

Pregnant Thoughts

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art
In the Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University

May 2018

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Master of Fine Arts

Herron School of Art and Design

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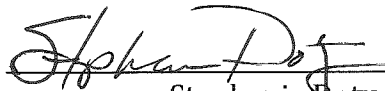
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“I feel that in some sense, all my work is provisional: that is to say, while I believe in it very strongly, I still remain open to what I hear, learn, and experience. I see it very much as a dialectic, a cooperative experience, Feminist art history -- like feminism itself -- is a product of give and take, talking and listening.”¹

Linda Nochlin

My thesis work explores pregnancy as a lived experience with deep cultural connotations. It looks at aspects of how pregnancy feels and is experienced differently depending on circumstances and perspective. This research uses the pregnant female body to explore issues of difference. The work seeks to create a dialogue with the viewer on issues that are central to resolving inequality in society. Pregnancy, childbirth, childcare, and the necessary cultural support are the focus of the fourth wave of the women’s movement and its continuing push for equity and justice.

Classical phenomenology is explained as being interested in human consciousness as a way to understand social reality, in particular, how one thinks about experience. In my work, I am exploring how the lived experience of pregnancy felt in my life and I am referencing a lifetime of discussions with other women on the subject.

Pregnancy is not a universal experience, because it is not experienced first-

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hand by men and many women. It is, however, a politically charged experience that others have attempted to define and control. Traditional theories of phenomenology have been used to explain the lived experience of pregnancy from a male perspective. Feminist phenomenology goes beyond the generic human experience and engages with difference and inequality, as well as social, political, and cultural forces.

The pregnant looking *Woman of Wildendorf* figure from Paleolithic times suggests an early cultural preoccupation with fertility. In Western art history the condition of pregnancy has not been depicted all that often. The 15th-century painter Jan Van Eyck's, *Arnolfini Portrait* or *The Arnolfini Wedding*, depicts a very pregnant woman. From the 15th century to 20th century, Alice Neel is one of a few women who have painted the pregnant figure. Neel defrocks motherhood as a form of ideal femininity in her paintings of pregnant women. She was unafraid to show pregnancy to be an uncomfortable condition. ² In her painting, *Margaret Evans Pregnant*, 1978, the subject's body stares at the viewer, and appears agitated and forced into stillness. The figure looks compressed and elongated in a way that depicts pregnancy more like a trap than a "miracle."³

The condition of pregnancy is unique to women. The issue of reproduction is central to feminism. The ability to prevent pregnancy is relatively new. Access to birth control has been available since the 1880s, and a variety of forms of

² Broude, Norma, and Mary D. Garrard. *The Power of Feminist Art: the American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*. Abrams, 1996. Chapter: *The Body Through Women's Eyes*. Joanna Frueh p. 195.

³ Ibid., p. 195

contraception have been widely available since the 1960s. Abortion has been a legal right since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. Yet cultural and legislative conservatives are challenging access to birth control. From a social justice perspective, prevention is a woman's right, yet women should also be supported if their decision is to have and raise children.

My work is primarily in clay. I have been interested in textures since childhood, observing textures in fabrics and in nature. Some of the sculptures for this thesis exhibition have earthy textures and some involve working clothing and fiber arts textiles into the surface of the torso. The work is a personal expression and an examination of sexual difference in contemporary culture.

Contemporary artists Magdalena Abakanowic and Carmen Dionyse have influenced the use of texture in my clay work. I am attracted to the charred rough surfaces in Dionyse's figurative work. Her use of partial bodies and surface texture to evoke connotation have made me think differently about the role of texture on form. Abakanowic's use of multiple headless figures has influenced my use of multiple torso forms as a way to convey meaning. Abakanowic's background in textiles influenced her ceramics and bronze work. My work in textiles has influenced the way I am using textiles in my ceramic pieces.

The strong influence of consumer culture and growing up female in the United States cannot be ignored in my work and process. At a young age, an obsession with "fitting in" on a budget led me from fashion magazines to the fabric store. The challenge to have the right look, motivated me to learn to sew well and

drape my figure in a way that fit the norm. Dress forms and store mannequins are used in my sculptural process with clay slabs handled in a similar way to the drapery of fabric on a dress form.

