CHAPTER I

A Prior Symptom

Attitudes

In this chapter I aim to contextualise the representation of woman in western art history during the nineteenth century, and examine the various stereotypes she came to represent. During this period women were being redefined as an artistic subject, the nineteenth century artist depicted woman as, a paradox, a sign, a martyr, in both a cruel and sentimental manner.

My intention is to read two paintings and one lithograph. The first is The Nightmare completed by Henry Fuseli in 1781, the other is Ophelia painted in 1851 by Sir John Everett Millais (1829-1896). The lithograph is by Fernand Khnopff titled Istar, (1888).

I have chosen to discuss these works sequentially, by time, as they span a difficult period in western history, a time of extreme social upheaval and uncertainty. Elaine Showalter, in her book Sexual Anarchy, discusses the complex developments that arose from class relations, race relations and sexual difference; a post-Darwinian “sexual science” offered expert testimony on the evolutionary differences between men and women. New developments in scientific theories could now justify superiority of class, race and gender; all past mythologies were thought to be shattered, a renaissance of true education was thought to begin: the ultimate truth could now be revealed.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century woman’s body became an archaeological site for rational exploration in western art history and science. From the Age of Enlightenment scientific & artistic assumptions had conceded that woman’s body was unknown territory: a site of hidden truth. This was not a new theory, but was informed by attitudes still seeped in the culture of the classics.
History locates both Plato (428-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC) as perceiving woman to be less than man. Plato believed that the soul was ‘more perfect than body’. The soul was connected to man by the faculties of mind and reason. Woman in turn was tied to desires and the senses of the body; which thereby located woman on the lowest rung of the metaphysical ladder. The philosophy of Plato was characterised by reason. He believed that a person can only have true knowledge of something if it is understood through their ability to reason. Aristotle, a natural physician and theorist, was also a pupil of Plato’s. His rational biological theories were informed by notions of Ideas of different degrees of heat: between an animal and human, and to varying degrees between man and woman. He believed that the more heat a body could generate, the more strength and perfection were the result of this heat. As woman’s body was perceived to be moist, wet and cold, her biological disposition placed her as less important, she was considered weak and imperfect: the opposite of man.

Early Christian views also placed woman’s biology as a primary concern. Her body was seen to be ruled by the senses, the so called inferior faculties connected with the body, that of the emotions and passions; her physical purpose in life was for the generation of the species: her biology defined her original inferiority.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), a thirteenth century Christian theologian, supported this view in his writings, stating that ‘woman was a helper in the work of generation;’ thereby making the male the primary object and subject in the role of reproduction, but still in need of the woman as helper in the generation of the species. As man was formed in God’s image, his spiritual strength was divinely ordained as perfect, he was endowed with the highest faculties of reason. Woman, on the other hand, was divinely ordained imperfect, her emotional instability, her passions and her sensuality were seen to be her grinding weakness.

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2 Ibid p.11, Aquinas, T, quoted by Nancy Tuana.
The ancient physicians believed that woman’s uterus was the cause of much of her ill health. They believed that the womb could float around within woman’s body causing various physical and psychological disturbances and responded instinctually to smell - much like an animal:

‘If the uterus had traveled downward, this could be remedied by applying fetid smells to the ‘genital region, which would cause the womb to run back to its original position’.3

The linking of woman’s body with the instinctual perceptions of animals, reinforced the ancient assumption of woman’s lower status in the dominant hierarchical world of man. The base extincts of the animal world were aligned with the intuitive faculties; the lower realm not governed by the world of Reason. The sensory world of touch, taste, sight and sound, while being regarded as hopelessly inferior,4 offered other ways of experiencing a visual and tactile world. A secretive world which was not visible to the naked eye was not easily rationalised, it was a dark and forboding realm. This unknown world was in need of exploration and colonisation; it was thought that scientific rationalism could enforce and control a sense of order.

The reinforced assumption that woman, while being less than man, was therefore the object of (man’s) scientific investigation was played out throughout the next five centuries through to the Age of Enlightenment. Prior to this point in time, assumption and speculation played the central role in the prognosis of why certain behaviours or illnesses occurred. The emphasis now shifted to factual findings of how things worked; through anatomical and physiological advances, what may once have been considered to be a disease could now be easily recognized as a symptom of a disease.

3 ibid p. 94.
The act of looking was considered paramount to both artistic and scientific disciplines; observation and science, combined with philosophical reasoning, was considered to be a ‘natural’ way of understanding all human behaviour. While the anatomists cut deep into the surface of the skin and probed the underlying tissue and internal organs for truth, the artist sought to render his truth in a realistically visual manner. With the aid of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg’s (1742-1799) *Philosophical Ideas of Metaphorical Dissection*, a new approach to scientific investigation began. Lichtenberg’s theory of Pathognomics, the scientific/artistic ‘readings’ of the body’s surface i.e. a person’s clothing, gesture, posture, and so on, were thought to hold signs which could be read by scientific and artistic experts. This new way of perceiving ‘fixed signs’, captured and held within the body’s surface, became an exceedingly useful tool - a moral aid for defining class, race, and sexual difference. On the other hand Johann Caspar Lavater’s (1741-1801) philosophical and scientific discovery of the interconnection between the mind and body introduced the theory of physiognomy. The physiognomist believed that the body held symptoms, (which were an expression of the mind) and only the specialist was able to read these symptoms.

Propelled by the Victorian obsession with female sexuality and sanctioned by ideas of objectivity and realism, (while still being influenced by superstition and religious dogma) the philosophical search for notions of (false) truth in art and science was pursued with much ‘objective certainty’.
Virtue

Bram Dijkstra discusses how during the eighteenth century ‘the soul-healing power of female virtue’ was a highly prized commodity for the eighteenth century businessman. The rise of new economic activities for the working-class and middle-class meant less shared ideas concerning equality. Relationship between men and woman were now altered as work went from the home front out into the social sphere: woman’s role changed from an equal partner to a dependent partner.

This period in history changed the social construction of both male and female alike, feminine domesticity and financial dependency lay heavily on the shoulders of the eighteenth century male, in return, woman’s appearance: her clothes the materials used in the clothing became a sign of social respectability and standing, woman’s worth was now equated to her visual appearance.

Woman’s sexuality was called into question and defined as unstable. Eighteenth and nineteenth century painters, influenced by the prevailing philosophical ideas reinforced this distorted perception of woman’s sexuality by embracing those current ideas and fervently depicted the passive (soul-less) female body in a sentimental and voyeururistic manner. The Swiss painter Johann Heinrich Fuesli (1741-1825) was known to have collaborated with Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801) on numerous projects which visually sought to capture Lavater’s theory of symptoms trapped within the body.

History and evolution had determined woman’s present state, now science and art were philosophically linked in rationalizing the subjugation and suppression of woman. Not only was her sexuality a threat to the social order and in need of constraint, her mind was unable to comprehend the workings of a complex contemporary society.

