

Imaging Affront, Crisis and Survival

Lucienne Fontannaz

ABSTRACT

My research and artwork address stereotyped and objectified representations of the female body and propose that visual art can play a vital, likely unique role in responding to these issues. Images in this domain are highly visceral, affective and effective, readily able to impact powerfully upon viewers. To express the complexity, intensity and violence of the images, my chosen artistic process is appropriation, collage, juxtaposition and over painting. In this way I facilitate a direct physical, visual and conceptual response to the subject matter which evidences my concern and discomfort. My artworks are created from the layering of images obtained from popular weekly, fashion and pornography magazines, as well as from historical paintings and the Internet. As most of those images of the body are intentionally seductive, the challenge is to create original works that visually critique their violent aspects, are not in themselves titillating and yet are celebratory of women's sexuality, identity and empowerment.

In this essay, I will literally illustrate my concerns regarding the stereotyped and objectified representation of women's bodies in the media, and the physical and psychological consequences for our self-image and our relationships. I demonstrate that visual art can play a crucial role within this domain by elucidating and interpreting feelings.

The artwork images that follow are categorised as responding to "Affront", "Crisis" and "Survival". They are a selection of images made for my Master of Fine Arts (Research) at the University of New South Wales, in the Faculty of Art and Design, from 2012 to 2014.



Figure 1. *Memory*

The first image (Figure 1) depicts a woman with her arms bound, yet the mechanisms within her never cease to grind out past histories. Some might shiver at the thought that she could suddenly turn her head and reveal her face (of what age?) to the present.

Each work in this series is primarily a collage, and this is how they began. For years I had dreamt that one day I would find a way to represent in artworks something that women – at least some women – feel strongly within themselves, but is not visible on the façade of their visual appearance. I managed to explore the possibility once I thought of a direct way to proceed.

The source material included locally available popular magazines, in which I found current media representations of the body as fashion, celebrity, porn, health and body building, and so on. I often combined popular print media images with reproductions of details from historic artworks and scientific drawings.

The figures I have used from these sources are primarily of white women and men. This is the context I am close to and as an artist can best interpret.

After photocopying these images in black and white at A4 size, I proceeded to cut out silhouettes, mostly of female fashion models. Then I started to look through these “openings” onto other figures that were scattered around my studio, until I found arresting yet somehow meaningful combinations of shapes, tones and potential narratives.

I then glued together just the top edges of the pieces of paper. I also had A4 transparencies made from other images of women, which I overlaid upon the raw collaged material, adding to the complexity of each figure. I felt I could now travel deep into, and explore, the feelings of these emerging characters. For the exhibition, the collages were pinned to the walls, just at the two top corners, so that visitors could lift the various layers to see further and further underneath.

Affront



Figure 2. *The Un-dressing*

When all the collages were “finished” – satisfactory for what I was intuitively searching for – I examined the image outcomes and proceeded to describe what each meant to me. For example, the description for the image in Figure 2 included the following: “As a little girl, she

used to place prim clothes cutouts with attaching tabs onto undressed flat cardboard dolls. Now she is inverting the game of dressing the body... for adults only”.

This systematic analysis led me to write a short creative text to accompany each image. As the various texts formed an overall narrative, I had both images and texts printed and bound as a limited-edition book which was included in the exhibition.

I also had several of the collages enlarged and printed in various sizes up to 2 metres high, on sturdy art paper. They translated very well through the printing process. I then painted some sections of these printed images with thick acrylic enamel in red, black and/or light blue, in this way adding a smooth, simplified surface to some areas. These large works were pinned to the wall for the exhibition.

