamping and erosion of individuation, then the form is pure Apollonian - structure and discreteness. The urge to make art stems from a desire to individuate, to create something that

²² Sansonese 71

²³ Paglia 3

stands apart from the body - "dispelling anxiety by formalizing and freezing emotion." ²⁴

WORKS:

PERFORMANCE PIECE:

I created life-size paintings of women on transparent vinyl. These were symbolic representations of aspects of myself as a biological being, static and mired, inhabiting the realm of water which is an analogy for the Dionysian condition - transformative, destructive, unstoppable. I drew from a ritual, which Paglia describes in *Sexual Personae*: "In ancient Mexico, a woman representing the goddess was flayed and her skin put on by a male priest." ²⁵ The priest in his symbolic transsexualism could draw on the wisdom of both sexes, could tap into female intuition. I took this as an analogy of the bisexual nature of women.

I covered the bottom of a large swimming pool in black cloth. I chose to use a man-made pool rather than a natural space for reasons that were mainly pragmatic. The clarity of the water was important as the images needed to be visible. I also needed a clean space so that I didn't kick up huge quantities of sediment which would have obscured the works and made the process of finding them nearly impossible. The black cloth worked as a formal element, dark but delineated against the blue mosaic of the pool. At night, which is when the piece was performed, the blackness of the cloth confused perception of distance, so instead of encountering a sanitized pool, the viewer was confronted with the visual illusion of infinite depth.

²⁴ Paglia 30

²⁵ Paglia 44

The vinyl paintings were underneath the cloth. I immersed myself in the water and began the process of uncovering these images, bringing them to the surface and playing with them so that they became distorted and uncanny. The cloth was pulled to the sides and taken out of the water so the pool eventually became cleared of all but my body and the images. I spent as much time as possible completely submerged so that I was in the position of being totally involved in the symbolic space as opposed to the viewer who was wholly outside. I experienced the isolation very strongly. I could not hear nor see anything outside of the medium. I was weightless. Yet the viewers who were so geographically close to me could only experience the piece through visual information. It seemed an apt analogy for the female psyche that I was the other, and that I was in close physical contact with the medium that I had chosen to be representative of corporeality and the abject. The audience, analogized as male, could not empathize nor directly experience my experience, but maintained a detachment and accessed the piece through the gaze.

I was involving myself in a ritual of acknowledgment of my femaleness, finding the “bodies”, re-assuming them as mantles, then pushing them down again to the bottom of the pool, relinquishing them to their symbolic space. Once I had done this I could be free to leave the water. I intended this piece to incorporate and explore both sides of my duality. It involved my exploration of the desire to die, to relinquish the struggle, to become unindividuated. This is the seduction of the Dionysian. The act of exploring this desire is Apollonian. In making paintings or videos or engaging in a performance piece, I am entering into a process of creating discrete visual experiences, applying form to the random flux of nature, which is a direct result of my struggle against lack of being. In order to explore my desire to die, I have to employ the skills that are born of the desire not to die.

I am aesthetisizing and therefore anaesthetizing the remembrance of times when I have been close to the desire to surrender myself to non-existence. Art-making, (which fixes and gives form), becomes

an apotropaion for me.²⁶ (Paglia, p.49.) Hysteria (which is womb-madness)²⁷ is part of the pull into the Dionysian. Pre-menstruation for many women is a time of panic induced by this pull. The body's imperative kicks in most strongly and threatens to overwhelm mental control. Hysteria is the frenzied scream of the Apollonian woman losing her identity in the viscera of biology: "In the war for human identity, male tumescence is an instrument, female tumescence an obstruction. The fatty female body is a sponge. At peak menstrual and natal moments, it is locked passively in place, suffering wave after wave of Dionysian power."²⁸

PAINTINGS:

In my paintings, I have been working with the ideas of envelopment and dissolution in amorphous matter, this being a mental visual equivalent for me of the Dionysian and biology. In most of my paintings, I deal with the envelopment of the female form, whereas the idea of actual dissolution is implied or anticipated. The figures are in the process of becoming individuated, but will not become entirely discrete from their forming substance. I am exploring aspects of the female psyche as subliminal and often submerged, of women literally underwater, metaphorically suspended in that moment of pause between the inhalation and exhalation of breath, sinking or floating in translucent liquid.

²⁶ Paglia 49

²⁷ Paglia 45

²⁸ Paglia 91

With one exception, there are no eyes visible. Visual acumen I equate with projection and sentience, eyes with communication with another and therefore a means of realizing one's distinctness from others and from environment - ie. - identity. At the time of painting these images, I was concentrating on the solipsistic and self-contained aspect of women which I see as the step past hysteria, where struggle is relinquished and the mind gives over to the body, so my intent was that these forms be seen as non-communicating.

I involved myself in describing various degrees of psychic immersion, quiescent or non-quiescent states. Some of the figures are inert and yielding, sometimes foetal. Others are involved with some kind of internal struggle, which is made manifest physically. A very few deal with emergence or surfacing.

The actual process of painting these images had a parallel to the content. I became fascinated by the rather obvious notion that I was building form, albeit illusionistic, from a collection of amorphous paint. As I built up the figures in the water or matter, I would repeatedly and ritually destroy them by applying translucent paint over them while they were still wet in order that they gained a sense of homogeneity with the water. This process blurred the boundaries of the form, or of the self so that it became liquescent.

Another myth which I refer to often is the Nekya, or the descent into Hades. In Homer's *Odyssey*, it is structurally the center-piece or pivotal point of the epic. It takes the form of a symbolic death, a journey into the dark subterranean subconscious, an analogy of sorts for the Dionysian realm. It is an acknowledgment of a symbolic death in order to gain insight and wisdom, an attempt to better understand the self in terms of the limitations that biology places on us - the fact of death and our understanding of ourselves temporally and the overwhelming glimpse into the grinding process of nature that we cannot escape. This forces a process of contemplation, even action, a reaction against an inhuman obliterating force. There can be no life without death, no being without lack of being.

