

# PHYSICAL RELIEF

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Organized and with an essay  
by Susan Edwards

Helen Chadwick • Maureen Connor • Nancy Davidson  
Orshi Drozdik • Shirley Irons • Shelagh Keeley  
Mira Schor • Jeanne Silverthorne • Kiki Smith

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From the *Venus of Willendorf* to the *Venus of Urbino* to the more recent versions of the ideal woman which are promoted in the popular media, western culture has looked upon the female form with pleasure, fear, awe, loathing, fascination, reverence and disgust. But the visual arena is merely a reflection of the broader and more entrenched psychological responses, social philosophies and political policies that too often deprive women of the ownership of their own bodies and minds. One cause of psychological oppression, a factor in human alienation, is an estrangement from self.<sup>1</sup> As the causes of estrangement are revealed, an abatement or removal of pain comes about. For more than twenty years women artists have addressed the truncated, objectified feminine persona. The exhibition *Physical Relief* brings together recent work by nine women artists who turn to human anatomy, biological processes or sensory perception to demystify the female body. They investigate the body not merely as the site of representation, but also as a metaphor for physical, psychological, intellectual and emotional integration.

Women scrutinize their bodies, their body parts and functions with excruciating criticism. Women are more attentive to standards of attractiveness, due, in part, to the greater importance placed on their physical appearance by society. Recent studies have proven that each day men and women spend approximately the same amount of time engaged in body awareness and this awareness is roughly equal in importance, but women feel worse for their self-attention.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 20-32.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen L. Franzoi, Jennifer J. Kessenich and Patricia A. Sugrue, "Gender Difference in the Experience of Body Awareness: An Experiential Sample Study." *Sex Roles*, Vol. 21, nos. 7/8, 1989, pp. 499-515. See also G. Calden, R.M. Lundy and R.J. Schlafer, "Sex differences in body concepts," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 1959, Vol. 27, pp. 115-122. For a discussion of the relationship of gender role to body image see Linda A. Jackson, Linda A. Sullivan and Ronald Rostker, "Gender, gender role and body image," , 1988, Vol. 19, nos. 7/8, pp. 429-33.

The inability or unwillingness to accept physical reality, with its frailties and imperfections, prompts the individual to attempt to create an artificial self. With insight, the individual recognizes that the love earned with so much effort is for a false self.<sup>3</sup> Both alienation and the need for gender validation reside in the interstices between the true self and the false self.

In her recent book, *Female Perversions*, Louise Kaplan discusses how eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, which are almost exclusively female disorders, are grounded in fragile sexual identity and the need for constant reassurance. The ultimate result of excessive thinness is, however, the exact opposite, the loss of feminine shape, the cessation of the menses.<sup>4</sup> In her work Maureen Connor has boldly confronted female perversion, specifically anorexia and the importance of thinness imposed by the fashion industry. Her study of the perception of the female body addresses two issues: the perception of gender and how sensory perception itself relates to gender. Her series of installations based on the five senses<sup>5</sup> includes *Ensemble for Three Female Voices*, 1991, lipstick casts of human larynxes accompanied by taped recordings of women of various ages as they cry, laugh, cough, sigh. Female voices utter no words but conjure a wide range of emotions — expressive sounds are interspersed with silent pauses. In Marianne Moore's poem "Silence" she writes: "The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence."<sup>6</sup> The poet alludes to the eloquence of moderation in speech, but at times silence is an expression of repressed anger. Connor demonstrates the expressive power of terse acoustical matter; the sound of a baby crying means something quite different from the sound of an adult woman crying, and a sigh of disgust is unlike a sigh of relief.

Connor's interest in the five physical senses is shared by Nancy Davidson whose conceptual work addresses the primacy of visual illusion and the material reference to touch. Her rubbings, often of found objects, mark the indexical sign of gesture. The solemnity of Davidson's sculpture is relieved by ironic undertones and sophisticated word play. *Loving Touch*, an allusion to domestic care, is an installation of embroidery hoops projecting from the wall. The sense of touch is conflated with a sense of concern and contact with the physical body. Handmade needlework, traditionally women's craft, is implied but in its stead Davidson has stretched cloth with rubbings made from discarded beer cans that have been run over. Once cylindrical like Warhol's soup cans, these cans are now cultural refuse — abandoned and homeless. Rubbings made by the loving touch

<sup>3</sup>Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*. (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>Louise Kaplan. *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Madame Bovary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>Connor's commentary on *Don't Touch*, an installation dealing with the sense of touch, follows this essay.

<sup>6</sup>Marianne Moore. *Collected Poems*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), p. 95.



of the artist are also part of *Don't Lie* (Fig. 2), a construction consisting of a bed frame draped with a continuous veil. The matchbook rubbings on the veil allude to: the fires of passion, the danger of playing with matches, a match, to match, a matchbook cover. As a transitive verb, to veil is to cover; as a noun a veil is a cloth worn over a woman's head such as a bridal veil or the veils worn by women in eastern cultures. A veil conceals, hides, obscures the visible.