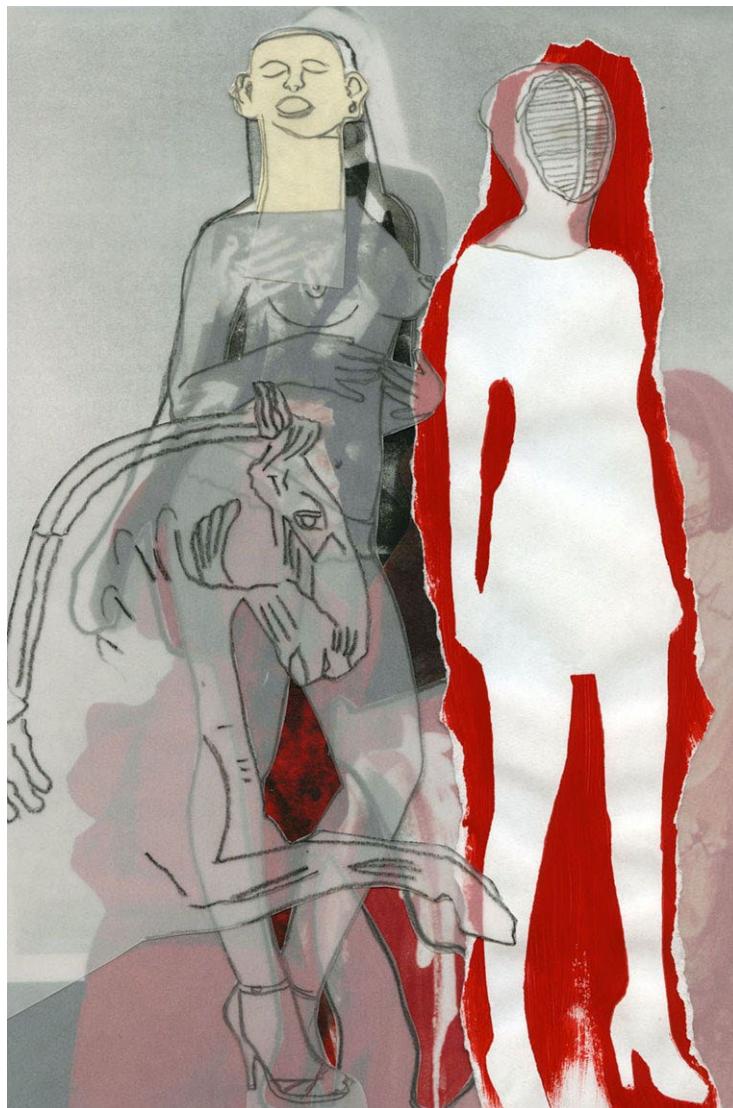


Figure 3. *Twin Self*

The work *Twin Self* (Figure 3) makes reference to the complex interactions between a woman's inner and outer Self, as she realises she is an object of the male gaze, and of "his" imagination.



Figure 4. *Porned*

The collage in Figure 4 alludes to the influence of increasingly accessible pornography on Internet sites – sexuality that is stereotyped, sometimes hateful, increasingly violent. And to peer group assumptions and the pressure to look and act like porn stars, which is at times pushed to the limits, including physical injury.



Figure 5. *Shield and Weapons*

As a woman goes out into the wider world, armed with shield and weapons (Figure 5), her legs shake under the burden of a battle-ready body, on high heels.

Crisis

Many of us, or maybe all of us, had issues of self-image while growing up. So, the previous section dealing with self-image was to some extent familiar territory for me. But for this coming section about relationships (and I am only alluding to heterosexual relationships), I had to rely on stories other people have told, and on books and films, for inspiration, as I have not experienced the type of violence I describe here. As an artist, I believe it can be legitimate to enter other people's situations via empathy, imagination and compassion, and then transpose these interpretations as feelings into artworks.



Figure 6. *Egos and Wills*

The image in Figure 6, initially an A4 collage, was subsequently printed on art paper and enlarged to nearly 2 metres high, so that the figures are approximately life-size.

Because I was appropriating images from the popular media, I questioned how my collages differed from the work of 1950s and 1960s Pop Artists, who were almost exclusively male. I reasoned that, while Pop Artists capitalised on the recognition of audacious reproduction (and I did as well), the obvious difference is that I eliminated the reference to the origin of the borrowed figures, through cropping, altering, trashing or enhancing and reworking the appropriated images for impact on new audiences.



Figure 7. *Ceremonies of the Blood*

The collage in Figure 7 hints at the Marquis de Sade, immortalised through the words “sadism” and “sadist” – and his most infamous book *120 Days of Sodom*, written in 1785 while he was incarcerated at the Bastille for actual scandalous, even deadly, sexual abuses.



Figure 8. *Deeds*

The woman in Figure 8 looks back from afar to assess the ever-escalating injuries that have been inflicted upon her, while the bust of a predator still looms in the background.



Figure 9. *Exit*

The image in Figure 9 refers to the complexities of leaving a site of domestic violence.



Figure 10. *The Tear*

Continuous hard-core violence leaves women mutilated, flesh torn and hanging, bodies like emptied vessels, wrecked. In *The Tear* (Figure 10), little appears to be left of this woman's slumped body, just some skin and hair, not enough material to sew together in repair.

Survival

This third section is about women finding a secure place within. As such, it resonates strongly for me, so, unlike “Crisis”, this section is more autobiographically inspired.