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Fig 1 Henry Fuseli. *The Nightmare* (1781)

**Imagining**

The painting *The Nightmare* completed by Henry Fuseli in 1781, depicts a helpless beautiful woman dressed in a filmy white gown; she lies as if with a broken back, not in pain, but as though she is completely exhausted, almost dead. Her body is presented as passive, inert; an eerie cold light filters into the darkened and claustrophobic space exaggerating her eroticized image and making her appear lifeless. The visitation of an incubus who sits on-top of her abdomen adds an undertone of violence as he stares menacingly out towards the viewer. The incubus’ closed and rigid body shape casts a long shadow across her lower abdomen acting like a stain upon her gown. He sits his body weight upon her, rendering her physically inept: a martyr in need of punishment for arousing other’s sexual interest.
The thin filmy white gown acts as a second skin accentuating every curve and hollow of her ‘seductive’ body. Surrounded by rich velvet like drapery and other soft sensuous fabric, the line of each form is organic and fluid. The warm red curtain echoes the soft red cloth that lay beneath her body, which, in turn, echo the soft fleshy folds of woman’s (hidden) sexual organs.

The depiction in art of a helpless woman, unable to defend herself against the forceful sexual advances of others was an aesthetic and voyeuristic sight to behold. Leppert states ‘the bed in art often represents less the site of mutual pleasure and love that a place for the punishment of females, the locus of sanctioned revenge.’ He also suggests that ‘the removal of drapery references Eve’s sin,’ her shame is woman’s shame, she is judged by her past sins to be eternally punished.

The life-less young woman represented in The Nightmare is not a real woman, (though obviously modelled on one) but a fantasy, an imaginary female body: a projection of the male spectator, the artist and anatomist alike.

Un-Natural

*The Nightmare* depicts the cool light of the moon filtering in, casting an eerie light onto her white luminous gown - the body of woman acts as sign for the night; the irrational world of dreams and anxious nightmares. The possibility of death is ever present when the life giving presence of the sun is obliterated. The moon needs the sun to reflect its surface; much like woman was supposed to need man to reflect her dark and mysterious world and ‘to explain the natural origins of her pallor: her white skin, her “consumptive” passivity.’ Science had already aligned woman’s menstrual cycle with that of the moon and the moon’s

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7 ibid, p. 216.
connection to the changing tides of the oceans, woman was therefore linked to the natural world - woman was now a sign for nature, linked to the changing seasons and the unknown cosmos.

One cannot view this painting without considering why Henry Fuseli may have painted it. As I mentioned before, the imaginary body of woman was a fantasy of the artist and (for) the spectator. Henry Fuseli drew incessantly in his sketch book producing hundreds of erotic sketches of women; this is not to say that only his private drawings were erotic, his paintings were also infused with eroticism. Peter Webb in his book titled *The Erotic Arts* states that Fuseli’s works ‘express the obsessions of a man who was painfully aware of his lack of sex appeal owing to his diminutive height and unattractive disposition.’⁹ We could assume from this quote that Henry Fuseli’s ‘obsessions’ were expressed and projected within his own works; the squat dwarf sitting atop the dormant woman, could quite well be a manifestation and reflection of his own inadequacies, and on a broader social level, we can assume that similar anxieties were being reflected in both art and science; for the late eighteenth century male, fear of female sexuality loomed menacingly on the horizon.

**Martyr**

The character of Ophelia was brought into prominence by the Pre-Raphaelites during the nineteenth century. She defined the predominant view that the ideal woman was self-sacrificing; an empty and abandoned vessel, defined by her nature she was destined to a life of passive subservience. The Ophelian woman was often depicted as beautiful, vacant and unpredictable. She was unable to take control of her life due to extreme melancholic and emotional instability. Her sexuality was linked to (her) madness.

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The painting by Sir Herbert Millais depicts Ophelia fully clothed, floating face up in murky water surrounded by dense untamed foliage. The space in which Ophelia is represented is claustrophobic. There is no symbolic view of another land beyond the site of her death, her natural place is among the untamed weeds: nature in all its varying uncertainty. The undergrowth, that dark mysterious space which is often hidden from view, that tangled and chaotic other place where the laws of rational logic are defied.

Ophelia having been driven to despair, spurned by Hamlet, returns to the cliché ridden, fluid womb of nature; ‘woman and water united forever in a passive voyage to eternity among the reeds’10. Ophelia accepts her fate, she does not act to effect change, she merges with the amorphous transparency of fluid water. The painting of Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, (1484-90) depicts the early Renaissance Woman (the new Eve) as Venus rising modest but triumphant from the open shell upon the foreshore of a calm clear sea. The nineteenth century Ophelian Woman, in complete contrast, is destined to return to the murky waters from which she came. Woman and water have been symbolically linked, Elaine Showalter states:

‘Even her death by drowning has associations with the feminine and the irrational, since water is the organic symbol of woman’s fluidity: blood, milk, tears’11.

Linking woman with the fluidity of water, aligns her complicity with nature, the seasons and the cosmos. As water she is bound by the edges of the earth and linked in time to the seas, to the moon and the tide; and as nature she remains undeveloped, primitive, more like a child.12

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Sir Herbert Millais places the body of Ophelia in a horizontal position, she lay submerged in a bed of water, drowned in her own sensuality: a victim of her own biology. Ruled by her body and not by her mind, she represents all women of weak temperament. The fact that an unknowable sexual force could send a woman mad.

The artists of the nineteenth century explored the eroticised image of the sleeping woman (not quite dead), the bound woman and the helpless woman. She was represented as passive, inert, weightless and ethereal: the universal symbol for all natural phenomena.

**Virago**

Fernand Khnopff’s lithograph titled Istar (1888) depicts a young woman, her hands apparently tied together above her head as if in an act of punishment. Her long dark hair hangs freely down her back, her chin
is raised exposing her long slender neck. Istar stands erect and defiant, the gesture of her pose suggests that if she were not bound and restricted in movement she would reek havoc on those around her.

The paradox here is that the fair skinned, fair haired child-like woman, (presumed to be irresponsible and helpless), was to be represented in quite a different manner to the dark haired ‘wanton woman’ whose overpowering sexuality is here represented as a mutating monster in need of control. The animal-like instincts of woman were thought to reside deep within her ‘wandering womb’: a symptom of woman’s biological inferiority and a sign of her emotional instability; her body, if not restrained (by man) would (s)mother and devour him.

Fernand Khnopff’s representation of a ‘wanton woman’ whose naked body is restrained but exposed to the viewer, is in total contrast to Millais’ Ophelia and Fuseli’s depiction of a passive woman. Istar’s cropped frontal pose exposes her pubic area and upper thighs which are represented by thick snake-like tentacles which merge and twist into a facial scream. The tentacles appear to be entering her abdominal area; here the tentacles replace her pubic hair, a common social taboo in the history of western painting. Richard Leppert states it ‘is a body sign of adult sexuality that, in the history of representation, simultaneously defines her innocence and her guilt’. The naked female with her genitals exposed, has often been reviled as being obscene and linked to both sin and shame throughout the history of western art (Eve had her pubic region covered by a fig leaf).