VIDEO INSTALLATIONS:

FILMING: DOUG MITCHELL

PERFORMERS: TANYA POOLE AND JUANITA FINESTONE

EDITING: DOUG MITCHELL AND JOCELYN WORTELEY

“The monsters of the abyss reappear in a number of traditions: the Heroes, the Initiates, go down into the depths of the abyss to confront marine monsters; this is a typical ordeal of initiation.”²⁹

The video installations are a loosely chronological or sequential series moving from the initial absence of awareness of self, through the origins of form and the struggle for identity to a discrete autonomy. Each piece deals with one of these states. With the exception of *Chrysalis*, they are non-narrative. With all four being filmed in water - the symbolic matter of the Dionysian - the implication is that biology is never escaped, even once the Apollonian mind becomes able to consider the possibility of becoming free of matter. Sartre's notion of the perfect being - that to which we strive in order to exist - is an impossible state. Women, whose psyches are informed by the cyclic nature of their bodies, seem more aware of the influence and inescapability of this matter. These videos are about the acknowledgment of this corporeality and its effect on identity and imagination.

All four videos were filmed through a window into a water-filled hydrostatic weighing tank. I used white cloth to disguise the walls and paraphernalia in the tank and heighten the movements of the figure in the water as the cloth was acted upon by the motion of the water. Juanita Finestone, a professional dancer, choreographer (and recent mother) performed in three of the four pieces. All four videos were projected onto the tall walls of a former jail, consisting mainly of interlinked courtyards, which are open to the sky.

²⁹ Eliade 158

I had intended to wet all the floors at the sites to heighten the effect of moistness and allow the images to extend beyond their format into reflections on the ground. This was in order to “encompass” the viewer. However that night it drizzled, so not only were the floors dampened, but there was also low, soft cloud cover, which picked up reflected light from the town. Each piece had a different soundtrack and scale of projection. The only light was from the images and from the low cloud.

In *Chrysalis*, my intention was to abstract the figure to the point where it could be read as elemental. This was to establish the idea of the association of women with Nature and of nature as an unindividuated force. The discreteness of the figure becomes diffused in the homogeneity of the image as a whole, and as such appears uncontained and formless. The head, as the seat of sentience and identity, is not seen in this image. I wanted to aestheticize the state in which the body is fully acted on by Nature and identity loses its autonomy. In this sense the work exists as an apotropaion.

I swathed the figure loosely, but completely in white cloth. As she moved, she stirred the backcloth so that her body became a barely distinguishable form from her environment. I filmed this piece under ultraviolet light to make it colder and more ethereal. It was lit from the front so that very little depth could be read between the figure and the background, as though the barriers between the water, the figure and the background had nearly dissolved.

In order to further abstract the figure and to parallel it to dehumanized forces, I turned the image horizontally during editing so that it was in a landscape format. I then projected it onto the wall of a large courtyard to the largest scale possible (five meters at its diagonal) to make it assume elemental proportions. The projector was on a high balcony and the top of the image rested just above the top of the wall. Because of the low cloud, the image could be read as a fluid extension of the sky. During the course of the evening, the drizzle formed darker damp trickles down from the top of the wall into the image. The soundtrack was the sound of wind and sea - again, to allude to a natural force.

With *Matrix*, I wanted the image to read as a womb within a womb within a womb. It is in the uterus

that we are given physical and distinct form. It is also the place of psychic unindividuation - where there is no sentient consciousness or struggle for identity. We are surrounded and protected by this watery medium until the shock of birth.

When I filmed this video, I used more cloth around both sides to give a sense of depth and envelopment. I lit it from behind and above the tank, creating the illusion of a tunnel-like space and used a range of red, orange and pink gels to make that space seem warm and visceral. Slow and suspended, the naked figure hangs in the water with the cloth moving and folding around her.

This was the only work presented in a small enclosed space. The video was projected against the back wall of a cell and could only be viewed by one person at a time through a viewing hole in the closed door. The image filled the viewer's range of vision. The soundtrack was a heartbeat, which pulsed at changing tempos and was occasionally overlaid by a second heartbeat. Inside the cell, I installed an amplifier so that the heartbeat was strong enough to underlay all the other soundtracks in the building. Geographically, this was the central image; by enclosing it, making it the warmest in terms of colour and amplifying its heartbeat, I wanted it to read as the uterus of the installation exhibition. The cell could be read as a womb, inside which was the womb metaphor of the video, framing a mother, whose status was in turn an outward indicator of her own womb.

Projected on the wall of the courtyard opposite Matrix was Caul. This is the most frenetic of the pieces and the only one in which I performed. I wanted it to represent the conflict of body and mind, where, for women, the horror of the abject periodically threatens to overwhelm reason and its "over-proximity produces panic in the subject."³⁰

As I am very comfortable in water, I was able to be completely immersed for most of the video. Because of this, the water could be read more as symbolic psychic space rather than physical water. I performed behind a sheet of cloth (which could be read as both a caul and a matrix) against which

³⁰ Foster 153

I thrust my body and face and struggled with as if I were trying to emerge. My movements were graceless and frantic. With my body impressed against the cloth, all details and edges disappear. Visually, the boundaries between my body and the matrix appear tenuous. It causes my face and head - signifiers of identity and individualism - to seem unformed and blinded.