My interest in and study of social justice issues and social change has also influenced my work. I was involved in the second wave of the women's movement starting at age 16 when I attended a consciousness-raising group. I was in college during the 1970s when social justice issues were being studied and debated. I actively participated in this movement as a charter member of the board of directors of the North Country Women's Center in Duluth, Minnesota. On the campus radio station, I hosted "Voices of Women," a program producing documentaries on a variety of topics including rape and birth control.

These issues are still highly relevant today as we see the president of the United States and male celebrities in the arts and entertainment industry being called out for inappropriate sexual behavior. In fact, the issues of gender have been in the forefront of the third wave and now the fourth wave of the women's movement. President Trump's extreme rhetoric may have prompted women in the #MeToo movement to become more vocal and others to actively participate in social change. The current rise in activism was captured in a recent *New York Times* headline, "Donald Trump: King of the Old Boys' Club, and Perhaps its Destroyer."⁴

Recent themes in my artwork have included corsets that are also vessels. The corset is a historical symbol of the fashion industry. It is an artifact from the first wave of the women's movement. The corset pieces are an appealing form and a

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/magazine/donald-trump-tape.html>

fashion object that was really about pleasing men at a cost to one's own health. The use of the corset in my work is a symbol of constriction as well as a metaphor for how we limit our possibilities in life.

The constricting corset and manufactured sizes that followed led to problems of body image because clothes often did not fit one's body type. Women had to make their bodies fit the sizes of manufactured clothing. The corset was viewed by the women's movement in the 1880s as a garment that restricted range of motion, and caused health problems for women, including broken ribs and problems with breathing.

Graduate school provided me the opportunity to learn how to cast a corset that I found at a flea market 30 years ago. The corset casting has helped me move in a new direction with my work, experimenting with press molding the cast into a torso form. When working on the first slip-cast of the corset I removed the piece when it was too wet. In a "what-do-I-do-now moment," I cut and pressed the pieces into a pregnant torso mold. *Undercurrents* (Image 1) was the result. The lacing and stays of the corset became something more interesting as a texture on a body torso. In places they look like ribs or text. Another piece using the corset cast is *Under the Surface*. (Image 2)

All of the work for my thesis exhibition involves the use of clothing and textiles with clay. Some of the pieces are staged with wedding dresses and some with skirts. Found objects such as birth control packets, clothing labels, syringes, an Our Lady of Guadalupe statue, and a broom are incorporated into the pieces to examine cultural connotation associated with those objects. My work, for the thesis

exhibition, uses pregnant body forms with textures that originated with fabrics, either casting clothing, pieces of lace, or dipping clothing items into clay. I am attracted to clothing and textile arts partly because it is an area of art that women have excelled in and one that art historians have excluded and put in the category of a “lesser” art.

As my research has progressed I experimented with soaking sweaters and fabrics in liquid clay slip. I have used castings of pregnant women and a pregnant store mannequin form to create plaster strip molds to drape the forms or press the clay into. The tactile qualities of fabric against our skin and how that feels as a body experience are of interest to me, as well as the sensations of pregnancy and an expanding body.

My work looks at the lived experience of pregnancy and the cultural norms that have been placed upon the experience. I am interested in the power structures that impact pregnancy and women’s lives in general. Feminist thought sheds light on the lack of attention to the female perspective. Feminist scholarship has explored how philosophical accounts of a “universal” or “generic” human experience from a male perspective doesn’t apply well to pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering. Phenomenological writings historically have described a subject as autonomous, rational, genderless, and unified, ignoring the female experience of birth and dependence.

The phenomenology of pregnancy indicates there is a need to rethink classical theories. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his existentialist embodiment theory,

provides a method for exploring uncharted territory in lived experience.⁵ More recent phenomenology of pregnancy writings challenged the validity of a theory that suggests a universal account is enough. Universals have been defined in the past from a male perspective in art theory. As Linda Fischer noted, “An account that fails to recognize that its descriptions omit particularities of women’s experience, such as pregnant embodiment, betrays the underlying (masculinist) assumption that the generic (male) account sees the standard and encompasses all possibilities, and in this manner functions to diminish and marginalize the experience and perspectives of women.”⁶ In feminist theory, pregnancy is viewed as a subject’s lived experience and not as a disembodied universal thing.