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Representation of the female breast in nineteenth century western art was an attractive and socially acceptable sign for female sexuality: breasts displayed the softness of flesh as sign of female nurturance and comfort and also a sexual desirability. Woman’s genitals would normally be hidden from view, but here they take on another form of life, and as Barbara Creed states “the all incorporating black hole which threatens to reabsorb what it once birthed”\textsuperscript{14}.

The desire to re-discover and re-define the body of woman, albeit through knowledge of the inner workings of woman’s body, specifically those organs necessary for the reproduction of human life thereby link her biologically with nature and the cosmos. The reasoning which

\textsuperscript{14} Creed, B (1993) \textit{The Monstrous Feminine Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis}: London, Routledge, p. 27.
linked the body of woman to nature and other worldly realms determined a cruel twist of fate. Though her body became a form or representation for both fear and desire, she was now rendered inept and artificial.

The dominant models for nineteenth century representation of woman were the Ophelia/Istar dichotomy. Aided by mythology, fed by a changing social climate and new developments in scientific theories these two opposing forces of woman were deeply etched into the psyche of the nineteenth century male. The nineteenth century artist placed woman in the context befitting her social acceptability: in interior settings (domestic) or within the chaotic world of nature.
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CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper I examine how during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries woman became a sign for scientific and artistic investigation.

Woman’s body was metaphorically and symbolically linked to the unconscious world of the unseen and the immaterial and as such was investigated by the anatomist/artist. Fear, desire and uncertainty aligned with ‘the imaginative and the imaginary’ in both science and art. Chimerical thoughts permeated all facets of life. The nineteenth century anatomist set about investigating the unreal, aided by artistic realism they sought to find and capture answers which were thought to be trapped in the nervous system, the tissue and organs of the body.

The representation of woman as sign coincided with society undergoing radical restructuring and redefinition. The changing economy required a re-assessment of society’s codes, systems and values. The roles of men and women required new ways of perceiving and relating to each other in a changing social and political environment. Those who desired certainty were faced with uncertainty, life seemed paradoxical, as did nature. The representation of these uncertainties were often captured in a frozen moment of archaic dystopia or heroic utopia. Belief and reason played an important role during this period in history. The nineteenth century scientist was not concerned with the assumed truths of God and divinity. Their projected desire was to explore moral uncertainty.

Darwin’s theory of evolution required a reassessment of society’s beliefs as creation being immutable. The certainty experienced by theologians, philosophers and western society for centuries: that man was created in God’s image - as the perfect being, now came under serious threat. The unalterable order imposed by the creationist theory was now under the microscope. Change and complexity were considered by Darwin to be the new tenets of evolution.
While Darwin’s theories on evolution and natural selection positioned woman as biologically inferior, Sigmund Freud’s theories, analysis and subsequent hypothesis of the workings of woman’s mind placed her in an equally inferior position. While Darwin’s theories remain firmly in the nineteenth century, Freud’s theories have infiltrated psychological and philosophical thinking well into the late twentieth century.

Freud believed that woman was incapable of deflecting her biological or sexual energies into socially constructive or creative channels, and was therefore a "retarding and restraining influence" on the development of the social order\(^1\). This perceived conception of woman lacking rational control in mind and body had been a continuing process of hierarchization. Woven deep into the fabric of western society this form of thinking was extolled by Freud and his predecessors.

Sigmund Freud was a philosophical and scientific descendant of the Physiognomic & philosophical theories of Johann Caspar Lavater (see chapt. I & II). Freud tried to calculate the unseen to arrive at a fixed and universal truth, this narrow psychological and intellectual form of inquiry into the workings of the mind and body brought forth new ways of excavating the internal without the physical aid of the scalpel. The physiognomical process chartered by the eighteenth century philosophical scientists was an early form of depth psychology, whereby an in-depth analysis of a person’s body symptoms was thought to unravel and disclose the original person hidden from the rescuing specialist.

Freud’s preoccupation was with the transformation of empirical phenomena into a clearly defined teaching system, a teaching system governed by laws which enabled the specialist to connect the correct answers to existing physiological & psychological problems.

Liz Grosz in her book *Volatile Bodies* investigates Spinoza’s theories on the body and his claims that ‘the body does not have a “truth” or a “true nature” since it is a process and its meaning and capacities will vary according to its context. These limits and capacities can only be revealed in the ongoing interactions of the body and its environment.’

If this is applied to the body of a woman, at any point in western history, it becomes harder to define and fix ‘one true meaning’ of woman, regardless of the continual exploration and dissection of the anatomist/artist.

Even in today’s contemporary society, as we head towards the end of the twentieth century the body of woman is still being re-presented and re-constructed to suit the ever changing social and political climate. Whether in writing, film, or fine art, the re-presentation of the body of woman continually transforms. Throughout this evolving process, the representation of the body of woman in western art history is still culturally specific and still positioned as a sign for vanity, narcissism, shame et cetera, and a common held belief that woman still hides her ‘true nature’ beneath a mask of clothing and make-up. Even in the late twentieth century the site of woman’s body remains a receptor for projections of mystery and fear.

The body of woman represented throughout this paper is shown to be a construct of the artist’s/anatomist’s imagination: the passive, fragmented, dead body of woman became a cipher for those specialists of moral uncertainty - she became the mirror of his anxieties and ‘phantasies’.

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INTRODUCTION

Layering

Richard Leppert states that 'Images are not the things shown but are representations thereof i.e. re-presentations. Indeed, what images represent may otherwise not exist in "reality" and may instead be confined to the realm of imagination, wish, dream, or fantasy.' If images are products of a constructed 'human consciousness', a frozen moment in a social, cultural and historical epoch, they also represent a fragment of a reality which can contest, oppose and affirm our ways of seeing in the world; therefore our perception of these constructs create endless possibilities of multiple layering of images and meaning.

This research paper attempts to investigate the re-presentation of the body of woman in 18th and 19th century western art and science and how this reflects the imaginary world of the male artist and scientist.

Assumption

Social Darwinism informed much of nineteenth century thinking. Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) theories on evolution and natural selection placed the primary of male superiority and genius firmly at the forefront of his theory of natural selection. Darwin’s theories became entrenched within the male dominated institutions of both art and science. He perceived women as being biologically and socially unstable and inferior. Darwin’s research, and the subsequent publications of his books, have positioned him as a major thinker of the nineteenth century.

