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### Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Gender: Human Being

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

McClaine Timmerman

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Loretta Livingston, Chair  
Dr. Lisa Naugle  
Professor John Crawford

2017



## **DEDICATION**

To

all women

in recognition of their worth

“The day will come when men will recognize woman as his peer, not only at the fireside, but in councils of the nation. Then, and not until then, will there be the perfect comradeship, the ideal union between the sexes that shall result in the highest development of the race.”

Susan B. Anthony

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Photos by Jazley Faith

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Loretta Livingston, who gifted me her gentle and steady guidance throughout my thesis process. It is hugely because of her support and inspirational leadership as a mentor, that I was able to find confidence in my work.

I would like to thank my committee members, John Crawford and Lisa Naugle, who gave their full support in my research and creative process.

I would like to thank both Jennifer Fisher and Mary Corey for reintroducing the academic writing structure as well as how to construct professional presentations.

In addition, I would like to thank Peter Carpenter, department Chair of Columbia College Chicago, who introduced me to the integration of dance and spoken word as a source of choreographic inspiration. It was in his *Topics in Dance Making* class that I first began writing the *Pink Blanket* monologue.

I also thank my mother Cindy Bailes for her unflinching support and love. Without such a strong female figure in my life, I may never have found the strength and bravery to stand up for what I believe. She has supported my artistic choices from my first dance class to creating this thesis.

Thank you to the UCI dance department for facilitating my thesis concert, as well the University of California, Irvine for providing an atmosphere that supports individual research.

Thank you to Jade Cole, Jessica Leyva, Ashley Rose, Samantha Scheller, Morgan Embry, Bruce Warner, and Daniela Sider for dedicating so much time and energy to bring my concert and artistic vision alive.

Thank you to composer Scott F. Hall for giving me permission to use his music in support of my audio design.

Thank you to John Didonna, Drama Department Chair of Valencia College, for producing my shows in Orlando and giving me the confidence to continue creating my own work.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for their continued love and support. You all have such a special place in my heart. Without you in my life I would feel incomplete.

## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Gender: Human Being

By

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Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Loretta Livingston, Chair

The purpose of this research is to identify and analyze the connection between art and feminist theory, using dance as a main point of departure. The investigation of feminist theory in art provides a platform to create commentary on widespread projections of femininity in American visual and mass media culture. The research divulges how art continues to not only illuminate but also challenge conflicting notions of feminine beauty. In this thesis I provide analyses of three contemporary art makers whose work in performance and installation revolves around concepts of feminist theory. Additionally, I document my creative process in creating a multi-media dance theater concert about the “ideal” woman at the University California, Irvine. To encompass the findings within the research, an original monologue titled *Pink Blanket* was created and performed within the dance theater concert, giving voice to my personal relationship to feminist theory. The monologue is about a female who is experiencing the conflicting and unattainable expectations of the socially constructed “ideal” woman. The outcome of this research served me in my own understanding of my place among feminist art makers, and has inspired me to create more performance projects as an emergent feminist dance maker.



## CHAPTER 1

### The Connection Between Art and Feminist Theory

As a female choreographer, I am most interested in the connection between art and feminist theory. In titling this thesis *Gender: Human Being*, I am creating a space to open a conversation about the female experience. Specifically, in the discussion of art and feminist theory, I am interested in gender equality. “Feminist theory explores both inequality in gender relations and the constitution of gender” (Carlson). In the book *A Mind of Her Own: The Evolutionary Psychology of Women*, it is explained that “Feminist theorists are concerned with how gender (which is the social construction of characteristics associated with sex) affects individuals’ access to control of their own and other people’s lives, power, and resources” (Campbell 36). In 2009, dance scholar Alexandra Kolb wrote about how investigating feminist theory through art provides an essential environment to publicize and deconstruct hidden ideologies (Kolb 12). She believes the language of feminism is how artists investigate the modes in which we are perceiving gender issues (13). The ability and challenge to direct the spectator’s gaze inwards is what gives art such a powerful voice for feminist theory. It requires the viewer to take notice to their personal identity in relation to gender.

American feminist Peggy Phelan defines feminism as “the convictions that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture” (Phelan 18). She also defines this pattern of organization as favoring men over women. It is her belief that feminist art can create visible connections across media and cultures (18-19). In a survey about art and feminism, she talks about how art addresses feminist theory:

At the heart of the language of feminism is a complicated attempt to address embodiment, politically, aesthetically, historically, psychoanalytically. Interest in the body of the woman, as image, as icon, as goddess, as worker, as mother, as daughter, as narcissist, as martyr, has been central to both feminist art making and to feminist art theory and criticism. (Phelan 36)

In her book *Theater & Feminism* (2016), Kim Solga discusses Phelan's understanding of the gendered nature of the spectator's gaze and how it effects the creation of the female character, the body of the performer, and the viewer. This "gaze" is not just the spectator's act of looking at the performer, but also deriving from the unconscious understanding of how social and cultural standards depict gender roles and images (Solga 18-19). Solga wrote about how feminist performance theory and criticism is a story of "women and theatre, women at the theatre, and women in and of the theatre" (1). Her belief is that theater and performance art can serve as activism for feminist theory. This relationship of women, theater art, and feminist theory:

... is about how feminist theatre theory and practice allows us to understand the way *all* gender is constructed and reinforced in performance, for better and for worse, and for all human beings on the planet — be they men, women, transpersons or others. (Solga 1)

This understanding and discussion of the social constructions of gender, sexual orientation, political power, and human rights in and outside the theater, is what feminist theory and criticism actively addresses (Solga 2).

British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey made a strong impact on feminist theory with her inquiries into the representation of women in film. Phelan describes Mulvey's theories on the construction of females in films, as "the passive object of an active and powerful male gaze" (Reckitt 39). In the book *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, authors Marita Sturgeon and Lisa Cartwright write about "the gaze" in multiple

forms of visual culture<sup>1</sup>. “The gaze is not the act of looking itself, but the viewing relationship characteristic of a particular set of social circumstances” (Sturken and Cartwright 76). The idea of the male gaze has been a consistent issue addressed through art and feminist history. In her landmark article “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” (1975), written during the women’s liberation movement, Mulvey gave multiple examples of where this gaze can be seen. For instance, the gaze of the viewer can be directed by the camera’s lens being closely focused in on women’s body parts, transforming them into fetish objects for the viewer (Mulvey 22). This camera work directs the spectators to view the film and its characters through the eyes of the “powerful male protagonist” (Solga 21). The gaze of viewing women, defined by their appearance, holds great importance in the impact of contemporary image culture. There is a divide between viewing the image as the ideal and viewing the image as oneself— both enforcing the “looking at oneself through the implied gaze of others” (Sturken and Cartwright 81).

Author Christy Adair commented in her book *Women in Dance* (1992) more specifically about the gaze in relation to female dancers:

Women internalize the gaze and live confined by a constant sense of surveillance. For dancers the constant checking of oneself in the actual or internal mirror means turning the gaze against oneself, for within the gaze one is always found wanting. (Adair 77)

This inconsistency between these two opposing images of the female is also discussed by Kolb in her chapter “Feminist Perspectives”:

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<sup>1</sup> “Visual culture is a rubric and a model of critical thinking about the world of images saturating contemporary life.” (Jones 2)

The discrepancy between images of femininity conveyed on stage and the real women incorporating the role, corresponds to the polarity between the image of the female in literature and the woman outside fiction, with the only (albeit major) difference being that the female dancer *is*, in some sense, the fictitious figure in question. Thus, when performing on stage, she is both image and real woman as fiction and reality converge. (Kolb 53)

She suggests that because the images designed to please the expectations of men impact the ways women define and perceive themselves, there is a disassociation of image and reality for both the performer and viewer (Kolb 17-18). This idea of the spectator's gaze informing the way women perceive themselves is of heavy importance to my investigation of female identity. Can we as artists bypass the ingrained images of the culturally defined ideal in our endeavor to create work about the human experience?