Attention toward the lived body in feminist theory shows that a “one size fits all” phenomenology fails to live up to its very promise of truly starting from experience.⁷ Our individual experiences, which are determined by gender, impact our subjective life and our experience in our world and culture. Whether society and our lives are valued or diminished impacts our lived experiences. Tia Welsh observed that the pregnant woman is a source and participant in a creative process.

⁵ Talia Welsh, “The Order of Life: How Phenomenologies of Pregnancy Revise and Reject Theories of the Subject,” in *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering*, Sarah LaChance Adams and Caroline R. Lundquist, eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 284.

⁶ Linda Fischer, “Phenomenology and Feminism: Perspectives of their Relation,” *Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. Linda Fischer and Lester Embree (Dordrecht, 2000), 24.

⁷ Welsh, “The Order of Life,” 284.

Pregnancy involves profound changes to bodily capacity and shape, with shifts in body awareness. It is an expansion of one's borders.⁸

The generalizing of male experience, as universal, has prompted gender-sensitive scholarship to phenomenology. In Iris Marion Young's work, *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays*, she argues that the objectification of one's body is not negative. She describes the experience saying, "pregnancy roots me to the earth, makes me conscious of the physicality of my body not as an object, but as material weight that I am in movement."⁹ Pregnancy is difficult to universalize, since it is an experience foreclosed for men and not a part of every woman's life. Can a person who has never been pregnant understand pregnant embodiment? There are many other experiences as well that are difficult to understand if you have not lived through them, such as experiencing the death of a loved one, a religious experience or hallucinating.

Pregnancy might be thought of as Michael Foucault's idea of a limited experience and not as a universal concept of our human experience. The limited experience theory could apply to pregnancy in that the idea of pregnancy is rooted in lived experience but not the experience of traditional phenomenology. Feminist phenomenology wants to go beyond the "generic human experience." For many feminists who want to engage with difference, inequality, and oppression there is concern that social, historical, political, and cultural forces might be ignored. The

⁸Welsh, "The Order of Life," 285.

⁹ Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and other Essays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). 52.

thought is that a focus on the body is too limited to support a philosophical understanding of gender.

In exploring the idea of embodiment without ignoring the social, political, and cultural effects Young's book is important work. The valuable aspects of women's experience can provide political grounds to reject limiting structures and continue to expose and criticize the violence, overwork and sexual exploitation that many women suffer. As Young notes, the lived body is a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is body -in-situation.¹⁰

The meaning of some of my pieces in the thesis exhibition were inspired by the notion of "discursive formation" in Foucault's writings. Foucault used this term to address the systematic interconnections of an assortment of related statements, which define a field of knowledge. In creating the ceramic torsos, I was interested in how the expansion of the body in pregnancy feels physically. I was also interested in the weight of a one's experiences in deciding to become or remain pregnant. It is a physical weight but also an existential weight in the magnitude of one's commitment to another human being. In my work I have added clothing and other found objects to reference cultural connotations and circumstances that impact this commitment.

As one scholar noted, "Today, the meaning of clothing evolves from overlapping and changing discourse of class, race, popular culture, high fashion, feminism, academia, subcultures, anthropology, and the history of costume."¹¹ The

¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

meaning of clothing inhabits what Foucault calls “a space of multiple dissensions” and contains a “set of different oppositions whose levels and roles must be described.”¹² In my ceramic torsos and the way I stage them with objects I am looking at multiple dissensions and cultural aspects influencing the experience of pregnancy. It is about the physicality of pregnancy but also about the cultural context and society’s norms influencing the experience. The physicality of pregnancy and its cultural context, whether it is politics, economics, popular culture or circumstances in general, all impact the experience. I am asking the viewer to think about these issues.