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The development of the character of woman during this period of social Darwinism was one of an “undeveloped human”. The perception of woman as being less than perfect has been played out fairly consistently throughout various times in western history, thereby reinforcing already entrenched assumptions of woman as a social misfit. Marred by this form of thinking and consigned to the ranks of an inferior being in need of total control from those who were more powerful, woman was reduced to a stereotype in both art/science. She became the passive victim, femme fatale and the perfect corpse.

Agent of Event

The initial catalyst for my interest and research into representation of woman in western art history and science was the film DEAD RINGERS, by David Cronenberg. The film is set in America during the 1980’s and charts the experience of two small boys into manhood. The two boys are twins. They happen to have names more often associated with women - Bev & Elli. They emerge from their childhood into adult life, into highly successful gynaecologists. This film, in which woman’s body is perceived by the gynaecologist as imperfect, is multi-layered and complex. Her interior body is the wrong shape, wrong size and scale etc., for his perfectly designed anatomical instruments.

Throughout this film the portrayal of the gynaecologist is one of superiority and control. He creates fantastic elaborate looking medical instruments to aid his gynaecological practice. The instruments are subjective in design (much like the seventeenth century public executioner and anatomist whose instruments of anatomy were also tools of torture). On one level this film suggests that twentieth century gynaecological investigation of a woman’s body is inextricably linked

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3 ibid, p. 38.
and portrayed as an erotic and sadistic process. It establishes the specialist/gynaecologist as being distant or revulsed at the sight of the body of woman. He remains at a ‘voyeuristic distance, to enjoy witnessing and enacting violence and associate it with the sexual pleasure’.

Even though this film is set in the twentieth century, for me it holds a clue to the past. The twin gynaecologists’ ambivalence towards their subject and their continual displaced anxiety onto their women patients, is similar to that of the nineteenth century artist and scientist. The twin gynaecologists were an exaggeration of the nineteenth century artist/anatomist in that they continued to refuse and acknowledge that ‘bodies construct and in turn are constructed by an interior, a psychical and a signifying view-point, a consciousness or perspective’.

The body of woman was not recognised in art/science as more than a complex object, an organic system to be investigated with a fixed definitive absolute outcome. Towards the end of the nineteenth century scientists collaborated with artists in canonising the link between disease, woman and madness, and as an artifact her body was reduced to signs and symptoms which could be viewed, diagnosed and investigated by those specialists of objective authority - the artist and scientist.

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Influences

For the practical component of my research, the investigation and representation of the ‘true’ meaning of woman posed an interesting, if not complex dilemma. Various women artists have placed themselves in the position of the object and subject of their own investigation, a few of these artists have informed my own attitudes concerning the representation of a personal female experience.

I have chosen to briefly discuss three artists who have informed my own investigation and research. Two twentieth century women artists who I perceive to have made a significant contribution to art history, albeit in the sense of exposing the defined limits set within the dominant culture, are Frida Kahlo and Louise Bourgeois.

The third artist is an eighteenth century engraver, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whose work redefined ‘the general cultural trend in separating the informative from the imaginative’. 7

Frida Kahlo’s body of work - her narratives and self portraits, all express her continuous relationship to her own body and her immediate environment. Kahlo placed herself as the scientific object and the artistic subject of her own investigation. Her paintings reflect the outcome of the misfortunate experience of being a passenger in a bus accident in 1926 which left her permanently physically and biologically impaired. Kahlo re-presents herself in a state of psychological anguish as a result of the continual pain she experiences from the accident which results in many operations upon her spine. Her traumatic miscarriage in 1932 also fuels much creative imagery.

Kahlo’s paintings often verge on the descriptive, though her aim is one of self-presentation and a re-presentation which she ‘repeatedly brings into play this body-as-garment metaphor’ where the hierarchy of

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surface and depth is turned inside out. Frida Kahlo re-presents the unrepresentable, ‘her body is a site where political concerns intersect with personal ones’ she places herself as the subject and object of obsessive investigation - a participant and voyeur of her own life experience.

The second artist is Louise Bourgeois, whose evolving organic sculptural forms are hard to categorise and fix within a particular historical framework. Her work represents a non linear evolution and expression of a continuous process... ‘The subject is the artist. The object is the whole thing, the contained and the container, it’s the whole environment.’

These two women artists influenced my thinking in terms of the possibilities of representing interiority and fragmentation with a seductive surface to both attract & repulse the viewer/voyeur. While an artist from the nineteenth century provoked ideas for merging imaginary landscape with architectural/body forms. This amorphous imagery challenges perception of space and place thereby creating multifaceted illusion and ambiguity.

I chose to include Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) as for me he emulated the eighteenth century anatomist by using his ‘etching needle as a creative surgical tool to uncover information about an otherwise unretrievable past.’ Piranesi’s etchings of architectural buildings are similar to x-rays in that they depict accidental holes or “wounds” in a structure and surface. The emphasis on the decaying masonry which is juxtaposed, inlaid and assembled parts of architecture, resembles a skeletal structure of the body, resulting in a complex scattering of architectural and figurative forms. This creates a spatial ambivalence whereby the inside/outside cannot be easily delineated. Using these visual tools Piranesi attempts to uncover and retrieve the uncertainty and ambiguity of a past/present social body.

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5 ibid. p.19.
The Medium

As the body of woman has traditionally been linked as an object and medium for the expression of art, I chose to use x-rays and ultrasounds taken of my own body and combine the nineteenth century artist/anatomist’s approach of combining the imaginative with the scientific in both my paintings and drawings; thereby exploring self-presentation - the object and subject under artistic investigation: a construct, with a hidden psychical interior, an archaeological depth to be re-visited and re-explored, re-constructed and re-presented.

The unifying link between the research project and the research paper is that both set out to investigate the state of subjectivity that permeates and reflects much of our own objective thinking, and as a process this investigation both reveals and conceals a psychological interior where contradictions abound.

While the research project aids the exploration of interior space, the subjective realm where the conscious mind demands logic and reacts by imposing knowingly i.e. like the ambiguous shapes and forms which float within the paintings and drawings, this unreal space or unknown territory acts as the site for the viewers 'hidden truth'. The absence of certainty within the works challenge the viewers perception and demand that the viewer project their own range of conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings upon the work, thereby placing them in a similar position as the nineteenth century specialist.

The research project combines aspects of some of the imagery from the works I have chosen to discuss throughout this paper. One quality which predominates is the conveyed sense of silence in a world somewhere between day and night. This world silently reveals incomplete & fragmentary mute forms floating in a sea of uncertainty, a reflection and acknowledgement of the process of our existence, our imperfection and the fragile impermanence of our being in the world.
The materiality of these artworks contain traces of the process of production which therefore reflects a social and personal history. I perceive these artworks to be a re-expression, a re-investigation of a multifaceted reality. This reality is ‘an open-ended, pliable set of significations, capable of being rewritten, reconstituted’,¹² not as defined by a scientific framework which seeks to categorise the body of woman as a fixed set of signs, predisposed to various sociological, biological or psychological illnesses.