In 1978, Mulvey discussed four categories of women's art making in an interview (Jones 72). The categories were then refined and printed with descriptions in the article "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making" in 1980 by Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis. The first depiction of women's art is described as 'the glorification of an essential female power' (Flitterman-Lewis and Barry 67). This illustration of the female role in art reverses the roles within a patriarchal system. "Instead of the male supremacy of patriarchal culture, the female (the essential feminine) is elevated to primary status" (67). This category encourages women's self-esteem, and promotes the validation of female identity. The second strategy of women's art reconstructs the "hidden history of female productivity" (69). This can include anything women have created from quilting to activities performed in the home. Not only does this bring attention to the ingrained innovations of women that go unnoticed in mainstream culture, but also illuminates the patriarchal divisions that "restrict creative avenues for women" (69). The third category of women's art "views the dominant cultural order as a monolithic construction in which

women's cultural activity is either submerged or placed entirely outside its limits" (69). This form is represented by two separate viewpoints of women: the "separatist" and the "non-feminist." The "separatist" group of female artists work to create their own society in hopes to battle patriarchal customs and do not identify with the art world. The "non-feminist" group prefers not to fall under a stereotyped art form and do not believe their art engages with the feminist struggle. Instead they consider themselves artists who are also female (70). The last artistic practice of women's art exploits existing gender contradictions, placing women at a "crucial place in patriarchy" (70). This is the category that separates the women simply making art in a patriarchal society, from the feminist art makers actively commenting on feminist theory (71). The terms *women's art*, *feminist art makers*, and *female artist* do not all file under the same category of art. I found myself asking, "what category does my artistic voice fall under?" I am creating a commentary on the expectations and stereotypes of women that are designed to satisfy the patriarchal system. This categorizes my work under Mulvey's original *feminist art maker* category, which I will further address in the conclusion.

As art can challenge and illuminate traditions and societal customs, it can be argued that it also provides a space to explore instinctual responses and enlightened thinking. Dance can be an instrument of political expression and a vessel for embodying activism in feminist theory. American dance scholar, Ann Daly, specializing in women and women's history, specifically wrote about the relevance of dance and feminist analysis in an essay for the *Dance Research Journal* in 1991:

Among all the arts in western culture, dance may have the most to gain from feminist analysis. Certainly the two are highly compatible. Dance is an art form of the body, and the body is where gender distinctions are generally understood to originate. (Daly, Journal 2)

Therefore, as dance is an art form of the body, it lives in the space between natural and socially constructed (Adair 23). No matter how the body is presented on stage, an involuntary response from the audience may exist because of the representation of the female body in visual culture (Adair 13). In her chapter “Viewing women; the production and reception of dance” Adair writes about the audience’s learned gender associations that effect their perception of the dancing bodies in front of them:

By taking the viewpoint that gender is not just difference but oppression, changes are possible in the making and viewing of dance. The recognition that dance cannot be separated from the material conditions of a particular time and that choreographers cannot totally control the reception of their work have implications for feminist producers of dance. (Adair 65)

In other words, the socially constructed vision of the female affects the way audiences process art. If the dancing body on stage is being directly linked to what is culturally defined as feminine and to the hyper-sexualized images in media culture today, then the viewers’ undertaking of the work is tainted.

In her book *Women, Feminism, and Media* (2007), Sue Thornham identifies one of the central concerns within feminist theory media studies as the culturally defined conception of what is feminine, and how these constructions affect our sense of selves (Thornham 55). In her chapter “Narrating Femininity,” she writes: “The underlying fantasy which structures these public narratives of femininity is therefore for women a profoundly masochistic one” (58). Feldenkrais<sup>2</sup> Practitioner Julie Sandler-Friedler also writes on this concept of femininity in reference to the ever-changing American cultural standards of the ideal female body. In her book *Dancing Female* (1997) she discusses how these culturally

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<sup>2</sup> The *Feldenkrais Method* is a form of somatic education which expands repertoire of movements, enhances awareness, improves function and enables people to express themselves more fully.

defined ideal standards lead to the objectification of women's bodies as a spectacle. In her chapter *The Physical Body* she talks about how this "body-as-object" point of view affects both the experience of the dancer and viewer in its failure to acknowledge the lived experience. Sandler writes, "She is and is not her body. She cannot be reduced to her body, but she is not separable from it" (7). She later brings up the question: "how can a woman be an active subject when so many messages have indicated that she ought to aspire, above all, to be a beautiful object?" (7).

Cultural objectification of women in images is only one of the multifaceted representations I am interested in exploring through the body. The task and challenge as a dance maker is the endeavor of embodying all of these representations of women at once, thus creating a conceptualized "ideal"—the "ideal" woman—who can do it all. The mainstream representation of females often categorizes them into a collection of parts, instead of a whole being. Because mainstream American culture appears to be obsessed with the way the body looks, it is placing value on the body as an object separated from the spirit (Sandler 197-200).

Separation of mind and body is also a topic feminist scholar Ann Cooper Albright talks about in her book *Choreographing Difference* (1997). In her chapter "Mining the Dance Field" she discusses the difference between the "lived body and its cultural representation" (Albright 4). These coexisting representations of women can bring the audience's attention to the space between stereotypes and the reality of the dancer's corporeal life (4). Albright claims to separate and compare historically and culturally inflicted representations of women with personal identity, we must engage with both the body's physical and intellectual meaning. The goal in doing this critical thinking about identity is to notice what

happens in the body and mind when embodying cultural conventions (10). Albright speaks about how through dance we can challenge cultural conventions and representations:

Clearly cultural values resonate throughout the bodies that constitute them, and often these structures are physically internalized and thus rendered as “essential” elements of human nature. Dancers, however, can consciously engage in a physical training that seeks to resist oppressive ideologies concerning women and their bodies in performance, effectively challenging the terms of their own representations. (Albright 94)

The questioning of female identity is the journey I hope to bring the performer and viewer on through my choreography. The questions I am asking myself are, is it possible to represent both the cultural representation and the lived experience at once? Can we (performer and viewer) actively distinguish between the two images? These topics of representation and identity are imperative in understanding how culture is embedded in our perception of self. Therefore, it is important for me to understand the learned cultural values of women when choreographing the female.

In her book *Dancing Women- Female Bodies on Stage* (1998), dance historian Sally Banes talks about the first generation of American modern dancers— often called “forerunners” (Banes 66) — that were in search of liberation for the female dancing body in the late nineteenth century. Banes states, “The forerunners of modern dance constituted the first generation of women in dance history to rebel as a group against both choreographic traditions and society’s gender expectations” (123). She speaks about how through dance these women “made their innovations in a patriarchal world” and by putting their bodies, emotions, and imaginations on the stage, created a new vision of the female (123). Modern dance forerunner Isadora Duncan was a strong female figure who intertwined dance and feminism in her choreography and movement aesthetic. In her book *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America*, Daly mentions Isadora’s belief that modern



dance had a responsibility to accomplish change within the social sphere (Daly, *The Dancing Body* 24). This new form of movement and expression through dance allowed for female dancers to detach from stereotypical images of the male invention (Kolb 101).

Banes describes how the rise of modern dance created a platform to reimagine female roles:

A mother could be viewed as destructive, rather than nurturing. And the sexual desires of both virgin and old woman could be acknowledged. These were the sides of femininity the “new woman” in dance, like her counterparts in literature and the other arts, explored. (Banes 125)

Beginning in the late 19th century, Isadora Duncan believed dance could aid in the understanding and experience of “natural” beauty (Daly, *The Dancing Body* 22-68). In American visual culture today it seems the ideas of what is “natural” and “beautiful” are still undefined and perhaps even misconstrued with ideals of sexuality. It seems although feminist issues have gained recognition over time, some of the underlying questions are still being asked. What is considered natural or beautiful? Who decides what constructs those ideals? Is it possible to separate ourselves from the status quo?

The moment I realized I had something to say about feminist issues was in my first undergraduate dance-making class at Columbia College Chicago in 2005. I created a monologue and movement solo titled *Pink Blanket* about the expectations placed on girls to conform to an idea of femininity directly after birth. After receiving such positive feedback and responses, I continued to improve its context and delivery with a more humorous and ironic point of view of the female condition. The *Pink Blanket* monologue I developed is a character study about a female who is essentially experiencing the conflicting and unattainable expectations of what our society has constructed to be known as the “ideal”

woman. This character study is now the driving inspiration of my thesis concert. Her (the “ideal” woman’s) voice is what drives both the movement and the story.