In the installation of my thesis exhibition, *Pregnant Thoughts*, I elevated three torsos staged over wedding dresses. Taking the wedding dress out of the closet for public viewing is part of the message in these pieces. Women often hang on to their wedding dresses their entire lifetime. In fact, the dress sometimes outlives the woman who wore it. I am interested in these wedding dresses as a cultural symbol and marriage as the cultural norm that pregnancy is practiced in. There is evidence of a homemade dress by a family member in *Familial Legacy*. The dress in *Leap of Faith* was bought in an import shop in 1978 and is evidence of the ethnic clothing traded on the global market at the time of the second wave of the women’s movement. In the third piece, “*With Respect to Dada and Judith Shea*” the dress is a recently purchased ready-made designer label.

¹¹ *Discursive Dress*, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin. September 1993-January 1994.

¹² *Ibid.*

The highest and centerpiece in the installation (Image10) is titled *Leap of Faith*. (Image 3) I have included a clay torso of a pregnant women with a wedding dress mounted on the wall behind the torso with a wooden statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe on a small shelf at the top of the torso neck. The dress sleeves have birth control pill packets sewn into them. The dress was purchased at a Mexican import shop. The global market was bringing ethnic clothing into the United States in the 1970s. The use of a Mexican statue of the Virgin Mary Mother of Jesus references a feminine image of motherhood that appears in centuries of art history. The wooden statue references the mythology of the Catholic Church and the story surrounding a Mexican peasant's vision of an apparition. The intention of this piece is to compare and contrast the cultural attitudes towards pregnancy and dialogue about pregnancy from a religious, sociological, political and feminist perspective. Questions one might ask include: Do I take the leap or not? How do I avoid taking the leap of pregnancy? How does religious mythology play into a women's experience? What mythology are we using to live our lives? What mythology did the Virgin Mary use to live her life? What did Joseph think of Immaculate Conception?

The torso with a wedding dress in the upper right is titled, *Familial Legacy* (Image 4). It explores aesthetics and political issues that relate to domesticity as well as traditional needle arts. The surface of the torso has casts that were made from pieces of discarded lace. The castings were then slip-casted and pressed into a plaster tape mold of a store mannequin. It is staged with a wedding dress from the 1940s. The title *Familial Legacy* has to do with the teaching of fibers arts in the home setting. Women traditionally taught their daughters these techniques. There

can be other interpretations including that knowledge of pregnancy that has been passed down through the generations before the medical profession got involved in the business of delivering babies.

The piece on the upper left is titled *With Respect to Dada and Judith Shea*. (Image 5) I have used a 2016 wedding dress, a ready-made with a Nicole Miller label. The idea of using ready-made items in art goes back to the Dada Movement. The idea of a dress as sculptural form in its own right comes from the 1960s, when artists were making art out of everyday objects. Judith Shea carried the idea further when in 1980 she exhibited *Inaugural Ball*, a life-sized dress hung on a gallery wall, in the landmark exhibition, *Women's Art, Making Their Mark: Women Artist Enter the Mainstream*, 1970-1985. The 1970s were a time when painting was under attack. Feminists raised political questions about the hierarchy of media with painting as the highest form of art. Male artists were described as geniuses. The art critics over used the term greatness in their reviews. As art historian Linda Nochlin noted, "Tied to the idea of greatness was the idea that it was immutable and that it was the particular possession of the white male and his works—greatness was constructed as a sex-linked characteristic in the cultural struggle."¹³ It is in this cultural context that Judith Shea hung a simple minimalist dress on the gallery wall. It has cultural connotation still.

The torso of "*With Respect to Dada and Judith Shea*" (Image 5) is a casting of a woman in her eighth month of pregnancy. A sweater dripped into clay slip was

¹³ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have there Been No Great Women Artists?" Thirty Years After P.22

draped over her body cast. The dress underneath is the woman's wedding dress. Both the dress and the torso are sculptural forms with the figure in absentia.

While researching pregnancy and in the process of working with the torso form, I became intrigued by the notion of clothing and what it can convey. As an artist, I like the idea of being able to offer my perspective on the state of our culture and society, and I like to use the accepted concept that clothing is a form of self-expression. Reconstructing and re-contextualizing clothing has possibilities for re-examining social meanings that are implied but not necessarily articulated. This concept has changed the process of how I work in clay. Reclaiming clothing items and soaking them in liquid slip has changed my process from press-molded slabs into another use of fabrics and fibers in the construction of my pieces. The clothing on the clay torsos inspires complex feelings, questions, and a discussion among viewers.