The following three chapters seek to explore and investigate (much like the anatomist) the contradiction of the traditional archetypal journey from the dark to the light, (death-rebirth) which was metaphorically being played out by the anatomist/artist during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and ascertain why woman was the chosen medium.

Heroic mythical journeys were undertaken: the philosophers ‘ascent from darkness to light’,¹³ their alignment with the truth seeking realm of the mind set them on course, exploring the possibilities of correspondence “between the natural and the spiritual world”, via the medium of the body of woman.¹⁴

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An Imaginary Other

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ABSTRACT

This research paper has developed over the past four years and from its original inception taken various twists and turns before focusing on a specific period in western art history.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held fascination for me as it marked the beginnings of modern science, a time when the artist and scientist collaborated in a mythical search for a key to unlock the mysterious realm to the unknown. With their tools of trade the artist/scientist set on course to discover a new frontier thought to be buried somewhere in woman’s body.

I have formulated this paper into three chapters. By reading and contextualising five paintings and two lithographs from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, I examine how the representation of the body of woman was reduced to a stereotype in both art and science. She became the passive victim, femme fatale and the perfect corpse. Her body was reduced to a fixed set of signs and symptoms which could be viewed, diagnosed and investigated by the eighteenth and nineteenth century artist/scientist.

By examining these eight images I seek to expose the subjective nature of the artists/anatomists’ investigation during this period in history and reveal how art and science formed a complicit alliance in the misrepresentation of the body of woman. Her body became the site and the chosen medium for the projected fears and phantasies of the male imaginary.
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CHAPTER II

An Ideal Death

Inanimate

In this chapter I will analyse ideas surrounding the representation of the image of woman as corpse, and notions of feminine death\(^1\) in nineteenth century painting. Two paintings I will examine are Gabriel von Max Der Anatom, painted in 1869, and an anonymous lithograph of the painting by J H Hasselhorst, titled, \textit{J.C.G. Lucas and his Assistants Dissecting a Female Cadaver}, 1864.

These two paintings depict the bodies of anonymous female corpses, Elizabeth Bronfen has suggested that the predictable reading of these images would be to assume that the two bodies were of prostitutes who had thrown themselves into the river.\(^2\) This particular comment could lead one to believe that prostitutes with their ‘insatiable needs’ to be “vampires of the streets”\(^3\) felt compelled to redeem themselves by drowning. Now, cleansed of past sins the corpse of woman lay inanimate and pure, an object now venerated by artist and anatomist as an ideal subject; a sign of morbid eroticism.

Unknown Terrain

In Gabriel von Max’s \textit{Der Anatom}, the anatomist is seen pulling back the fine veil of cloth that protects his gaze from that which he fears. His clenched right hand strategically poised above a partially exposed breast, portrays an anxious anticipation of what lay beneath the veil. He

\begin{itemize}
  \item \(^1\) Bronfen, E (1992) \textit{Over Her Dead Body, Death, Femininity and The Aesthetic}: NY, Routledge.
  \item \(^2\) ibid pp. 13.
  \item \(^3\) Dijkstra, B (1986) \textit{Idols Of Perversity Fantasies of Feminine Evil In Fin-De-Siecle Culture}: NY, Oxford University Press.
\end{itemize}
fixes a firm gaze upon the object of his sight, the anatomist/artist is now in the position of the ultimate male fantasy of conquest, domination, and power; he cannot be rejected by the object of his gaze, there is no challenge from his subject of intent. The anatomist/artist is now free to look and explore the unknown terrain of the corpse of woman, both as subject and object, internally and externally.

The corpse is somewhat of a contradiction here; if in her previous life she worked as a prostitute her present state of transformation is more like a religious icon. Swathed in a shroud of luminous white cloth, this protective film defines the contours of her dead body, presenting her body as a sign of wholeness, a sacred object; her interior body cannot be defiled as she represents something beyond human control and limitation. This ‘protective film’ acts to conceal what may be both attractive and repulsive in the subject: lest the viewer’s eyes and sensibilities be offended by a ‘less than’ perfect female form.

Fig 4 Gabriel von Max. Der Anatom (1869)
Her body lay as if in waiting, not quite dead and not quite alive, she appears to be in the nether-world, awaiting transportation. The lofty pursuit of the translation between life and death, and the communication with some other-worldly existence, was presumed possible in the presence of the highly aesthetic medium of a totally compliant female corpse.

Other-Worldly

Elizabeth Bronfen discusses the importance of the structure of this painting, how the dead objects are 'arranged in a triad of skulls, books, manuscript'. These act as visual codes which connect the anatomist’s thoughtful eye with that of his hand, the head of the corpse, his research material and the skull positioned to the far left of the painting. These visual codes reinforce the already suggested idea, that here, woman as corpse acts as a sign, through which the anatomist seeks to logically validate his research in relation to life/death and the morbid search for meaning.

The High Realism of the painting also belies the 'unreal' subject matter. Fantasy, the unknown, the imagined, is positioned as being knowable if viewed through the body of a female corpse; her body belonging to the material world, unable to transcend it unless facilitated by a figure of the Father of authority. The corpse acts as medium, the hands and the mind of the anatomist are what facilitates his knowing and her transformation from the material existence into the transcendent realm of textuality - beyond the grave.

Gabriel von Max’s painting portrays the anatomist in a central location, upright and midway between the confirmation and recording of his truth, and the imagined truth - which is about to be revealed.

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5 ibid, pp. 31-35.
The anatomist, is much like a Catholic Priest in a confessional box. One captures a glimpse of an outline of dark clothing, which highlighted by his white cuffs and collar, sits ominously in the dark interior, adding and air of mystery and secrecy. The quietly spoken words of the confessional between (the listener) priest and his subject are never spoken but seem somehow psychically communicated. This is no ordinary autopsy.

Feminine death was other-worldly and only to be explored by those with the authority and the language of that law - could do so. The anatomist's head and hands have dominance over his body, his manuscripts and skulls align him to a scholarly profession befitting his thoughtful manner. He ponders her silence; her continual absence even in death creates an ambivalent speculation on 'her truth': the enigma of women is even more mystifying in life as in death - and beyond the grave. Her inability to be allowed to be seen as she truly is and not mirrored as the object of his gaze, suggests the withholding of secrets somewhere in her body.

Forbidden Pleasure

The corpse in von Max’s painting has been discreetly covered by the white drape, which acts as a screen for the illusion of death. Feminine death was void of the normal activity associated with the after-death experience of putrid decay. The illusion of beauty at the site of the corpse, defies the process of death; disfigurement, dismemberment, blood, urine, faeces are neatly concealed, as is the absence of female genitalia.

As in chapter one, the nineteenth century artist searched the visible surface for any obvious signs of physiological difference, here the anatomist penetrates the surface of the cadaver’s skin, slicing deep into the body in the hope of revealing something not yet known.