As an artist researching the connection of feminist theory and dance, I noticed reoccurring themes within the language of feminist theory. The polarized notions of mind versus body, lived body versus the cultural representation, physical bodies versus cultural identities, stereotypes versus the reality of corporeal lives, and cultural representations versus personal identity began to set the tone for my choreography. I set out to further investigate how other contemporary artists were addressing these concepts of feminist theory in their work. The next chapter includes both analyses of and my personal responses to specific works of three artists: Canadian choreographer and provocateur Marie Chouinard, American visual artist Mindy Minton, and New Zealand choreographer Julia Croft. I analyze how they used feminist theory in creating their work, the potential impact it made in exposing feminist issues, as well as describe how and why it influenced me in my own choreographic process.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Analysis of 3 Contemporary Art Makers: A Commentary on Feminist Theory

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to draw direct parallels between critical issues in current feminist thought and art. I am interested in articulating the interrelatedness of these two seemingly different subjects by providing a commentary on their social meaning and discourse. While I am a dance maker endeavoring to conduct my own physical investigation into feminist theory, the generalized term “art” in its broadest sense provides various media, both abstract and literal, into the subject at hand.

In this chapter I analyze how three different artists create a commentary on feminist theory in their work. I chose three different art forms; a contemporary dance concert by Marie Chouinard, a visual art exhibit by Marilyn Minter, and a performance theater show by Julia Croft. It is my goal to use this analysis to understand how current art makers are integrating feminist theory in their work, what concepts they are focusing on, how they exposed their commentary through their artistic medium, as well as to help aid in the development of my own work.

#### Marie Chouinard

Canadian choreographer and provocateur, Marie Chouinard's, *bODY\_rEMIX les\_vARIOTIONS\_gOLDBERG*, was created at the Venice Biennale's International Festival of Contemporary Dance, Italy, June 18, 2005. I watched the hour length video to attain my own understanding of her artistic projection concerning feminist theory, and was blown away with her bold presentation of human sexuality and concepts of liberation through

concert dance. What I mean by *blown away* is that I felt overwhelmed with the visual, intellectual, and physical responses I had watching her work.

Chouinard choreographed and directed the work, as well as designed the lighting, set design, and props. Her fearless dancers were costumed in nipple pasties (females only), and what looked like small pieces of light and thin fabric to cover the genitals of both genders. The breasts and buttocks were essentially exposed, providing for a provocative and raw sexual appearance. The music was scattered and dark, as if the soundtrack to a thriller film. There was an integration of recorded and altered voices, ambient and classical music, and live sounds performed into an onstage microphone by the dancers. The movement was animal-like and awkward— seemingly inhuman in both gesture and movement quality. Chouinard's use of solos, duets, and ensemble work is paired with the hindrance of being attached to arm crutches, bars, harnesses, metal poles, and rope. The fine line between pain and pleasure within both movement dynamic and expression of the dancers became more and more defined as the work unfolded. Whether this existential sexual content was delivered through moaning, breathing, exposed tongues, the suggestion of masturbation and intercourse, or the BDSM<sup>3</sup> references, the dancing itself was exquisite. What I mean by *exquisite* is the dancers' clean lines, strong controlled movements, their powerful sense of identity within the work, and commitment to serving the choreography. The dancers all seemed to be in tune with the concept and movement qualities that were designed. I noticed an involuntary curiosity as a viewer that surprised me. How could something appearing so violent seem so innocent? The exploration of wild and seemingly raw sexuality through undulating, thrusting, and dragging of bodies, soon became less

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<sup>3</sup> B/D (Bondage and Discipline), D/s (Dominance and submission), and S/M (Sadism and Masochism)

about the body itself being viewed only as a spectacle, and more about the experience the dancers were having. Dance scholar Anne Cooper Albright discusses Chouinard's ability to enable different responses from her audience:

We are right there, smack in the room, and that exposure forces us to redefine how we are watching this performance. Her presence forces the audience to recognize their ability to respond in multiple ways, to take responsibility for meeting her energy and participating in the event, even if that response is to squirm uncomfortably in one's seat. (Albright 100-101)

Although both the male and female sexual exposure was equal, Chouinard's separation of gender was ever-existent. The females were almost always the targeted submissive and preyed upon gender, while the males most commonly were choreographed as the dominant predator. For instance, the males were usually moving on a higher vertical plane than the females who were more often dragging around on arm crutches, crawling on the floor, hanging on barres, or attached to a male performer. Chouinard created a consistent separation of gender, whether through planes in space, or dominance and subordination. However, I would argue that the hyper sexualization and experienced sexual desire of both genders was equal. I feel Chouinard was creating a world where gender distinctions were solely based on sexual orientation, rather than culturally learned perversions.

Albright talks about how dance can actively resist oppressive ideologies and challenge representations: "Because dance is at once social and personal, internal and external, a dancer can both embody and explode gendered images of the body—simultaneously registering, creating, and subverting cultural conventions" (Albright 94). She comments on how Chouinard challenges the representation of what is considered feminine in her re-structuring of human desire. "One of the more radical elements of

Chouinard's work... is her challenge to the representation of feminine desire as being a passive (and silent) desire-to-be-desired, a desire to be someone's "other" (Albright 99). This existence of human desire for pleasure, for pain, and for human connection in the choreography can push the audience into a self-reflective state, inquiring into their insecurities and personal associations with sexuality.

During a duet, roughly twelve minutes into the video, a male inadvertently stalks the female dancer around the stage as her body violently and submissively attempts to retrieve. The reason I say *inadvertently*, is because both genders appear without a conscious understanding of what their body is doing. In other words, the dancers seemed to be embodying instinctive sexual responses without moral judgement or concern. This reminds me of the sexual nature of most animals. It is less about emotional commitment or connection as it is an instinctive reproductive and biological behavior. At the beginning of the video I felt distant and uncomfortable. These dancers were coming onto stage with poles in their mouths performing aggressive and sexual movements without any more than a small strap covering them. The choreography itself was controlled, but was delivered in a way to all appearances without control; as if the body was controlling the mind, instead of the other way around. It wasn't until half way through that I noticed I cared less about what their bodies were doing, and more about how the dancers were experiencing it. There was a sense of freedom and liberation from social constructs and expectations in the way the dancers performed the movement. It made me curious to know if while performing this work the dancers felt liberated or enslaved.

The commentary of human sexuality is what I am taking away from Chouinard's work. In American society today, human sexuality seems to be in direct conflict with

projections of what is and isn't ideal. I felt she removed the surface level existence of sexual exploitation and gained possession my personal understanding of the internal experience of the dancer. Exploiting their bodies and sexuality visually, physically, and intellectually by removing all morality and judgement within the movement, she created a raw view into human sexuality through concert dance. By placing her work on stage to be viewed as a spectacle, I felt Chouinard challenges her audience to allow any uncomfortableness that may have been present to manifest into a personal inquiry about what is "natural" in regards to human sexuality. While watching Chouinard's work I found myself asking, "why is it so important to me to create dances?" I realized that it is not necessarily about the spectacle inside the theater that I most think about, but the post-performance thought processes and self-reflection the audience may have after leaving. I am not interested in making movement for movement's sake, but rather to create meaning in movement through storytelling about the human experience.

#### Marilyn Minter

The second source that inspired my choreographic process was a visual art exhibit called *Pretty/Dirty* by Marilyn Minter. I was able to see her work hosted at the Orange County Museum of Art in May 2016. This exhibit included work she had been accumulating since the beginning of her career, a film, and her exquisite enamel on metal art. I was shocked and impressed with Minter's fearless views on gender, sexuality, images of beauty and advertising, and play between opposing images of femininity. Her perspective and impact on feminist theory in creating images described as both "pretty" and "dirty" is bold and impactful in its public display of the hyper sexualization of woman, and on the ideals of feminine beauty.

As I walked into the exhibition, there was no tip toeing around the concept. In her section *Wet*, she opposes images of the grotesque closeness of body parts, with the seductive quality of liquid dripping down or splashing out of the enamel. The colors were both stimulating and vibrant, allowing for my gaze to linger in guilty curiosity. Sturgeon and Cartwright state, “We can have intense relationships with images precisely because of the power they have both to give us pleasure and to allow us to articulate our desires through looking” (73). Although the entire exhibition was uniquely invigorating in its thought provoking presentation of images of femininity, the most exhilarating component was a video.