My work speaks to the physicality of pregnancy and human consciousness as a way to understand social reality. I am interested in the conscious mind, but also unconscious desires, fears and a host of conflicting social, political, and ideological factors. *Body-in-Situation* (Image 6) speaks to conflicting social factors and current issues that impact pregnancy. There are rough textures along the edges of the ceramic torso and syringes are stitched to the edge of the skirt. The piece can be read in multiple ways by the viewer.

My research looks at conflicting factors inside and outside of women, and it examines how pregnancy is experienced differently depending on the woman's situation. In the piece: *Ultimate Hospitality* (Image 7) the surface of the ceramic

torso depicts inner turmoil and references lava flow in its texture. The skirt projects an image of femininity in the lace. One's appearance, which is significantly defined through clothing, is connected to one's definition of "self." This is a relatively recent phenomenon that occurred in Western culture since the nineteenth century with the transition from clothing's function as an indicator of class to that of an indicator of sexual difference. It is interesting to note that this happened in the same time period as the shift from homemade clothing to mass-produced manufactured clothing. It was the beginning of the idea of the self as a work of art, the shift from clothing as a marker of class to clothing as a marker of gender.

Another one of my pieces uses a print from a poster I made in the second-wave of the women's movement. The torso with a broom is titled *Second-Wave Artifact* (Image 8). The image of the woman with a broom plays on the *American Gothic* painting by Grant Wood. The image spoke to domestic unpaid labor in the 1970s. The torso with its companion broom speaks to the burden of emotional labor experienced by many women today.

The only piece in my exhibition that is on a pedestal is titled: *Expanding Borders* (Image 9.). The form references reliquary statues of saints in the Catholic Churches in Europe. This piece has a skirt that is filled with clothing tags that were stitched together. The tags spill out onto the floor interrupting the pathway of the viewer. These tags and their placement reference the idea of over-consumption in Western cultures, as well as how pregnancy can interrupt one's path in life.

In this body of work I hope to chart and examine the many ways we articulate our subjectivity. Clothing is protection from the elements as well as a

costume, or a way to show off, as a kind of plumage and a way to hide. It can also be a symbol of resistance, complacency, or even complicity, with the status quo. The surface is one thing and how it feels internally can be something else. My work attempts to articulate what women feel and experience. The use of clothing, absent the figure, is a way to catch a moment in time. Pregnancy is one period of time in a woman's life. Time will move on, the children of pregnant women will be delivered and grow up, and time will march on. Both of their bodies will change and so will the undercurrents of how society constructs meaning. My intent with my sculptures is to create a dialogue with the viewer. It is my hope that my work will help people think about women's experience with pregnancy, childbirth and the raising of children and the challenges that we face moving forward in the fourth wave of the women's movement.

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Image 1
Title: *Undercurrents*
Material: Ceramic
Dimensions: H: 21" x W: 11" x D: 5.5"



Image 2
Title: *Under the Surface*
Material: Ceramic
Dimensions: H: 20" x W: 15" x D: 7"



Image 3
Title: *Leap of Faith*
Material: Ceramic
Dimensions: H: 20" x W: 11" x D: 5.5"



Image 4
Title: *Familial Legacy*
Material: Ceramic and Found Objects
Dimensions: H: 21" x W: 11" x D: 5.5"



Image 5

Title: *With Respect to Dada and Judith Shea*

Material: Ceramic and Found Object

Dimensions: H: 20" x W: 15" x D: 7"



Image 6
Title: *Body-in-Situation*
Material: Ceramic and Found Object
Dimensions: H: 17" x W: 13.5" x D: 5.5"



Image 7
Title: *Ultimate Hospitality*
Material: Ceramic
Dimensions: H: 20" x W: 15" x D: 7"



Image 8
Title: *Second-Wave Artifact*
Material: Ceramic
Dimensions: H: 17" x W: 12.5" x D: 6"



Image 9
Title: *Expanding Borders*
Material: Ceramic
Dimensions: H: 7.5" x L: 25" x W: 18.5"



Image 10
Title: *Installation of Pregnant Thoughts*
Material: Ceramic and Found Objects
Dimensions: H: 18' x W: 18'