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Here, in von Max’s painting, the object of the anatomist’s gaze emanates light and appears to be floating. The female corpse brings light to his darkness, she mirrors his thoughts, through her face and body, he faces his worst fears.

The paintings of Gabriel von Max and J H Hasselhorst present the corpse of woman as an object of perfection, only the artist’s brush and paint or the anatomist’s hand and scalpel will complete the representation of her body.

This is a non-public viewing of the corpse of woman, both before - and during dissection, only the ‘pure gaze of the connoisseur’ will determine the state of death; we as viewers are not privy to the entire view of the whole of the corpse. Her body fragmented, the surface fetishised, what is hidden from view could hold hidden danger for all concerned if revealed.

This added sensual pleasure of the forbidden, adds an air of excitement to the ‘connoisseur’s’ gaze: ‘The erotic represents aestheticized sexual representation; it marks out the limits of the sexual within legitimate cultures’. Linda Nead’s statement points to a way of understanding the erotic within pre-existing cultures and what defines the social and moral boundaries during particular periods in history. The image of ‘Woman as corpse’ during the eighteenth and nineteenth century is re-presented as a highly desirable and aesthetic form for the ‘legitimate cultures’ of western art history and the beginnings of modern science to encounter. The limits of these cultures were defined by the authority of the male gaze, and what was not acceptable or permissible was rendered absent.

\footnote{Nead, L (1992) \textit{The Female Nude Art, Obscenity and Sexuality}: GB, Routledge p. 88.}
\footnote{Ibid p. 103.}
Fetish

The representation of woman as corpse was a fairly common practice during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and was partly due to new knowledge of bio-medical studies, and the desire for knowledge of the workings of the inner world, which these new studies were thought to facilitate. The beginnings of modern science opened up completely new ways of exploring the inner body, while the early nineteenth century pathologists cut into and explored the cadaver to ‘see with their own eyes what was the cause of death’, the later half of the century saw these ‘explorers’ convinced that the corpse of woman, as a scientific object, held hidden secrets that could be rendered visible. Her body was like a veritable Pandora’s Box.

The course of medical history was now being altered by the discovery of ‘micro organisms as a cause of disease’⁹. This radically altered the diagnostic procedures for health and disease. Autopsies were now a major focus for medical practice as were objective observation and the concepts of reason.

The Anonymous lithograph, after a painting by J H Hasselhorst, titled J.C.G. Lucae and his Assistants Dissecting a Female Cadaver, 1864 - aptly depicts all three processes of diagnostic procedures. Ludmilla Jordanova states that ‘Professor Lucae (1814-85) was interested in the physical basis of female beauty¹⁰, the uncertainty of dissection prevalent in von Max’s painting is here replaced by voyeuristic certainty. The corpse is displayed much like a relic from antiquity, a stone statue under the deep scrutiny and curiousity of a ‘group of men, comprising both artists and anatomists’¹¹.

One can assume that Professor Lucae is the anatomist dissecting the corpse, and that the other anatomist stands above the head of the corpse; both are caught under the glare of the overhead light, which complicity aligns them with the corpse. This leaves us to assume that the two

standing men, positioned behind Professor Lucae in the background, are artists; their participation is by distant observation. Content to remain beyond the actual process of dissection, they are able to imagine what is seen, their second-hand information accrued from the exclamations of the anatomist in the foreground.

Fig 5 Anonymous. J.C.G. Lucae and his Assistants Dissecting a Female Cadaver. (1864)

Jordanova discusses the idea of veiling in her book Sexual Visions - she puts forward the idea that veiling is more often associated with 'women and with female sexuality'\textsuperscript{12}. The act of wearing a piece of cloth over one's head, to hide one's head of hair, or to cover the face or body are often linked to notions of modesty, shame and submission\textsuperscript{13}. This results in an act of concealing and revealing: that which is socially, politically or morally unacceptable.

\textsuperscript{12} ibid p. 89.
\textsuperscript{13} ibid p. 90.
The piece of cloth which both conceals and reveals in this manner, is that discreetly placed over the lower pelvic area and upper thighs of the corpse. This strategically placed piece of fine white cloth, conceals the female genitalia, or as Liz Grosz refers to this code of concealment as the "missing organs".\textsuperscript{14}

The corpse of woman is positioned here on this table much like a museum specimen, there is no hint of the usual procedure before dissection, (that of the draining of blood from the corpse), her flesh appears full, solid, firm: her arranged body, tense.

The primary sexual characteristics of this corpse are covered. One can deduce from this that the veil reveals an inherent fear of death, inextricably intertwined with a fear of active female sexuality\textsuperscript{15} that needed to be covered up - or at least rendered absent.

\section*{Centrality}

As in Gabriel von Max’s painting, the visual structure of Hasselhorst’s work is of equal importance. The composition of this painting appears to be divided into two halves. One side is bathed partially in intense light and encompasses the exposed torso of the corpse, the broken skull on the nearby table, and Professor Lucae’s head and hands. The other, standing-anatomist leans into the space of light, his left hand supports his body-weight by leaning heavily on bound books of knowledge, his eyes appear to be transfixed upon the breasts of the corpse. The connection between the artist’s eyes, Professor Lucae’s eyes, the cadaver’s breasts, and back up to the other anatomist’s eyes suggest that placement of these visual signs placed the breast in a position of central importance in the representation of female sexuality.

\textsuperscript{15} ibid
The breast has often been represented in art history as a visible sign of female sexuality. Historically motherhood has been linked with the female breast. It has been a symbol of female perfection, and a sign of nurturance and fertility in western and non-western art since antiquity. Breast size and shape have also played an important part in the portrayal of the feminine subject, the larger breasted woman, with (larger and possible darker) nipples have more often been associated with pornography and a more lustful form of female sexuality, while the smaller breasted woman (more child-like) has been likened to a refined, demure and controlled female sexuality.

In both of these paintings, woman’s breasts and a healthy flowing head of hair are positioned as the central focus of female sexuality, as they are visible outside of the body. The nineteenth century anatomist/artist believed that if they wanted to ‘truly’ know woman they would have to dig below the visible surface.

The initial reason for anatomical dissection, was to discover what had caused the person’s death or disease. Notions of how the body functioned came much later. The eighteenth and nineteenth century artist/anatomist re-presented the body of woman as an ideal corpse, the perfect subject for both literal and metaphorical probing of the known and the unknown, the real and the imagined.
CHAPTER III

The Mimicking Body

Real of Imagined

This chapter examines the blurring of boundaries between Art and Science, the merging of what constitutes the internal body with the outer body, the real with imagined. Here I explore the representation of woman’s fragmented body and why her body is offered as a sign of two forms of existence; though she resembles ‘real woman’ she is in fact a fantasy, she belongs to another life - beyond that of material existence.¹

Throughout the nineteenth century anatomy was related to the discipline of physiognomy: the science associated with an understanding of the interrelationship between mind and body. ‘Cutting through density was, literally and metaphorically, a way of piercing any opaque morphology, of achieving transparent self-knowledge of others’.²

The philosophical reasoning of the physiognomist, combined with the help of the specialist/artist was considered the new way of interpreting the body’s symptoms. Scientific diagnostic procedures merged with the artist’s practical skill of rendering the real scientific subject. These two combining factors: rationality and objectivity, were considered a valuable tool in the science of physiognomy.