*Green Pink Caviar*, an eight-minute film created in 2009, played on a monstrous screen at the exhibit connecting the erotic and freakish footage of a woman’s mouth and tongue moving different colors of caviar around on glass. The colors of the caviar mixed with the sensual movements of the mouth and tongue were set to memorizing and relaxing sounds of bells and gongs, by composer, J. Ralph. Similar to my curiosity in the racy absurdity of Chouinard’s choreography, I found myself wondering why I wasn’t running away, shaking my head in discontent, with an uncomfortable response. Minter’s ability to direct the viewers gaze intellectually was like Chouinard’s, a pivotal point in my viewing experience. It wasn’t just uncomfortably stimulating to look at, it also provoked me to process both her and my views on feminist theory. Sturgeon and Cartwright write about the connection of looking and ideology as a part of image culture:

The image culture in which we live is an arena of diverse and often conflicting ideologies. Images are elements of contemporary advertising and consumer culture through which assumptions about beauty, desire, glamour, and social value are both constructed and responded to. (21)



Minter's close up exploitation of gender specific body parts, sexualized advertisements of women, and exploration of the ideals of "beauty", all reminded me of unrealistic images of the sexually "liberated" woman today to whom we are all compared. It also allowed me to make the connection of Mulvey's theories on the direction the spectators' gaze to the consumer's depiction of the art's meaning.

Art critic Gareen Darakjian commented on Minter's work: "It is difficult to tell if Marilyn Minter's subjects are meant to make viewers uncomfortable— or turn them on" (Auther et al. 22). This is what the big question of *Pretty/Dirty* is about, isn't it? Is it pretty, or is it dirty? Is it possible that the two can exist in the same human response? As we are conditioned to view these descriptions as opposite concepts, it creates an uncomfortable response when the viewer experiences both at once. Minter puts the issue directly in the viewer's face. She comments in a conversation with Catherine Morris, Curator for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, "my whole process is ignoring what the 'big picture' is and seeing only what's right in front of me" (Morris and Minter 146-147). This was a crazy thought to me. How could she be ignoring the big picture? It would seem that the "big picture" is ever-present in all feminist art. As I thought about it more, it became clear to me what she meant. What is right in front of me? In Minter's section "Mirrors", there are gelatin silver prints of an older woman from the late 1960s in various positions in the home— in front of the mirror putting her makeup on, in the bed in her worn-out nightgown and hair curlers, and on the couch smoking. She doesn't seem sad, although she isn't smiling either. I felt lonely looking at the images. She looked like she was sleep walking. It was in this moment I realized Minter's ability to turn the concepts of femininity inside out. I felt she captured the continual rotation of household activities a woman learns

at a young age from watching her mother. The woman seemed zombie-like in her faceless expressions. Although she is doing what was typically considered feminine behavior at that time, the underlying exposure of inner turmoil and exhaust was flooding my vision. Age had become her, and she was now facing the reality of the meaningless existence that surrounds her. It is within the details in each work of art that informs the “big picture.”

Minter’s exhibition was of great interest to me because of her use of conflicting expressions of beauty and femininity. Her title, *Pretty/Dirty*, was easily relatable to my research of the conflicting standards of women that is portrayed in media today. It brought many questions up in my understanding of femininity: If “beauty” is natural, then why are we measuring ourselves against these unnatural beauty standards in our culture? How can we be both beautiful and respected, if to be beautiful means we are to conform to an ideal? The opposing descriptions (pretty and dirty) is how Minter represented beauty in its many forms through visual imagery. Her art was both pretty and dirty in its representation of “beauty.” Although human sexuality is natural and beautiful, the outweighing objectification of women’s bodies and not men’s in our society today, is one of the biggest impacts on our cultures’ understanding of human sexuality. The ideals of “beauty” and “femininity” exist as social constructs. They are designed visions of desire, which seem to remove all traces of nature from their projected existence. Minter’s visualization of projected desire was hugely impactful on my own understanding of its influence as both a female and dance maker.

Julia Croft

The third source I studied was a performance art show presented at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Scotland, August 2016. It was a one-woman show by choreographer Julia

Croft, titled *If There's Not Dancing at the Revolution, I'm Not Coming*. This title references Emma Goldman's<sup>4</sup> famous line, "If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution" (Albright 95). Croft is a performance choreographer from New Zealand, and presented her show in the Summerhall Venue at the Fringe. Her show's genre was located under the *Dance, Physical Theatre and Circus (contemporary, dance)* section in the Fringe Magazine. With the amalgam of projection, dance, film recordings, stage props, spoken word, and over ten costumes changes, she challenged the objectification of women's bodies as a spectacle in popular film culture. I was fortunate enough to see this performance live in Edinburgh, as a piece of my choreography was being showcased in the Fringe that year as well.

Some of the most thought provoking moments of the hour-long performance were uncomfortably raunchy, but humorous in her presentation. Inspired by Laura Mulvey's film theories on the protagonist male gaze, Croft was able to take extremely serious conversations about the objectification of women's bodies in film, music, television, and art while penetrating through any lingering uncomfortableness from the audience with humor. From one scene to the next she would take another layer of her costume off, revealing her next role. In one scene, she played a woman in the spotlight of a horror film. As she crawled scared and barely dressed into and around the audience, a spotlight followed her closely directing the audiences gaze. She was strongly guiding the audience to process the objectified female roles which fall helplessly under the direction of the male gaze in films. She also performed both the male and female roles from a scene in the iconic movie,

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<sup>4</sup> Goldman was a free thinking feminist and anarchist activist of the first half of the 20th Century, who was known for her political activism, writing, and speeches.

*Titanic*, while also vocally representing the point-of-view of the camera's "gaze." It was both shocking and comical to hear the inserted information of the camera lens.

In the most climactic section, she gave the audience streamers, cans of silly string, and confetti poppers to use while she seductively pulled a cheese burger and fries out of her costume (having been in there for over thirty minutes at this point in the show) and rubbed them all over her body while dancing as if in a glorified hip-hop music video. She would hump the floor (with recognizable movements from any typical rap music video today) and stuff the food into her mouth, smudging her lipstick all over her face. It was uncomfortable to watch. I glanced around at the audiences' response, and watching the overall look of shock was half of the fun. Croft was hyper sexualizing and objectifying her body to sell food products, or what media industries have come to call "food-porn." She was selling her body, sexuality, and identity at the most exciting and horrifying level of spectacle all at once. She showed how the representation of women as a spectacle can strip down identity by over dramatizing each scene out of context. By objectifying herself and succumbing to the many outfits a woman's role requires, she was commenting on the separation of mind, body, and female identity. Ending on the floor with food and soda everywhere, the show comes to its close with her standing on a platform, stripped completely naked, but with every piece of her combined costumes on her head. While balancing her many hats, she circled parts of her body with a marker. It was such a strong ending because we had been laughing at her performance so consistently, only to be confronted with such a deep contemplative silence at the end.

Croft boldly exploited the imposed meanings and images that distort our views on women in the Western World. My post-performance experience of processing the content

was almost more impactful than the hour in the theater. Her use of humor was the most effective aspect of deliverance in the show. The concepts of the male gaze, hyper-sexualization, objectification, and the representation of females in media studies are not humorous at all. These issues can be uncomfortable to look at critically as an audience member without comic relief. Croft's understanding of how to penetrate through any resilience with her witty expression and presentation of the content, connected me both aesthetically as an artist and intellectually as a female.

For my concert I plan to use a similar tactic. I plan to present the selected materials from my research in an over-dramatic and humorous way, so the audience remains stimulated and open to such fiery, historical concepts. If the dancers can emote their exhausting attempts at embodying the representational "ideal" woman, it might allow the audience to notice their own presumptions. As an audience member at Croft's show, I realized my own boundaries of receiving such critically important but invasive source material. It is my goal, to provide a similar response or awareness to my audiences.

### Concluding Thoughts

Bill Arning, curator of the List Visual Arts Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote about the meaning that is generated in the arts, "that the specter of filthy lucre makes critical thinking about its aura impossible" (Arning et al. 21). One thing I thought about after analyzing these three artists was how the Western world's extensive projections of sexualized women make it near impossible for female artists to make work without its imposing effects on the viewer. What I mean by this is that because our society is constantly exposed to images that objectify women, it may be difficult to not project similar expectations on ourselves, others, and for the purpose of this research, onto the

performer. I believe this is the challenge in which I am most interested. The complex messages we receive from images of sex, desire, beauty, and power through contemporary media and visual culture can affect the society at large. If we can become aware of the effects that the barrage of images is having within our own perceptions of women, perhaps we will be freer to see the images as separate from the human being.

My close look at these three artists' work convinces me that art can aid in the exposure of feminist issues. Whether through exhibitions, performance art, or modern dance, art can help liberate ourselves and invite the viewing audience to reconsider societal perceptions, and perhaps celebrate with enlightened thinking.