This was backlit with cool green and blue gels over the lights so that the cloth became luminous and the figure nearly reduced to a silhouette. During the editing, we increased the speed and played it backwards. The increased speed made the figures movements appear unnatural and by reversing the video, the cloth didn't billow out from my touch but was sucked in as though it was suffocating me. Neither of these devices was immediately apparent but worked to make the image more subliminally unsettling and desperate. The soundtrack was a shrieking gale-force wind, which also added to the unease.

The video was projected so that the bottom of the frame touched the intersection between floor and wall. This placement increased the intensity of the reflection on the ground so that one could "enter" the video space. This, together with the life-size scale, allowed the viewer a more immediate and intimate relationship to the projected body, and thereby enabled a more emotional response.

Hands is a calmer and less emotionally engaging work. This image is the most removed from corporeality or the object. It shows only the hands, which I see as the tools of creativity and therefore, extensions of the Apollonian mind. In making this video, I had no emotional attachment to the image, but focused only on the visual aesthetic.

During the filming, I noticed that when Juanita's hand first entered the water, it appeared to be holding light or fire. As the filming progressed, I also realized that the disturbance of the surface of the water was allowing the warm lighting I was using to penetrate the reflective meniscus. Coupled with the close-up disruption of the cloth, it appeared that the movements of the hands were creating fire and form. This brought to my mind the Promethean myth, which ties in well with the notion of Apollonian illumination.

Hands was filmed at an upward angle so that the reflective meniscus of the water occupies half of the format. The image is mirrored throughout. I turned the image so that the far edge of the meniscus bisects the format vertically. Instead of reading from up to down, the mirroring is read from left to right. Once I realized that this decontextualized the water (as water can only form a horizontal meniscus), it opened up the possibility of interpreting the image as water, light and cloth creating fire and form.

This video had its own courtyard, which was proportioned more elegantly than the others. The wall on which it was screened had approximately comparable dimensions to the format of the video, which I had cropped to a square during editing. I projected the image formally onto the centre of the wall. The soundtrack is literal - water splashing, - which, although it refers to the water, provided neither allusion nor emotional resonance. This piece is the most self-reflective in its reference to art-making and the Apollonian.

CONCLUSION:

De Beauvoir, writing about the Existentialist Conversion, states of humankind: "It is possible to want this tension even with the failure it involves."³¹ This is the tension set up between nothingness and the desire to be perfect - or, as I suggested in Chapter 1., to be in a state where one is not acted upon by nature. This tension, viewed from the position I am exploring in this thesis, is the tension that is set up between the over-proximity of the abject and the desire to be free of this. One may never be free of the body which will always trap and hamper the mind, but one may seek ways to ward off the abject. If this is applied to art-making, it results in a process that is essentially apotropaic.

³¹ De Beauvoir 11

We create, through art, something which exists outside the body. Often in an attempt to evade the temporal, work is created that will endure past the time of the creator's flesh. By fixing and creating stasis, one creates a representation of or a symbol for, the abject and one becomes subject to the illusion that "to name is to know". The abject becomes available for inspection, dissection and exploration. Even though it is not really the abject but merely a sign for it, the psyche is pacified and consoled by this.

The experience of muliebrity is not new and neither is the art-making impulse. However a relatively recent development is the emergence of many of women artists who are exploring the female experience. If the maternal body is "the privileged site of the abject" as Foster states, then the condition of being a woman - ie. - of being in over-proximity to the abject, must profoundly affect one's experience. In viewing the work of women artists, I have been looking at their art-making as a solipsistic relating of this experience, as well as an apotropaic device. The three artists I have chosen all relate their work directly to female experience. All deal with the polarities of sentience and abjection, Apollonian and Dionysian, being and nothingness.

I believe Jenny Saville to be the most self-conscious and literal of the three artists I have been looking at. In terms of being and nothingness, her work represents a fundamental polarity: the maternal body and acute awareness. This polarity is present in both the image and the process. Her work is neither relieving nor redemptive. Rego's work is less ideological, more enigmatic and often absurd. Violence, inferred violence and fear seems to be the legacy of her experience of the abject. Monsters and animals are often ciphers that characterize her fear and her understanding, and by locating her scenes within a cultural space, one senses the tension of opposites inherent in her apprehension. Uneasy and vertiginous, Sherman's work focuses on the tenuous boundary between consciousness and abjection, and the transgression of these borders. The medium of photography adds an edge to both the convincing "reality" and the absurd "staginess" of her images; they become both compelling and repellent in much the same way as does the comprehension of abjection.

I approached my own work with the sense of tension between these states and the knowledge that

the impulse was apotropaic. In a way that many women artists do, I needed to express the state of seduction and revulsion that abjection imposes. One is in the presence of something that feels prehistoric, whose all pervasive commonality and anonymity is terrifying and overwhelming, yet through art it can be simultaneously explored and repelled.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Apotropaion

A charm to ward off evil spirits.

Chthonian

Paglia uses this term as a substitute for Dionysian to describe "... the dehumanizing brutality of biology and geology, the Darwinian waste and bloodshed, the squalor and rot we must block from consciousness to retain our Apollonian integrity as persons."¹

Muliebrity

The condition of being a woman.