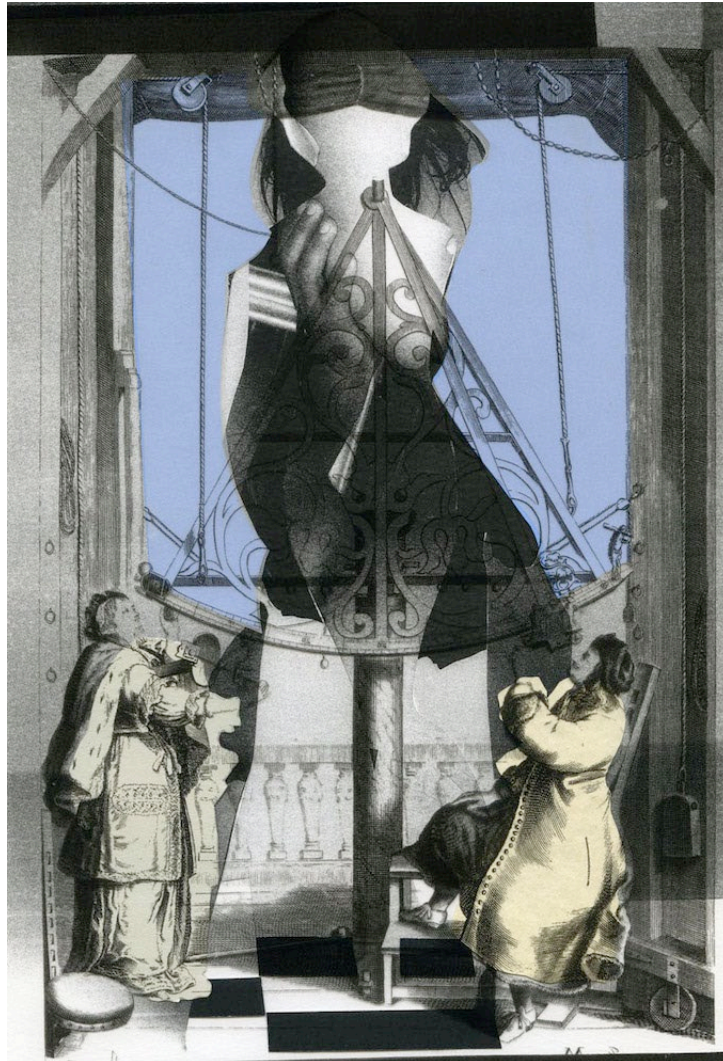


Figure 11. *Mid-heaven*

The image in Figure 11 alludes to us as individuals and as a society exploring and representing deeply felt, intimate, even profound feelings that can exist, internalised, within the body.



Figure 12. *Transcending Appearances*

Through the mirror, within her and beyond visual appearances, the woman in Figure 12 sees new depths of knowledge.



Figure 13. *Island Universe*

In *Island Universe* (Figure 13) I explored the possibility of creating art images that could have healing qualities for a dissonant Self – images of a more secure, balanced place within, from which the world can be experienced in a moderated (rather than controlled) way.

I do recognise that a fundamental problem with this work is this: how can we, as visual artists, address the complex issue of the representation of women in the media without reproducing the overly sexualised images that are at the centre of our critique?

However, I am encouraged to continue because of the immediate and powerful attraction we have to the sight of the corporeal body. If this intrinsic power of the body image can, in the wrong hands, condition and influence us in such negative ways, then, from the studios of artists, alternative and even more powerful positive images should emerge, evoking and interpreting women's own intuition, knowledge and expectations, as celebratory representations of the body, gender and sexuality.

I concede it is a difficult task...

Postscript

In 2021, I completed a studio-research-based Doctor of Visual Arts at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. My paintings examined mythological and historical female archetypes who, dispossessed of their positive powers throughout history, endured mistrust and betrayal, leading to violence being perpetrated against them – even murder. The subsequent acceptance of their diminished status has shaped our consciousness and expectations of womanhood. Through these artworks I evoked and then reinstated the dignity and authority of such exemplary women, who can now, symbolically and practically, contribute to an enhanced twenty-first-century female imaginary.

Lucienne Fontannaz, originally from Switzerland, has master's degrees in Art Education (Concordia University, Montreal) and Art Administration (University of New South Wales) as well as a Master of Fine Arts (Research) from the University of New South Wales. She has recently completed a Doctor of Visual Arts at the Queensland College of Art (Griffith University). She has taught art, curated major touring exhibitions, published books and exhibited her paintings in Switzerland, Canada, Australia and China. Over the past decade her artworks have addressed violence towards women vis-à-vis stereotypical portrayals and media representations of the body and sexuality, and pornography.