## CHAPTER 3

### “The Personal is Political” & Choreographing the Female: A Creative Process

#### “The Personal is Political”

American radical feminist Carol Hanisch wrote a paper originally published in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* in 1970 that was widely reprinted and passed around feminist communities for years. Editors Shulie Firestone and Anne Koedt eventually retitled the paper to “The Personal is Political” which is now a well-known and widely spread phrase (Hanisch). Submerging myself into personal experiences and those of other women has led me to a deeper understanding of how political the quest for liberation can be for all humans. The following excerpted speeches show the fight for gender equality between years 1971 and 2016. I choose to include these excerpts in my thesis because they help demonstrate the personal struggle of gender equality being represented as a political matter. Each speech in their entirety also aided in the movement invention for my concert. Whether I included part of a speech within the music design or to generate movement, they all contribute to a bold and important message around which my concert also revolves.

In 1971, Gloria Steinem, American feminist and activist who was also part of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960's and 70's, delivered an “Address to the Women of America” at the founding of the National Women's Political Caucus. I chose to integrate a recording of this quote in the sound design of my concert production, and will reference it again in Chapter 4. She proclaimed:

This is no simple reform. It really is a revolution. Sex and race, because they are easy, visible differences, have been the primary ways of organizing human beings into superior and inferior groups, and into the cheap labor on which this system still depends. We are talking about a society in which there will be no roles other than those chosen, or those earned. We are really talking about humanism. ("Gloria Steinem Addresses the Women of America")

In 1995, moving forward in the fight for women's rights, the First Lady Hilary Clinton gave a speech at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. She argued:

If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights once and for all. Let us not forget that among those rights are the right to speak freely -- and the right to be heard. (Clinton)

In 2014, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson gave a speech at a special event for the HeForShe campaign, United Nations Headquarters, New York:

Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong... It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum not as two opposing sets of ideals. If we stop defining each other by what we are not and start defining ourselves by what we are—we can all be freer and this is what HeForShe is about. It's about freedom. (Watson)

In 2016, Former President Barak Obama also spoke on the continued fight for equality as a self-proclaimed feminist in his interview titled "This Is What a Feminist Looks Like" for a Glamour Exclusive article. He not only stood up for his two daughters and wife Michelle, but for all women and men in America. He stated:

We know that these stereotypes affect how girls see themselves starting at a very young age, making them feel that if they don't look or act a certain way, they are somehow less worthy. In fact, gender stereotypes affect all of us, regardless of our gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation. (Obama)

The fight for equal rights and liberation is for all of humanity now. Gender stereotypes are being challenged and re-challenged with each new generation. As I conducted my research



on this vast subject of gender equality, I developed my personal voice on the political feminist struggle.

### Choreographing the Female:

#### The Research Process

My research began on the topic of feminist theory in my undergraduate studies in dance at Columbia College, Chicago. In truth, I think it began the minute I came out of the womb, and the doctor announced I was a girl. However, it was during my college experiences that I was first given the opportunity to create movement that expressed things about which I care. Since the first time I experienced liberation through choreographic expression, I have been creating work within the realm of feminist theory. What I mean by *liberation* in this context is that by expressing myself through movement in the body, I was freed from negatively constructed images of self to which I felt confined. I found it was significantly easier to express my thoughts and opinions through dance. Looking back at the work I presented prior to graduate school, I can see a commentary on gender stereotypes and expectations, identity, female oppression, and ideals of feminine “beauty.” It wasn’t until I came to the MFA in dance program at University California, Irvine, that I was faced with asking myself what I wanted to research that I found where my interests were. I noticed myself thinking about one thing the most: The Pink Blanket monologue. I have been working and re-working that spoken word solo for eight years. Why was I so attached to it? Then it dawned on me: through the years this solo has given a voice to my personal relationship to feminist theory. Although my scholarly research coincided with the pursuit of my MFA, my artistic research had been manifesting for over a decade.

In the beginning stages of my research, I cast a net for incoming information. I watched documentaries, comedy skits, dance concerts, and theater productions while reading everything from historical writings to the psychology of gender stereotypes. Topics within the realm of feminist theory were showing up everywhere. Comedians such as Amy Schumer, Amy Poehler, and Bo Burnham are using material in their stand-up specials about gender stereotypes of our generation. Since 1998 Disney has increasingly produced strong and independent female protagonists such as Mulan, Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* and Merida from *Brave*. I saw *The Vagina Monologues* on display at the Barnes and Noble during the 2017 election season. In the years 2011 to 2016 documentaries about female oppression such as *Miss Representation*, *After Tiller*, *It's a Girl*, *No Woman, No Cry*, *Dark Girls*, and "*Original Sin: Sex*" are now on Netflix, and in the 2016 presidential Hillary Clinton ran for President. I filled myself with content and allowed to be charged by incoming information and personal discoveries. For instance, during this phase I realized that although I identify as a feminist, I was becoming more conscious of a negativity that appears to surround the label. Saying the word "feminist" didn't feel as liberating as I hoped. Feminism, by the Oxford definition is, "The advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes" ("Feminism"). I was proud to know I was a feminist but in witnessing uncomfortable responses to the mentioning of it was off-putting.

As I began to make my research net smaller, I decided to write about the relationship between art and feminist theory. With the understanding that dance provided me an outlet to express my voice, I became excited to research how complex the relationship between art and feminist theory is in American culture. Once I began reading work from dance scholars and feminist theorists, I found a path and structure to my

research. I wanted to know what has been said about this connection before, what artists today were creating a feminist commentary in their work, and I wanted to create my own opinions and work as well.

Everything I learned along the way became extremely helpful in building a web of contextual knowledge around which my opinions formed. The research conducted for Chapter 1 revolves around the connection of art and feminist theory, with dance as the main point of departure. I was pleasantly surprised to read work from many dance and feminist scholars that had written about this connection. Once I had decided more specifically how I wanted to tie my research on feminist theory to my passion in the arts, I didn't have to look far to find my sources. All the research I accumulated aided with my analysis in Chapter 2. Watching and analyzing three artists' works with a more refined vantage point excited me to look at my own work more critically. I didn't realize what a learning experience it would be to analyze my perceptions of others' work after creating such a passionate relationship to the subject matter. It was a bit intimidating. These artists inspired and excited me as a dance maker, and it made me anxious to turn the "gaze" to my own work.

### The Rehearsal Process

In the beginning stages of my rehearsal process I felt a barrier between some of the dancers and myself. It felt as if something was separating us on the understanding and familiarity of the subject of womanhood. Having become so conscious of my thoughts and experiences of being a female, I was uncertain how to help connect the dancers with the material on a personal level. The concepts of sexuality, oppression, objectification, and beauty ideals were making some of dancers uncomfortable and confused. I realized quickly

that all women do not have the same experiences and connections to being female. There was also a ten-year age difference between the dancers and myself. As my rehearsal process continued, I decided to keep my opinions and research mostly to myself, and try a more systematic approach by giving more generalized descriptions of my concept. I would describe the movement qualities and dynamics, but not my personal relationship to them. Although it is important to me that the dancers understand the context to fully embody their responses, I decided to take a more direct approach to learning the material. What I mean by *direct* is that I would teach the movement and provide fewer cues as to the underlying emotions it may provoke, instead of describing why I chose the movement and giving contextual details.

After settling into a few rehearsals with my cast of four dancers, they began to ask more questions. It seemed they were forming their own identity within the work. They became more interested in my thought process of creating the movement. We were slowly breaking down the barrier. It was at this point I also began noticing each dancer developing her own character identity through the movement. They would ask, “what should we be feeling during this part?” and I would ask them how the movement made them feel. It was then that they began emoting without my having to ask for it.

The dancers also became more interested in the *Pink Blanket* monologue, asking if they could be a part of it somehow. This immediately inspired me to add the dancers into the monologue section as an echo of the two female identities between which the character fluctuates. I found a UCI drama major who was excited to take on the role of the woman I created. Having seen her around campus before, I was drawn to her energy for some reason. When I saw her, I remember thinking to myself “she is “her”— the “her” from the

monologue.” When I asked about her interests in the subject, we ended up chatting about our feminist perspectives for a couple hours. As we began rehearsing the monologue, I realized it wasn’t going to be as easy as I thought to let go. The monologue is personal to me, and although she was bringing new dynamics to the character, it was hard for me to hear it delivered so differently. In time, with each rehearsal, I felt extremely moved by the journey this script has taken. UCI drama major Ashley Rose was taking it above and beyond in her character exploration. The dynamics of this “ideal” woman were vibrant and thought provoking. The process of character discovery within the text was the most enjoyable journey I had been on throughout my choreographic career. The text had been developing and changing along with my time and experiences as a female. I don’t feel I ever completely released it to Ashley until the performance week. When I finally did let go, I realized that it wasn’t only important to me. It was also important to Ashley, the dancers, and based on the audience’s response it also seemed to matter to many others. Although I feel the monologue is complete in a way, I also feel it is a living, breathing, work of art that will continue to influence my work in the future.