¹Paglia p. 4-5

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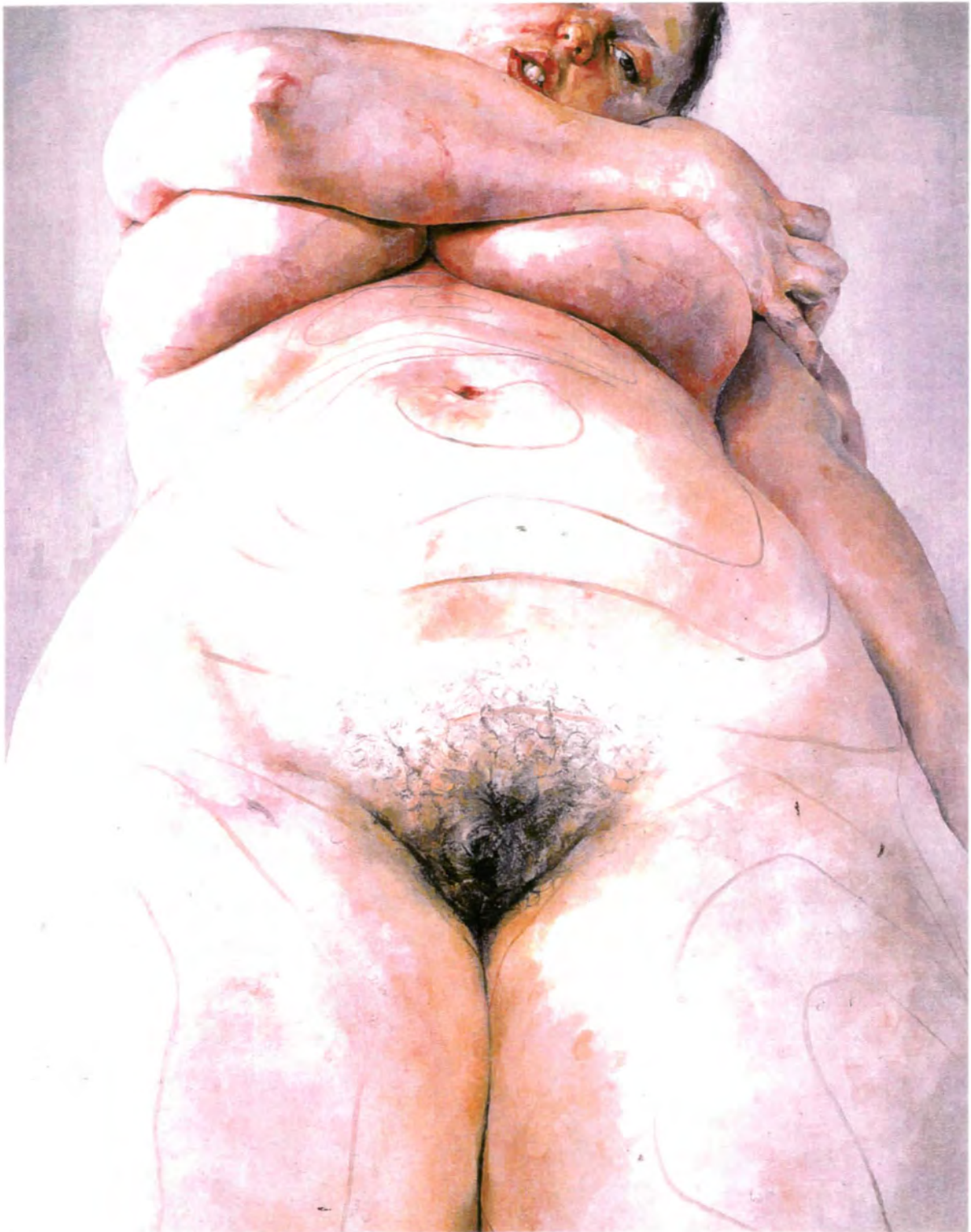
1. *Propped*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 213.5 x 183cm.



2. *Branded*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 213.5 x 183cm.



3. *Strategy (South Face/Front Face/North Face)*, 1993-4. Oil on canvas, 274 x 640cm.



4. *Plan*, 1993. Oil on canvas, 274.5 x 213.5cm.



5. *Prop*, 1993. Oil on canvas, 213.5 x 183cm.



6. *When We Had a House in the Country*, (Detail) 1961. Collage and oil on canvas, 49.5 x 244.5cm.



7. *Gluttony*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 100 x 140cm.



8. *Schmit's Restaurant or The Eating*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 101 x 126cm.



9. *Red Monkey Series: Wife Cuts off Red Monkey's Tail*, 1981. Acrylic on paper, 68 x 101cm.



10. *Red Monkey Series: Red Monkey Beats His Wife*, 1981. Acrylic on paper, 65 x 105cm.



11. *Red Monkey Series: Bear, Bear's Wife and Son Play with Red Monkey*, 1981. Acrylic on paper, 69 x 105cm.



12. *Monkey Hypnotizing a Chicken*, 1982. Acrylic on paper, 78 x 58cm.



13. *Vivian Girls Series: The Vivian Girls Breaking the China*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 240 x 180cm.



14. *Girl and Dog Series: Untitled*, 1986.
Acrylic on paper, 112 x 76cm.



15. *Girl and Dog Series: Girl Shaving a Dog*, 1986.
Acrylic on paper, 111 x 75cm.



16. *Girl and Dog Series: The Little Murderess*, 1987. Acrylic on paper on canvas, 150 x 150cm.



17. *Dog-Woman Series: Dog Woman*, 1994. Pastel on canvas, 120 x 160cm.



18. *Fashion Series 1983-4: Untitled # 132*, 1984. Colour, 172.5 x 117.5cm. Edition of 5.