² Stafford, B. M (1993) Body Criticism Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine: USA, MIT Press, p. 84.
One of physiognomy's main proponents was Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801), who was considered to be a 'master' in the field of his profession. He also happened to be a friend of Johann Heinrich Fuseli, and apparently collaborated with him on numerous projects. Fuseli would translate some of Lavater's ideas into visual data by producing a number of editions of engravings. Fuseli tried to capture the character's symptom. Both Fuseli and Lavater perceived these symptoms to be an expression of what lay embedded/trapped within the body.

The main tool used by the physiognomist was drawing, as it was believed that the drawn medium had the ability to fix and capture sign" which it is impossible to describe in words". The physiognomists were searching for something intangible, supernatural; to determine the indeterminable.

Lavater believed the body to be like an encyclopedia, which had the enormous capacity for withholding information; all that was needed was a skilful 'reader' with the ability to research, decode and isolate the fragmented features.

Prior to Lavater's philosophical ideas, and in complete contrast to his theories; George Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799), a product of eighteenth century culture, a professor of natural sciences and philosophy, theorised the science of interpreting the geography of the body; the visual journey across the terrain of the body; noting landmarks, 'an unfolding art of pattern recognition'.

Lichtenberg's concern with the surface of the body: how the surface of the body can be read; a person's body shape, clothing, gender, class and sense of self etc; all played an importance part in the philosophy of pathognomics. He concluded that 'Individuals were refracting, not reflecting corrugated surfaces'.

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3 ibid, Chapter 1. Dissecting pp. 84-113.
4 ibid, quote p. 96.
5 ibid, p. 121.
6 ibid, p. 126.
The pathognomic philosopher believed that any moral weakness or vice inherent within a person, could be easily read on the physical surface of the body. The musculature was thought to be determined by the person’s mental or moral constitution and was thought to hold valuable information.

The physiognomic and pathognomic theorists both had artists to visually objectify their ideas and theories. Fuesli conveyed Lavater’s theories of trapped body symptoms, while Lichtenberg interpreted many of William Hogarth’s (1697-1764) engravings of odd characters, commonly prevalent to big cities during the eighteenth century. He believed Hogarth, (much like himself) had the innate ability to “imaginatively project inside or below the surface” of a solid body: to be able to read the body for signs. This form of metaphorical dissection placed the knowing of the mind, in contrast, to the physical experience of an actual dissection.

These two scientific approaches: the cerebral and the manual, the real and the imagined, dominated and influenced artistic and scientific thinking throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, as well into the twentieth century.

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7 ibid, p. 55.
**Transparent or Opaque**

The scientific and theological belief that women were considered ‘by nature a danger to society’\(^8\) was a predominantly held view throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. To promote these scientific and philosophical theories, artists were needed to illustrate them. The artists who did illustrate anatomical dissections were considered, according to Thomas Laquer, to be creating maps of another reality: “all anatomical illustrations, historical and contemporary, are abstractions; they are maps to a bewildering and infinitely varied reality”. These artists could in turn change structures, according to the known historical understanding of the specificity of the human body. These ‘maps’ could be used by the artist/scientist to de-emphasise, exaggerate and exclude certain parts of the body.

Following are three works which serve to exemplify these two scientific and philosophical approaches in the reading of the body of woman: two are paintings and one a mezzotint. Jacques Gautier d’Agoty’s (1711-1785) multiple-plate mezzotint *The Anatomical Angel*, 1746; *Origin of the World* by Gustave Courbet, 1866; and Andre Masson’s *Gradiva*, 1939.

Jacques Gautier d’Agoty created lustrous coloured copper prints, his aim being to create the most visually pleasing ‘anatomical simulacrum’\(^9\) of an anatomical dissection. The mezzotint, *The Anatomical Angel*, 1746, was a visual reminder that the representation of woman’s body, whether dead or alive, was to be re-presented in an attractive and even *slippery* manner; woman’s body is positioned as a site for contradictions: her body is both threatening and seductive.

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Fig 6 Jacques Gautier d’Agoty, (1711-85). Multiple-plate mezzotint, *The Anatomical Angel*

Though Andreas Vesalius and Leonardo da Vinci had been drawing human skeletons since the sixteenth century, the eighteenth century saw a fervid rise of interest in female anatomy. An attempt was now being made in both art and science to define certain parts of woman’s anatomy. By positioning woman’s dead body as a site for sexual difference, questions arose regarding woman’s appearance. In life and death, the site of woman’s body signified a deception of the real truth and also of the imagined truth.

Gautier d’Agoty was an artist employed to record medical history. His recordings were greatly influenced by his imagination and what he assumed to be woman’s interiority. Most scientific drawings of anatomical studies up to this point in time, had always been influenced by cultural assumptions and expectations, and d’Agoty’s work was no exception.
The Anatomical Angel is a picture of a sitting corpse. The back of her torso is flayed revealing a spectacular interior: soft but firm like a corset. Her backbone or spine appears to be missing. In its place are cord-like ropes of stretched muscle, creating a patterning effect much like fabric. The invisibility of flowing blood enhances the pleasure of looking. Though the image is somewhat contradictory the violence of the image is in contrast to the way it is 'lovingly' painted. There appears to be no hint of decomposition, or anything remotely connected with this particular state of death.

Unlike other artists employed to objectively record scientific observation, D'Agoty's concern was the creation of a sensual surface, to simulate the tactile painted surface of a canvas. D'Agoty chose to add a rich glossy varnish to the surface of The Anatomical Angel, thereby creating both a reflective surface, much like a mirror, and the added illusion of a sensuous soft body-like surface.¹⁰ His choice of colour adds to this sense of excess. The ground of his mezzotint is coloured a rich green, which complements the angel's outer/inner skin. Her flesh has been peeled back like a piece of fresh fruit to reveal a soft, ripe, velvet-like underlay of rich red muscle and skin.

This cadaver is both alive and dead, her hair neatly bound by a ribbon, her cheeks flushed with life. She coyly peers over her right shoulder as if to see who is looking.

Jacques Gautier d'Agoty has captured the mutilated image of woman as sign of morbid and erotic pleasure. Her pain is the viewer's pleasure.