I first began to create the *Pink Blanket* monologue sitting in an undergraduate composition class. I wasn’t paying attention, and ran into a post on Facebook that had a divisional list of both male and female stereotypical behaviors. The next thing I knew I was searching for other depictions of gender stereotypes. I opened a new document on my laptop and began typing: “*Pink Blanket*.” I thought to myself, “this is where it all begins.” By the end of the night, I had my first draft of this multi-dimensional character who exploded out of my female existence onto the screen. I was creating a woman who was trying to fit

into the stereotypical gender norms, but who's identity can't be confined within those expectations. What I didn't realize at the time, was that it was about me.

As I write this thesis I understand that during my undergraduate years I identified as a dancer, as a female, and as an artist. I did not identify with the socially constructed gender expectations that were inherently enforced in my family or with the culturally defined beauty ideals that surrounded me. I didn't find value in some of the things my female friends did, and I didn't grow up dreaming of marriage or motherhood. The monologue was my first step into expressing my feelings and opinions about my personal connection with the feminist struggle. That first step has become a long-term journey of discoveries and expressions.

## CHAPTER 4

### Gender: Human Being The Stage Play

In the upstage right corner of the stage there is a female dressed in a 50's style cotton dress that is tightened at the waist and is billowing out with a white multi-layered petticoat. Her hair is in a tight hair sprayed up-do. She looks to be in the comfort of her home setting with a small side table holding her drink, cradle at her feet, and record player beside her. On the opposite corner of the stage there is a full-sized mirror and a dining table with four place settings. There are four female dancers kneeling around the cradle peering expressionless inside, as if they were dolls. The audience enters the theater unsure if the performance has already begun, and uncomfortably shuffle around to find their seats. As the house lights go down, all the remaining chatter subsides and silence fills the space. All that is heard is the sound of the woman standing at the mirror crying.

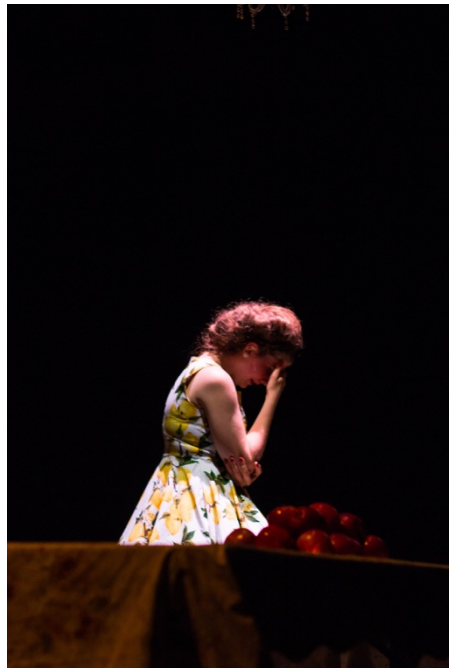


Figure 4.0 The Opening

A slightly haunting lullaby plays as the lights brighten. The woman is standing in front of the mirror crying with her back to the audience. After realizing she is not alone, she begins to speak to the audience as if they were guests in her home. She welcomes them and provides a short home walk through as any “ideal” housewife would be expected to do. She even introduces the audience to her mirror. She asks, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?”



Figure 4.1 The Cradle

The dancers surrounding and peering into the cradle are lit and simultaneously gasp and say, “it’s a girl!” As the monologue continues, her (the actress’s) personality fluctuates between the representation of the mocked “ideal” woman’s voice, and the representation of her real self. She speaks about the expectations placed on females as soon as they are born, defines the terms “ideal” and “perfect,” divulges why pink is chosen to represent females, and lists the projected qualities of the “ideal” woman. While she does this, the dancers are moving through the space around her gesturing and making shapes that echo what she is saying. Occasionally, the dancers also chime in vocally with a question or echoed response.





Figure 4.2 “Idealness”

Halfway through the monologue, the woman begins to lose her “idealness” and her internal thoughts explode out taking over her entire being as she no longer can uphold the qualities of the unattainable “ideal” woman. She has a moment where she gets stuck repeating the same word over and over as if a record was skipping, until she bursts out of the trance with a dramatic and loud representation of how ridiculous these expectations are. As she continues to laugh at herself and this conceptual woman she describes, she talks about aging, beauty ideals, and growing up with a false understanding about love and men. The dancers slowly leave her making their way to sit at the dining table, reconnecting with their faceless expressions. As the woman reminisces in her childhood dreams singing Disney songs, and talking about what a letdown it has been waiting for those expectations to become realities, her anger builds once more. She yells into the mirror, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who? Who, is the fairest of them all?” This shift from a more reflective and humorous state of expression to the anger that she directs into the mirror brings the monologue to its close. She delivers her remaining few lines into the mirror, and returns to her chair where it all began, and will begin over again. Before she sits down, she walks to

the record player and plays the song, “She Ain’t Built That Way” by old-time Kentucky singer Asa Martin and slowly returns to her original state of meaningless existence. The lights brighten on the dancers. One by one they slowly sink from their up-right seated posture and melt out of their chairs. They disappear briefly and emerge out from under the flowered table cloth on their hands and knees. Each of them takes an apple from the silver platter on the table. They walk in a line against the front row and gaze curiously at the audience as if they have never seen another human before. They each give their apple to someone in the audience before returning to the stage. The twang of the old tune about all things women can’t do because “she ain’t built that way” begins to invade the dancers’ sense of rhythm as they make their way in a single file line towards the mirror. The dancer in the front notices the mirror first and repels backwards into the other girls who are pushing her forward. One by one they push each other in front of the mirror where they look at themselves as if for the first time, up and down. They walk away from the mirror with heads hanging low and create a pile of bodies on the floor.

The woman in her chair changes the record and places the needle to begin a new song. The dancers are then awakened by a recorded woman’s voice with an upper class British accent over the soft sounds of the piano that begins with, “Chapter 2... Dress.” The dancers stumble around brushing off their dresses and begin to move as if programmed to do so together. The recording from *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness* is talking about the proper way to dress as a lady. The dancer’s expressions are mocking the sound and quality of the recording. As they drape their bodies with the heavy weight of being “perfect” over one another they begin to slowly lower to the ground. The woman in her home stands up and bumps into the record player causing it to skip. This creates

multiple bumps in the music as the needle attempts to find the beginning of the song. The dancers attempt to get to the back of the stage but fall to the ground with every skip in the record.



Figure 4.3 Dress

When the music begins again, the dancers fade into darkness at the back wall of the theater. A camera flash sound plays and the dancers are exposed in the light only for a moment. The picture the audience saw in the flash of light was the dancers lifting one girl up and pinning her for all to see against the wall. With every camera sound and flash of light, the dancers are seen against the back wall appearing vulnerable and trapped within their own life. The recorded voice from the Ladies Book of Etiquette returns this time speaking about the proper way to act as a female. This time she speaks about how to interact with others as a female. She gives directions on how and when to smile, how to react to serious conversations, how to bow when greeting another person, and how to sit still as a respectable female. The flash of the camera with the directions from the Book of Etiquette create a feeling of being under constant surveillance.

As the drone of the song playing under the sound effects fades away, the song transitions into the next section. The dancers stand up and leave the wall. As they walk towards the audience the recorded voice comes back in, this time talking about how to ride a horse as a respectable female.

To ride well is undoubtedly an admirable qualification for a lady, as she may be as feminine in the saddle as in the ball room or home circle... She must have a reserve in her manner, that will prevent contamination from the intercourse that too much riding may lead to. (Hartley)

The audience listens to the recording without knowing it is about riding horses and therefore are given freedom to connect the words to whatever subject comes to mind. In this case the words “riding” and “intercourse” provide a sexual tone against the dancers moving through the space with their hips. Without being told the subject title of the recording, it allows the audience to form their own connections of the movement and words to the sexualization of females in American culture.