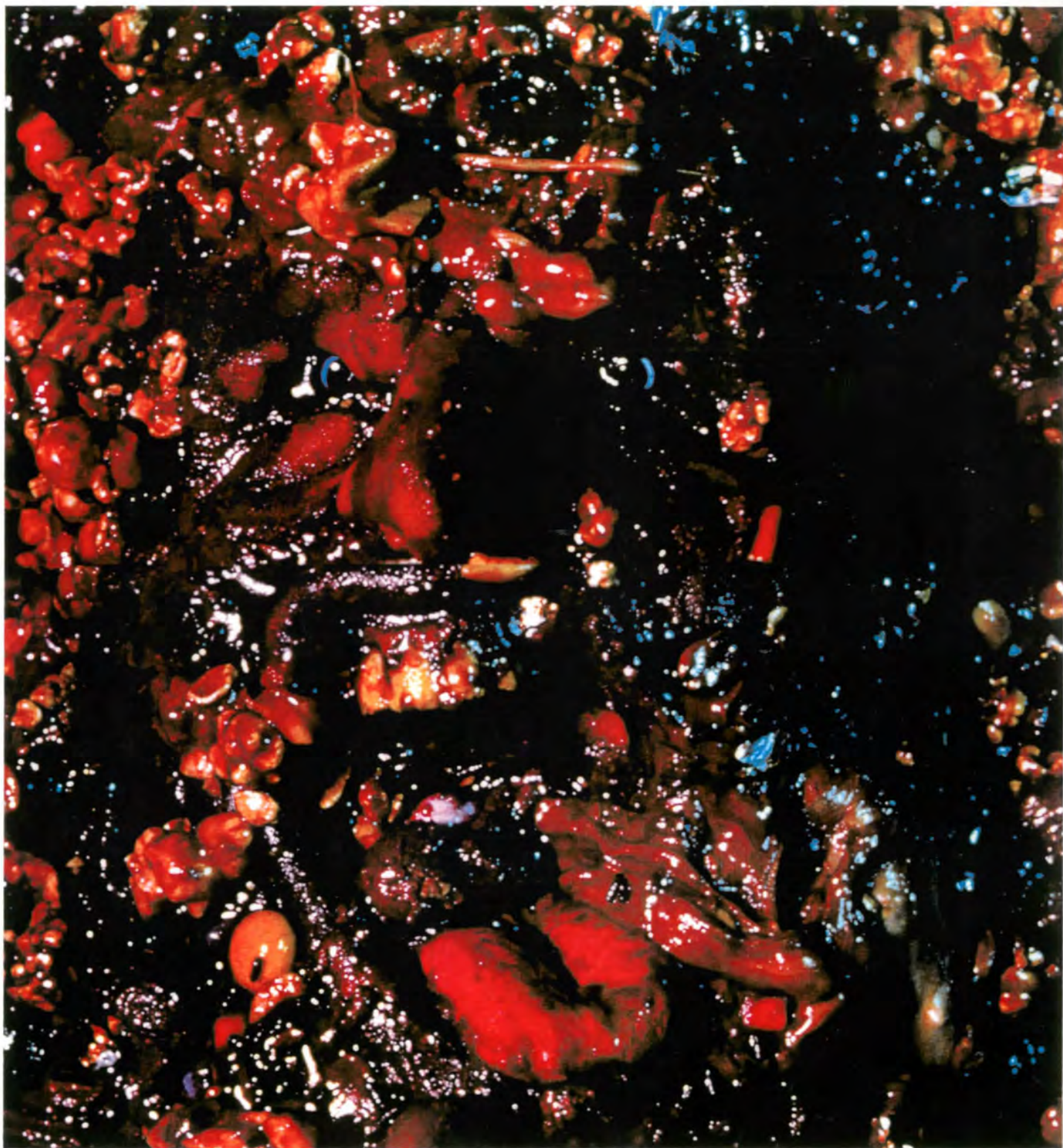
19. *Disasters, Fairy Tales Series 1985-9: Untitled # 140*, 1985. Colour, 181 x 123cm.
Edition of 6.



20. *Fashion Series: Untitled #138*, 1984. Colour, 178 x 121cm. Edition of 5.



21. *Disasters, Fairy Tales Series: Untitled # 175 (Detail)*, 1987. Colour, 119 x 179cm. Edition of 6.



22. *Disasters, Fairy Tales Series: Untitled # 190*, 1989. Colour, 231 x 178cm. (Two parts, each 116 x 178cm). Edition of 6.



23. *Performance Piece Documentation*, 1998.
Oil on vinyl in water, life-size.



24. *Performance Piece Documentation*, 1998.
Oil on vinyl in water, life-size.



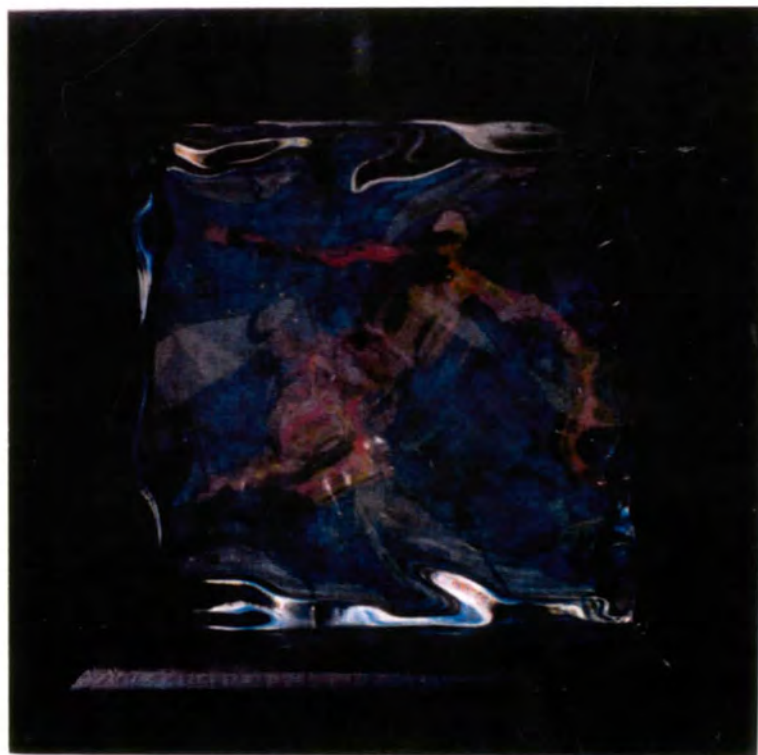
25. *Performance Piece Documentation*, 1998. Oil on vinyl in water, life-size.