The title of this mezzotint echoes the captured image of this angel's cadaverous bird-like wings. The hinted suggestion of her soul flying off and leaving the site of her dead body is contradicted by her trapped but animate position. The belief that the soul or spirit, when leaving the body could be captured, or manifested, in a particular type of surface;

¹⁰ ibid, pp. 75-78.
such as 'reflected in water, in mirror-image'; could potentially explain d’Agoty’s idea of his reflective surface. However, as with all reflective surfaces the real is never reflected, what lies in its place is the distorted, the inverted and fragmentary ‘other’.

**Cave or Tomb**

The *Origin of the World*, one of three works commissioned by a former Turkish ambassador to St Petersburg named Khalil Bey, was painted by Gustave Courbet in 1866. His chosen subject is a realistic view, of an anatomical fragment of a particular zone of woman’s body: that which is normally veiled by clothing and hidden from public viewing. And as the influential Greek philosopher Galen was said to have stated - women’s most obvious imperfection - are her genitals.

The fragmented body of woman is represented here with no head, arms hands or feet, there is nothing to identify the sitter of this painting: she is a fetishised object and much like nineteenth century woman she remains passive, silent and anonymous.

Courbet’s painted drapery gives an appearance of just being lifted, or rolled back to expose the partially exposed breasts, and the rounded belly. The upper thighs and female genitalia play an important subject of focus; an unusual factor is the obvious display of pubic hair, which during this period in art history was quite uncommon: unless the subject was portraying eroticism or prostitution.

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11 Barber, P (1988) *Vampires, Burial, And Death Folklore And Reality*: NY, Yale University, p. 182.
Courbet’s painting is a fragment of a whole body; here, one cannot be quite sure if this anatomical view belongs to a corpse or a live woman. The drapery adds to the assumption that this is ‘real live flesh’ we are viewing. Whether the head and shoulders were omitted as an act of concealing the model’s identity, or whether on aesthetic grounds it would cause distraction from the main object of focus, we can only speculate.

The fact that this painting was commissioned and was deemed for private viewing, adds a secretive air to it. *Origin of the World* sits comfortably with the nineteenth century idea; that biological explanations could explain sexual difference: female sexuality was defined by woman’s sexual organs.

The title of this painting causes the viewer to speculate on the possible meaning of this fragmentary view of woman, the pictorial allusion to landscape to which woman (as the title suggests) created.
It was thought that ‘the study of the womb is also the science of the origins of the world’.\textsuperscript{12} This shifting meaning from God creating the world to woman creating the world and the investigation of woman’s womb, caused an intellectual shift around the potential investigation of the nature of being.

\textbf{Fact of Fiction}

The last painting I intend to read is André Masson’s \textit{Gradiva}, 1939. This particular painting is of an image of woman re-presented as a decaying stone sculpture. The image is violent, her body is shown in a convulsed state of change, the internal body appears to be exploding, erupting up and out. The internal forms are organic and give the appearance of ancient fossils having been dug up and exposed for the first time. The outline of her body echoes that of mountainous peaks and crag-like formations. The allusion to Greco-Romanesque cloth, which is partially draped over the left side of the body, echo the organic forms which seem to have been excavated from the underlying internal layers.

As the archaeologist/artist digs the layers of flesh/stone, the slow erosion of time/history, reveals an underlying ‘natural world’ in a state of utter chaos.

Andre Masson's *Gradiva*, is a painting based on a short story written by Wilhelm Jensen in 1903. Jensen's story, is of an archaeologist who falls in love with a stone sculptural relief of the image of a young woman. The archaeologist then proceeds to 'phantasies' and dreams about her. In one of his dreams, the young woman (who he has named Gradiva) is alive and living in ancient Pompeii on the day (August 24, 79 AD) Vesuvius erupts.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) wrote a paper in reference to Jensen's story titled 'Delusions & Dreams in Jensen’s Gradiva’. His investigation into Jensen’s story and subsequent hypothesis puts forth the idea that as a simile, repression and burial are both historical events which are often preserved in time. They often remain inaccessible until an internal chaos and consequent explosion bursts forth freeing the trapped emotions once locked inside.

Andre Masson's depiction of *Gradiva* captured this sense of repression and the exaggerated violent effects it has on the body and mind. He depicts *Gradiva* in a state of convulsive hysteria. Here, I must also mention that Barbara Creed states that a Freudian
interpretation of the idea of 'phantasy' is more often linked with 'the activity of wish fulfilment'\textsuperscript{13} whereas the word 'fantasy' is more often associated with notions of light-whimsy. So Jensen’s short story is interpreted in the context of the Freudian sense of the word 'phantasy'.

Jensen’s archaeologist suffered ‘phantasies’ and delusions. He believed that Gradiva, ‘who was first a marble figure’\textsuperscript{14} is actually real, his perception of reality is somehow altered, the present becomes the past, the imagined becomes the real and vice versa. It would appear from Jensen’s story that the archaeologist preferred his phantasy of Gradiva; preferring her dead, or cold as stone: ‘he mourned for her as someone who was lost’.\textsuperscript{15} He discovered through his own grieving that his usual scientific approach and procedure; that of establishing an object’s authenticity and its original form - thereby determining the objects meaning; could not, in this particular instance, be of any assistance to him.

The painting, of Gradiva is a re-presentation of woman’s body as a sign of both fear and desire, a fusion of opposing forces. The metamorphosis of Gradiva appears to be structural - some form of ‘magic’ is taking place. The body of woman is represented here as an unknowable and unspeakable truth, her body cast in stone: a memento mori, the known and the unknown, the real and the imagined.

Gradiva is represented as a decaying sculptural icon, a relic from antiquity, part way between flesh and stone. The sandalled left foot of Gradiva sits firmly in the past. Her right foot is bare, toes pointed. The inner arch of her foot stretched high is strangely erotic, especially when juxtaposed next to the shell-like form of a vagina dentata.

\textsuperscript{15} ibid, p. 13.
Marina Warner discusses the metonymy of the misshapen foot as a 'secret hidden under women's dresses which men fear to see, but long all the same to know'.

In the context of these ancient ruins where Roman brides were initiated into the cult of 'religiously inspired sexual ecstasy' and Platonic ideas on beauty and form merge with the Judaeo-Christian. The archaeologically repressed is represented as the monstrous female where female sexuality signifies fear and danger.

Fear of woman's body clouded scientific and artistic vision throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. Her body controlled by reason and science became the subject of both physical and metaphorical dissection. It was thought that woman was adept at deceiving: in her passivity she was able to manipulate and control others; the artist was thought to be able to render these devious signs and symptoms, by capturing the imaginary, the real could at once be recognised.

Woman's fragmented body was offered as a sign of two forms of existence: death and life merged into an imaginary other realm, the supernatural, intangible, the immaterial realm beyond that of existence. The specialist chose to view woman like an archaeological specimen, an insect pinned down in a natural history museum where she was dissected, probed, and mutilated. Fragmented and fetishised her body became a site for contradictions surrounding truth in science and art.

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