Figure 4.4 Hips

The dancers finish on the ground as the music fades away. As they slowly peel their bodies off the ground once again, two dancers remain center stage while the others walk into the back wall and remain. A duet between the two dancers begins with another voice

recording. It is a voice of a woman with a counter contradictory response. Essentially, they are the same voice, but the responding vocals are robotic and distorted. The two dancers move together but with small differences in their movement quality. It is like a mirrored image that has small distortions in the reflection. The recorded text alters between the real voice and the reflected voice:

I am my body  
I am not myself.  
My body is a vessel  
I am not a vessel.  
It is a beautiful body  
I am not beautiful.  
This is my body  
This is not me.  
I can move my body through space  
I am not moving anywhere.  
I love my body  
I do not love myself.

I am not my body  
I am myself.  
My body is not a vessel  
I am a vessel.  
It is not a beautiful body  
I am beautiful.  
This is not my body  
This is who I am.  
I cannot move my body the way that I want  
I am moving myself through space.  
I do not love my body  
I love myself.

All the dancers meet in front of the mirror facing the audience. They pose with their hands in a prayer position over their heads while rounding forward looking at the ground.



Figure 4.5 Wolf Whistle

The sound of a woman walking in heels begins to play, slowly at first and then picking up speed. Ashley, the “ideal” woman, walks back and forth to the amplified clicks of her heels. With every heel click, the dancers perform gestural movements that progressively quicken until barely performable. During this violent movement of their bodies repeating the same gestures at a quickening pace, a wolf whistle<sup>5</sup> sounds. Hearing both the woman’s heels quickening and the wolf whistle creates a tense, fearful, and cold atmosphere. They end in the same prayer position as they began while the heel clicks and whistling fades away. The crackle sound of the record player looping around itself returns and the dancers come forward once again brushing off their dresses. They begin moving together building a rhythm against the loop of the vinyl. A recording plays of radical feminist Gloria Steinem’s “Address to the Women of America,” originally heard at the founding of the National Women’s Political Caucus in 1971:

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<sup>5</sup> a whistle with a rising and falling pitch, directed toward someone to express sexual attraction or admiration (“Wolf Whistle”).

This is no simple reform. It really is a revolution. Sex and race, because they are easy, visible differences, have been the primary ways of organizing human beings into superior and inferior groups, and into the cheap labor on which this system still depends. We are talking about a society in which there will be no roles other than those chosen, or those earned. We are really talking about humanism. (Steinem)

While this recording plays the dancers charge towards the audience with more athletic and aggressive dynamics. They begin lifting one another and pushing each other forward in support to take a stand. There are pictures of stereotypical gender lists, geological and political graphs of the United States, revolutions, equality signs, and pages of the constitution being projected through the dancers' bodies and onto the back wall creating a political and revolutionary scene.



Figure 4.6 Revolution

As the music fades away, the sound of the looping vinyl returns. The woman in her house bumps into the record player once more and the Ladies Book of Etiquette recording returns, this time about table etiquette. The transition from revolution back to the refined tone of the recorded female voice with the sudden bump of the record player hints at the backlash effect that can happen in post-revolutionary events. The dancers return to their faceless expressions but this time move in opposition to the directions being given. As the recording says, "Sit



gracefully at the table” the dancers instead sink down and slouch creating a humorous and ironic response.

After the recording ends, silence fills the space. There are apples in front of each dancers’ place at the table. They slowly begin to eat the apples. This quickly turns into a feast-like frenzy as they ravage their apples, spilling bites out of their mouths and around them.



Figure 4.7 Apples



Figure 4.8 Shame

During this feast, the woman hums a lullaby while rocking the cradle. She then bumps into the record player once more causing it to scratch back into the ending of “She Ain’t Built That Way” from the first scene. The dancers slowly wipe their mouths and once again slowly sink out of their chairs and crawl out from under the table. This time they walk directly to the mirror and one by one undress



leaving their dresses to pile up on the floor. Once again they form the pile of bodies, but this time without their clothes. The return to the song and the piling of bodies, represents the consistent fight for equality women have been circling around throughout feminist history.



Figure 4.9 Stripped

The lights fade down on the pile of female dancers and the woman in her home returns once more to the mirror. She begins to cry again. As the lights fade out, the sound of her sobbing leaves a sense of loneliness and continued struggle.



Figure 4.10 Backlash

## CONCLUSION

The investigation of feminist theory in art provides a platform to create commentary on widespread projections of femininity in American visual and mass media culture. The ability to challenge both inherited and learned perceptions of “idealness” through art allows for activism on behalf of feminist issues. The dancing body feeds the investigation of societal expectations of females in its expression through movement, providing a physical embodiment to the language of feminism. As a female choreographer, it is my goal to use dance as a form of activism that approaches a more humanist way of thinking. The personal inquiry that art provokes in both artist and viewer can be enlightening and liberating in its pursuit for individual truths. As other feminist artists continue to shed light on the concerns and effects of female oppression, I am beginning to find my place among them as one of British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey’s categorized *feminist art makers*.

American culture is submerged in images, advertising, media platforms, and cinema which all contribute to the learned perceptions of what is “ideal.” As many human beings continually search for liberation from societal ideals and expectations, it can be difficult to separate ourselves from the expansive and consistent barrage of daily images that reinforce the stereotyped “ideal” female figure. The bottom line is that the conceptual “ideal” woman is unattainable because of its false depiction of the female gender. Since American culture so heavily revolves around projected idealized images, it is difficult to separate ourselves from the status quo. To become the “ideal” would mean to forget oneself and to know oneself would most likely be unfitting to attain the “ideal” image. Artists such

as myself can contribute by revealing the underlying cause and effect of existing societal norms, with hope of providing insight into the individual truths of the human experience.

In the development of this thesis, I found that through dance I have identified with a feeling of personal liberation which has given me a sense of purpose in my choreographic work. It is now my belief that the ideology of liberation begins as a personal endeavor. In my research, I found that the connection of art and feminist theory has and continues to be explored by artists, feminist theorists, and scholars. It is exciting to know that in the fight for liberation and equality in our country, artists have a vital place to support their own political activism. Dance, as one of the many art forms, is extremely powerful in its embodiment of contextual idealization. As human beings we rely on our bodies to move us through space, give and support our lives, and act as vessels for incoming information and responses. Dance began and continues to translate expression into movement through the body, and therefore can exist as a source of personal liberation.

The following responses are in reference to the questions I asked during my research in Chapter 1:

*Is it possible to represent both the cultural representation and the lived experience at once?  
Can we (performer and viewer) actively distinguish between the two images?*

The *Pink Blanket* monologue was designed to represent both the cultural representation of the “ideal” woman, and her lived experience as a female. Although it seemed difficult to accomplish while conducting my research, I realized that the polarized nature of her identity allows for both representations to co-exist. Actively distinguishing between the multiple representations of the female image in art requires both performer and viewer to take notice to our natural responses, and facilitate a personal inquiry about how we identify with the content. To embody the cultural representation and the lived

experience at once I believe one must first recognize the separation, and secondly, understand the existence of both within their societal constructs. If there is no divide between the two images in our minds, then they cannot co-exist because they are one in the same. Through both the performance and viewing of art, we can interact with culturally ingrained images by conducting a personal relationship and inquiry using a more humanist approach.

*Can we as artists bypass the ingrained images of the culturally defined ideal in our endeavor to create work about the human experience?*

I believe artists can bypass social constructions of gender “ideals” through an investigative process with the use of improvisational tools, personal inquiries, and research to support a widened view on the subject. It was my goal, in the construction of the *Pink Blanket* monologue, to pierce through our societies gendered lens with the use of humor about the confusing yet understood requirements of the projected “ideal” woman. I also felt in my analysis of dance choreographer and provocateur Marie Chouinard’s work, that she bypassed socially constructed images, specifically of sexuality, by stripping the identity from the dancers. I felt she created a concert dance that challenges the projected nature of human sexuality by experimenting with instinctual sexual responses of both genders, within a world without moral judgement or concern. Viewing the sexualized spectacle allowed for the viewers to process their own sexual identity in conjunction to what they feel is “ideal” in our society. Simply stated, as artists we can bypass ingrained images of the “ideal” by challenging them instead of reinforcing their existence.