26. *Performance Piece Documentation*, 1998. Oil on vinyl in water, life-size.



27. *Performance Piece Documentation*, 1998. Oil on vinyl in water, life-size.



28. *Submerged Painting Series: Untitled*, 1998. Oil on board, glass brick, box frame, 20 x 20
- 10cm.



29. *Submerged Painting Series: Untitled*, 1998. Oil on board, 180 x 120cm.



30. *Submerged Painting Series: Untitled*, 1998. Oil on paper, 60 x 55cm.



31. *Submerged Painting Series: Untitled*, 1998. Oil on paper, 70 x 60cm.



32. *Submerged Painting Series: Untitled*, 1998. Oil on paper, 60 x 50cm.

INTERVIEW WITH PAULA REGO

TP: My thesis is on sexuality and identity. I don't know if you know Camille Paglia's work? It's really just the first two chapters of *Sexual Personae* on nature and art and sex and the birth of the Western eye and I'm taking my approach from there and that's really what my thesis is about and how it's manifested in your work and in Jenny Saville's work. Those are the kinds of questions I'm going to be asking.

PR: She's very outspoken and unusual in her approach [referring to Paglia] She's a bit of a show off.

TP: I need to know how much you feel identity is established, whether its through the process of relationships with other people and how much your identity is formed against other people - like family, friends. And how much of identity is locked up in sexuality.

PR: I don't know what identity is. I'm sorry, what is identity. It's who I am?

TP: Yes.

PR: Who I am is what I am born, where I am born and how close you are to your grandmother and how you connect to things when you're little. Um ...you are where you come from and there are other things added on. Yes. That's identity, yes?

TP: And how much of that is tied up with sexuality.

PR: Well, one is a sexual being from the time you're born. Children are sexual creatures and you discover more about sexuality when you're about thirteen and a half. And that's tied up with the work? Well, yes, of course. The work is sexual, too. I mean doing the work is a form of sensuality. The sensuality you use for making love, you use in your work. There's the touch element and all the lovely things, particularly the touch. Absolutely, yes.

TP: Has it been quite different working in pastels?

PR: Well, my early work was in collage. In my early work I did lots of stuff and cut it up and I reassembled it and stuck it down. I think in the cutting up of the picture, there was a great deal of pleasure in the cutting up and sticking down. It was all a very sensual thing. And then I find that doing a pastel is also very sensual because of the pressure of the sticks and the way you can change things, and yes, yes.

TP: And what do you think about possession? Does possession have a lot to do with your work? Does possession have to do with sexuality and identity?

PR: What do you mean by possession, owning things?

TP: Owning things.

PR: Owning things, or being possessed by someone you love?

TP: I think a bit of both, but mainly possessing someone or not possessing someone.

PR: You can possess work. You cannot possess. In the work you have immense, er, you can do what you like in the work, actually, you can be free to, to kill it even, if you like. I think the work is instead of. It's not at all the same thing. I think it's the opposite.

TP: The portrayal in the past of women by male painters - has that affected your work in any way?

PR: No.

TP: Do you paint with an audience in mind?

PR: I don't paint with an audience in mind. Er, let me see. I can't paint with an audience ... well, I am embarrassed by what I do sometimes. Excruciatingly embarrassed, so maybe I do have an audience in mind if I'm embarrassed, but I think I'm embarrassed because I'm finding it embarrassing. When I go in front of something I can't bear to look at, oh God, it's just awful. But

maybe I think, oh God, if anyone should see that. But most often I do it before ... no-one sees it. So I don't paint with an audience in mind. I painted many years without an audience, actually.

TP: Really?

PR: Twenty seven years. It was quite a long while. I had no audience in England for twenty seven years. I had my first one-person show twenty seven years after leaving art school. It's quite a long time. I mean I showed in Portugal, but that was small. All very cultured and cosmopolitan. People, artists, etc, all appreciated my work. A lot. But although it was cosmopolitan and well read, it was not necessarily a very sophisticated audience. There is a difference, yes, and they understood a certain amount, but then as the work progressed ... nevertheless, I'm having a great success there with my show [Lisbon 1997] . But twenty seven years without having a show here.

TP: Especially in your early works, your animal imagery and vegetables and things like that, did you choose that because animals are closer to nature and that's part of us, really. Or was it the other way round, did you choose them maybe because they're in the distance, you can put things into them and it's not so close to home?

PR: Yeah, I chose them because they're people. They stand in for people. They are somebody in particular. I chose them because the people look like that particular vegetable. I had a friend at the time who was the bear. Oh, yes, they were the people I knew, they were part of my life. And then the cabbage is my mother and then there were all sorts of things that were actually people I knew. It's an old form. It's satire, really, but then the satire becomes more compassionate. You feel for the victim.

TP: Do you still have a fear of the outside, or a fear of nature?

PR: Not so much.

TP: And at the time, what was it about?

PR: I was afraid of the outside when I was a child, you know, I was very cosseted and brought up in a very close environment. Naturally I was afraid of everything. I'm quite afraid of things now, but not so much as I was. You're not afraid of the outside. [She looks at my boots] You're outside a lot.

TP: I'm terrified of the dark .

PR: Are you? I can't believe it. Even now?

TP: Even now.

PR: What do you do, keep a light on?

TP: Yeah. I just make sure that I don't go out in the dark on my own.

PR: You mean outdoors?

TP: Yes, and inside. I just can't ... I get absolutely ... It's almost a phobia. I get all locked up and panicky. Unless I'm with somebody else. In which case it's generally fine. Even then sometimes I get a little bit ... I wanted to ask you about Portuguese myths and legends and fairy tales. Are they more violent than English stories?

PR: Portuguese folk tales are more down to earth. They are quite violent, quite lewd and rude, quite comical and there seems to be an arbitrary use of violence. They're marvellous, really, extraordinary things. They're not things that are published in books for children. I have all these collections. And you can get them in English as well. Taken from anthropologists in the 19th century, collected folk tales and they recorded them by hand. As late as 1979 there were people in Portugal who recorded old people telling stories. And I've got this book. Extraordinary. And they're anthropological studies, they're not the sort of thing for children, they don't even have proper endings, you know, yeah, they're very violent, yes, in other words, yes.

TP: I find with Jenny Saville's women, they're incredibly ...the heads are incredibly male. They're very sophisticated, they're very sentient, they're very aware and you've got this almost male head

on top of this vast and very female body. That's the whole thing about her work, you can't just look at it and study it because you're being watched at the same time. That's fairly frightening. And I think they're very intelligent heads, intelligent minds trapped in those bodies, whereas I find with your women that you paint that they're much more interlinked ... maybe that's the wrong word. I think they feel much more comfortable in their own bodies, with their own physicalities. Rather than thought, action is more important to them.

PR: Yes, you're right. You're absolutely right. No, it's true. Action, practically. How they lug their bodies around. They can do pretty well with them. You saw the ostriches?

TP: Yes

PR: They are very physical. They're not stupid, but they act and they think through their bodies. Like when you make a picture. You only know what a picture looks like when you've finished putting it down. You don't work it out. Women of action.

TP: Another thing I wanted to ask you about, which I'm very interested in is the dogs. I find dogs very feral, very wild.

PR: That's right.

TP: To me they're a metaphor for sex and for nature because they're animals which you bring into your home and you tame them but you'll never get the wildness out of the dog no matter how much you think you have. I wonder if that's also true for you, that dogs are like that and that they can become a metaphor for men and for women, for sexuality and for nature?

PR: It's not what I think about wildness anyway, that they can suddenly turn vicious and kill you. It's something else, they belong to another realm where standards are different, where the imagination can run wild and the dogs have access to things we don't know about. You see it's that aspect of it, not because they become ferocious and kill us, but because the imagination can travel along with a dog better for the fact that a dog is close to human being. We identify with them. A dog is more like a human being than any other animal. Except for a monkey. A dog is repellent as well as interesting.

TP: A bit like sex.

PR: Yes.

TP: What was the impulse for starting the dog series?

PR: By chance. Oh, yes. A story somebody wrote to me, and it goes like this: An old woman on her own with all her pets; a goat, a cat, a dog, a chicken. In her house by the dunes with the wind. During the evening a child's voice came down the chimney. The child's voice was very thin. She listens to this. And one day when the spume is high on the sea, the voice comes down the chimney particularly loud, and the animals start running round and round the table, round and round and the woman crouches on all fours and opens her mouth and swallows all the animals. That's right. And so, I was drawing something else and I got Lila to crouch. I said "Lila, could you crouch on the floor and open your mouth?" and she immediately looked like a dog. I did a simple sketch in five minutes, just like that, and I put that drawing away for two years. And one day I was working on *The Barnyard*, which is the one with the cow, and I was ... "well, should I put this in, should I put this there," and a friend came along and she said "oh, this is an extraordinary drawing," and I said "yes, isn't it" and I was going to put it in and she said "don't put it in, it's a waste," so I said "oh, alright". So what I did was square it up and put it on a canvas. I had a canvas there, and I thought - I'll work on it in my own time, and I worked on my other one, and I realised I needed a month, and I said "come here, Lila, let me do you" and then I put a nice dress on her and Ba! I realised she's a dog. I only called it *Dog Woman* when I finished it. I said "this is a dog woman." This is a dog woman and she's going to take me places. And sure enough, she did. Like the dogs take your imagination with them. Travelling across, that's where I went with this dog woman, into memory. She took me into memory. So I was able to relive bits of my marriage, areas I hadn't gone, things that might not even have happened but there was a feeling of being in a wonderland, rather because you knew your ground. I tell you something, you knew exactly where you were. I knew exactly where I was. All those pictures, I knew exactly what it was, and one idea came after the other. It was a form of blessing, really, being like that. Just one idea after the other, after the other, then it finished. Like things do. Yes, that's how the *Dog Woman* started. It wasn't supposed to be a dog woman, but it happened to me.

TP: That's incredible.

PR: Yes, it's lucky, it's so lucky. It's only happened to me three times in my life. They are what I call breakthroughs. You know exactly what you do, you know that it is totally truthful and you know the ground, you know where you are. So that's it really. It's finished now.

TP: Is it?

PR: Oh, yes.

TP: Was that before *The Ostriches*?

PR: Oh, yes. Someone commissioned me to do *The Ostriches*. I had already done the woman with the girdle and I'd done the two of them being beaten, being stoned, and a whole series of saints. So of course the woman with the girdle is Mary Măgdalen. And my saints, important figures of saints. And from there it was easy to move to the ostriches. Although the ostriches do not come out of Christianity, they come out of mythology. They are tied to the Greek Harpies. So they become more generalised. And they are not individual pieces, they all work together. So it wasn't too difficult to move on to that and onto *Pinnocchio*. Your imagination takes you places, eh? Together with the hand. It's the hand that does it really.

TP: Could you tell me more about your earlier works? Where your composition was more overall, especially the one with the crocodile.

PR: *The Bride*. She married the crocodile. So she's married and expecting some terrible thing, but she's a bit disappointed afterwards. The picture was started up on the left hand side. And then I painted something and the story carried on all around. And then it was resolved at the bottom. How it was resolved was the end of the story, and the story was resolved through visual means and whatever came to mind at the time made sense. There was a mood, and a thing I wanted, then I went with it. The lizard might have been someone at the time, but I have forgotten who he was, as one does.