In Chapter 3 I mentioned the negative stigma that seemingly continues to surround the word *feminism*. As I find my voice among feminist art makers, my response to that negativity is becoming more apparent. I hear people say the word *feminist* in a whisper or

pessimistic tone as if it is a demeaning label. I see the resistance in peoples' body language when I mention my thesis revolves around feminist theory. I feel this resistance may come from a place of unfamiliarity. If someone doesn't know what feminism is then they can not form their own opinions. As I transition from a response that may have once been purely defensive, I now feel more interested in asking questions to provoke new awareness. It is my belief that as human beings it is our right and responsibility to challenge cultural conventions and ideologies so to continue the fight for equality and true liberation of the sexes. Instead of complying with social structures of organization, should we not quest to eliminate any lingering resistance to enlightened thinking about historical and inherited beliefs? In response to the negative aura that I feel continues to suppress the word *feminist*, I would ask those who cringe at the label to consider the following questions: If the label *feminist* were changed to *equalist* would you feel the same way about its inherited context? Is the weight of the struggle for female liberation in the past altering your perception of what the word actually means? Might it be important for us as humans to continually challenge our own perceptions? Do our minds evolve each day just as the world around us? If we settle into each belief so far as to close the door to new possibilities or explorations, then I wonder if we would stop evolving.

In my analysis and creative process, I furthered my own investigation into the subject of feminist theory on a personal level. As I move forward with my creative work it is my goal to continue using dance as a source of personal liberation, political activism, and expression. In my concert production of *Gender: Human Being*, I hope to offer a space to open a conversation about the female experience. To question existing ideologies in both

American society and art can aid in the continued fight for a more generous equality among human beings.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I asked what it was that I learned about myself. As an artist, I have found a sense of personal liberation. Identifying myself proudly as an emerging feminist art maker has provided me with a place to express my thoughts and experiences within the realm of feminist theory. As a female, I am finding a sense of identity and presence not only in my body, but also in the world. I do not identify with the socially constructed images of “ideal” femininity in American culture. However, I do identify with the fight for equality of the sexes, as well as with the strong and brave women who have contributed to the path towards liberation. It is my belief that even though as human beings we categorize ourselves into groups, gender should not represent one sex as less worthy than the other. One day, I hope we will all feel united together as living, breathing, and thinking beings who can love and support one another as equals.

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## APPENDIX

### *Pink Blanket*

A monologue by McClaine Timmerman

The monologue is divided into different fonts for the readers understanding:

- The **bold** text represents the “ideal” woman’s voice.
- The regular text represents the “real” woman’s voice.
- The *italicized* text is to help the narration of the story.
- The indented text with a dash (-) is vocals from the dancers.

*(The stage is set inside the home. There is a chair and side table with drinks, a cradle, a self-standing mirror, and a dining table with chairs. The dancers are echoes of the woman’s subconscious. They are performing the multi-faceted representations of the “ideal” woman. The woman sitting in the chair gets up and walks over to the mirror where she begins to cry.)*

**Oh ... Hello! It’s a good thing you showed up when you did. I’ve been crying for hours. I’ve re-done my make-up 3 times already.**

**Excuse me for being so rude. I am, a female.**

**And to clear up any confusion by traditional terms that means I have a vagina.**

Excuse me sir, eyes up here please. The way your male gaze is falling upon my fragile female body feels like you are objectifying me. Also, intelligence isn’t situation in the crotch...

A vessel to be filled with man’s wisdom and knowledge.

**Anyways, welcome to my home. This is the dining room, and over here we have the mirror.**

**Mirror, mirror on the wall... who is the fairest of them all?**

*(Lights up on 4 female dancers kneeling around the cradle)*

- It’s a girl!

**Congratulations it’s a baby girl, here is her pink blanket.**

**Let us wrap her in this symbolic feminist obstacle of expectations that our society has constructed to be known as the “ideal” woman:**

**Bows, pigtails, dance lessons, dresses, Barbie dolls, shaved legs, painted nails, menstrual cycle, lingerie...**

**High heels, long legs, tight butt, flat abs, big boobs, long hair, clean skin, and a fabulously passive aggressive and submissive personality.**

**The socially constructed ideal woman**

*(Three difference dancers echo her in different tones)*

- ideal woman?
- ideal woman.

- ideal. woman.

**First, let's define the word ideal.**

**Ideal, by definition, is satisfying one's conception of what is perfect.**

**Perfect, by definition, is free from any flaw or defect in condition or quality; flawless.**

**The socially constructed ideal woman**

**placed upon the female race**

**begins to take effect directly after birth**

**with the pink blanket.**

**As if genitalia alone is not enough for sex classification.**

- why pink?

**Well, in the early 20th century pink was considered a watered-down red which was thought of as a fierce color for boys.**

**But, when the Natzi's and concentration camps began using the color pink to identify homosexuals in the 1930's, the color then began to identify with the feminine.**

**High heels, long legs, tight butt, flat abs, big boobs, long hair, clean skin**

**There is not just one, ideal woman.**

**It is a consensus, of an idea, of the ideal woman.**

**The, ideal woman can do it all.**

**The ideal woman is not too thin, and not too over weight.**

**The ideal woman exercises and eats healthy.**

- yes, is that gluten free, dairy free, soy free, nut free, casein free, sugar free, calorie free?

**No.**

**The ideal woman is successful and independent... and also dependent...**

**She's... independently, dependent.**

**The ideal woman also does**

**the cooking,**

**and the cleaning,**

**and the washing,**

**and the drying,**

**and puts AAALLL of it, away.**

**it is such a pleasure.**

**The ideal woman always wants to have sex.**

**especially with you.**

**And always has an orgasm.**

**especially with you**

**The ideal woman votes,**

**and recycles,**

**and gives to the charities**

**votes,**

and recycles,  
and gives to the  
votes,  
and recycles...  
and recycles...  
and recycles, and recycles, and recycles, and recycles...  
And of course, I recycle! *(laughing)*

Everybody knows you have to recycle if you're going to be the ideal woman.

You'd have to be crazy to think that I don't...

Ok, I'm lying.

I don't recycle.

But, I feel bad about that.

Yes of course I feel bad about that. Because I know recycling is good for the ...

- universe

yea the universe, and the ...

- animals

yea the animals ...

Ok so, I'm lying again.

I don't feel bad about it at all.

But I do love animals.

And isn't that what life is about?

Finding love?

Like listen here...

I love chocolate

Let's just burn our bras, make love, and eat chocolate!

- Wooooooo!!

Oh wait but not this one, it gives the ultimate lift.

Where was I?

The ideal woman is quiet but not silent.

Educated but not smart.

Happy but not crazy.

Fun but not wild.

You know, all of that sounds extremely liberating, but...

NO ONE CAN ACHIEVE THIS!!

But hell if we women don't spend all our money, energy, and intelligence trying.

And by the time we realized we can't achieve it, we are old...

and therefore, already considered dead by society.

*(Walks over to mirror)*

And in search for constant validation....

Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who is the fairest of them all?

*(Crying desperately)*

Somebody please tell me that they love me.

Somebody please tell me that I'm pretty.

I'm ugly.

*(Composes herself)*

So POOF the miracle happens, and you were born a female...

    You know the original sin.

I mean if it weren't for you, Eve, us women may have acquired all the power in the world.

It's obvious that that is what we all want.

        High heels, long legs, tight butt, flat abs, big boobs, long hair, clean skin

Don't call boys.

    Cross your legs.

        Do the dishes.

            Don't act crazy.

                Keep smiling.

                    Stay thin.

                        And always keep your abundant sexual drive a  
                        complete secret.

                            From everyone.

                                Including yourself.

Speaking of sex, or what our generation now refers to as Netflix and chill....

I don't know about you ladies, but my definition of "chilling out" is by myself, in my pajamas, eating ice cream, watching Ryan Gosling win back Ali's heart in *The Notebook*.

Ryan Gosling...

Isn't he just the modern-day Prince Charming?

This is the reason why we women are so confused.

Because we grow up watching Disney movies where the knight and shining armor rolls up on his gorgeous horse... with his hair... in the wind, come to save the day with his magical kiss.

Ya know... we want that.

I want that.

So disappointed.

*(Humming)*

"A whole new world,

    A new fantastic point of view"

*(Singing loudly and dancing)*

"I know you,

    I danced with you once upon a dream"

So then we grow up and it's like...

    such a letdown.

*(Yelling into the mirror)*

Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who? Who is the fairest of them all? It's important that I know for my self worth.

**So congratulations. It's a baby girl.**

**Here is her pink blanket.**

**She will be able to do it all.**

*(Looking into the mirror)*

Bows,

pigtails,

loooooong boobs,

flaaaat butt....

wrinkled skin,

and a fabulously opinionated,

and stubborn personality.

*(end)*