TP: Do you ever see, a bit like you've made characters into animals, do you ever see other people and transfer them into Lila. Does she ever become somebody else?

PR: Oh, yes. She becomes all sorts of things all the time.

TP: Does she ever become anyone specific?

PR: No, she does not. She becomes what is necessary for that particular picture really, like an actress. She has parts she has to play and then she changes herself according to the parts. I'm very lucky. But I have other models as well.

TP: The other question I wanted to ask you was about cinema and about *Disney* and how that has affected your work.

PR: Because it affected my childhood. And *Disney*, when we were little, a long time ago, *Disney* was new, *Snow White* came out, so for children it was absolute magic. There hadn't been anything else like it. And when I saw that, it was just how I imagined things to be. It was reality for me. It was marvellous, I loved it. I don't like *Disney* films now, though. This is the trouble. I take my grandchildren. I don't like the films now. They used to be so mysterious. *Pinnocchio* is a masterpiece. He was very influenced by the Surrealists. Dali used to work for him, you know. They've got a whole load of Dali pictures there which they've never shown. And Arthur Rackham as well, the illustrator.

TP: What do you think of Jenny Saville's work?

PR: I think she's brilliant. Those strokes. And so big! She was in danger of them becoming a landscape. But they didn't, did they? Which is to her credit. So I admire them, I thought, "She's fantastic for one so young." I think she's doing lots of things with mirrors, Jenny Saville. She was doing things with painting on mirrors, I'm dying to see what she does next.

TP: What do they mean to you?

PR: They meant a bit of unhappiness to me actually. They meant to me, something, not a happy

thing, all that vast flesh. They meant to me a bit of a burden. That's what they meant to me. Clogged down. The flesh brought you down. The flesh was not a liberating kind of flesh. It's the kind of flesh that ...well, Lucien Freud, for instance, uses flesh which is paint. This is more illusionistic. Even in Freud, the people have more story to them. There was no story to the individual in her pictures. They seemed ... I found them oppressive. They were hiding something that was behind them somewhere. Well, in fact, they took up the whole room didn't they. They were there on their own, nothing else there with them at all. Except those marks on their bellies. I suppose that was some kind of clue. They were for the operations weren't they? What do they mean to you?

TP: To me they mean very much the burden of your biological identity ...

PR: That's right.

TP: ...and your ...the way that something you'll never ever be free of. And at some stage you have to come to terms with, and eventually accept. And I think you go through a lot of discomfort getting there. I think those are at that stage. She doesn't want that kind of body, but because she has it, she has to go through that kind of process. Finding things and losing them and finding them again. And realizing the tension that it entails. And, like I said, coming to terms with them. With herself.

PR: With herself. Exactly.

TP: And I think that's why so many women responded so strongly. And I think it's also tied up a lot with the way women are so thin now and what that means. In this awful race to become equal with men, they don't want babies or periods or big hips or all of those trappings. And I think this whole tyranny of slenderness, this whole anorexia and androgeny and all that, I think its women trying to deny their biology, deny where they are coming from. I can't feel that's healthy, I don't think it is at all useful for anything.

PR: Exactly. Or whatever, it's certainly not, so I don't see it's useful in any way. I can't see why. I suppose it's useful for being a model. On a catwalk or something. I don't really know. But the terrible thing is that the thinner the model, the more the fashion changes. The more the fashion

changes, the more it's made for those people. It's impossible. So this whole thing is ephemeral. It's become an art form now, the thin body the fashion. It's an art form. It doesn't bear any relation to how it felt to put on a nice belt, to wear clothes that fit well, to button up your coat and get dressed to go out. Put on your gloves, your shoes, to be properly tucked into your clothes. As you should be. Like when you put on a school uniform, you know. And then you're right there in that role. And putting on clothes is really important. But putting on clothes, your body actually has to fit into your clothes, you know. It's not a sort of skimpy thing that doesn't fit anywhere and doesn't get you anywhere. It's uncomfortable. You must be protected. You've got to be tucked in to your tights, your shoes and everything, your face all covered up. I don't like this unprotection, oh God. It's very hard work, too. And you don't get that from Jenny's pictures, because those figures are beyond all that. Maybe they are some form of a saint. I don't know, actually, I wonder what she's saying, but they just grow. Her man paints things, too, the man she lives with. But they're more sadistic, the figures are more tortured. There's also something about that in his works.

My husband was much better than me. Yes, I think one feels very jealous of them. Desperately jealous. And we want them to help us too very much. But it's also very good to have such a person around because you'll never learn again as much as you learn from him. So listen well. It's important. I think it's tremendously important that we should be married to painters. Because they understand us much better than anybody else. And we can learn a lot from them. And what we've got to say is very different from what they've got to say....doesn't bear any resemblance whatsoever. But we admire them, I know, I know what that's like. Yes, I think it's wonderful. And it's a good way to learn. It doesn't mean-you can't be yourself. You can be more yourself if somebody understands you. I trusted Vic [Victor Willing] so much that if he were to say "look," which he did.....when I did *The Maids*, that big picture, by then he was crippled - he died of MS [Multiple Sclerosis]. He was crippled, he was in bed, I used to roll my pictures up and take them there to the house. So I took it and I pinned it up on the wall and he lay there and said: "Well. This isn't working, is it. You have...It's just a mess. What's happened is this: you have rather well painted figures there and you can't see them because the background's so messy. You've got all of this furniture here, furniture there. Take it all out. Take out all this furniture and the background." I cried, I cried. And then I went back to the studio and painted out the whole background.