Invisible biological structures are the building blocks of the intricate architecture of the human body. Jeanne Silverthorne turns to linguistics for a model paralleling the intricacy of the anatomical makeup of the human body.<sup>7</sup> Within the molecular basis of heredity, Silverthorne finds comparable references to different kinds of symbolic discourse. The double helix forms of DNA are the result of complex hydrogen bonds and likewise the multilayered meaning of language is crosslinked to the sum of its parts. *Untitled*, 1990 (Fig. 7), is to be taken in visually all at once, like a word. It is the sum of its syllables, the sum of its sounds — meaningless out of context and empowered by unification. An intricate network of cables, a cadre, "the system" looms over a small votive-like image. Armless and faceless with pronounced breasts, the fecundity figure talismanically conjures an adjacent thought cloud which hovers above the oppressive system. While a nimbus cloud, an aggregate of charged particles, obscures interstellar space, it also brings life-sustaining moisture; similarly, thought can obfuscate or clarify.

Silverthorne's concept of gender ideology mediated by cultural order opposes the essentialist argument. Because of her role as childbearer, woman is regarded as closer to nature, while man is more akin to culture.<sup>8</sup> It is, in fact, an estrangement from the natural, physiological self that underlies alienation. Complete understanding and comfort with the entirety of the body, in its healthy or unhealthy states, are too often turned over to organized power systems which assume the responsibility of care and knowledge. The laws and phenomena of human growth and development are countermanded by their destructive opposites, disease and death. Medical science is concerned with all of these aspects of fate.

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<sup>7</sup>In an interview with Elizabeth A. Brown, Silverthorne said: "I was working through the theories of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, particularly their investigations of the notions that language represents a loss of wholeness." "Social Studies 4 + 4 Young Americans," *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin*, Oberlin College, Ohio, XLIV, 1, 1990, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup>See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1953); Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male As Nature Is to Culture?" *Woman, Culture and Society*, eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1974) and Flavia Rando, "The Essential Representation of Woman," *Art Journal*, Vol. 50, no. 2, Summer 1991, pp. 48-52.

How the medical profession came to have jurisdiction over our bodies has been the concern of the Hungarian-born artist, Orshi Drozdik. Influenced by the philosophical writing of Michel Foucault, Drozdik has made art and written on the establishment of the medical model. She questions the authority of systems such as scientific nomenclature; for categorization, structure, and order imply hierarchy which in turn suggests both the appropriation and relinquishing of power.<sup>9</sup> The medical model is, of course, enlisted by the artist as a metaphor for social and cultural patterns, but on a fundamental level it represents itself and an implicit abuse of power. Burgeoning malpractice litigation and the drastic rise in medical liability insurance demonstrate more than the litigious nature of current society. Doubting the necessity for invasive surgery, challenging the practice of over-medicating, and questioning instances of neglect, patients reclaim responsibility for their own health and bodies.

Ellen Spitz writes, "... we tend to forget that an artist's work is, first of all, physical work." She continues, "... [an] acute sense of self-as-body enters into specific works in terms of content and form."<sup>10</sup> Helen Chadwick addresses the mechanization of the body as subject and object. Images of seduction and desire give way to subversive investigations of naked presence. We are quantified and categorized by the distinguishing characteristics of the external body — skin color, hair texture, sexual organs. Chadwick investigates the transience of the physical body and exposes the sinister vulnerability of consciousness. Mounting Cibachrome transparencies on light boxes, Chadwick transcends the flesh and exposes the precarious conditions of the inner world.

Like Chadwick, Shelagh Keeley touches on the sober realism of our physical selves. Her haunting images of internal organs candidly remind us of the frailty and mortality of the human body, but Keeley's images shun clinical representation in favor of intuitive, sensual renderings more closely aligned to primal markings. Travels in Africa and Asia inspired the artist's study of non-western philosophy. In Japan she worked with a master paper maker. Keeley's sensitivity to materials whether paper, wax, pigment or charcoal, and her practices of smearing and scraping advance the visceral refrain of her depictions of the internal realm. Inspired also by western sources, notably Pier Paolo Pasolini, Georges Bataille and Marguerite Duras, Keeley is concerned with cultural definitions of the body and its sexuality. Working through theories of fragmentation, Keeley's explorations of anatomy take us full circle from the inside out and back to a spiritual center.

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<sup>9</sup>See Drozdik's discussion of hierarchy within the body which follows in this catalog.

<sup>10</sup>Ellen Handler Spitz, *Art and Psyche: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Aesthetics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 123. See also Spitz, Chapter 5, "Psychoanalysis and Aesthetic Experience," where she discusses the contributions of object-relations theorists to an understanding of aesthetic experience.



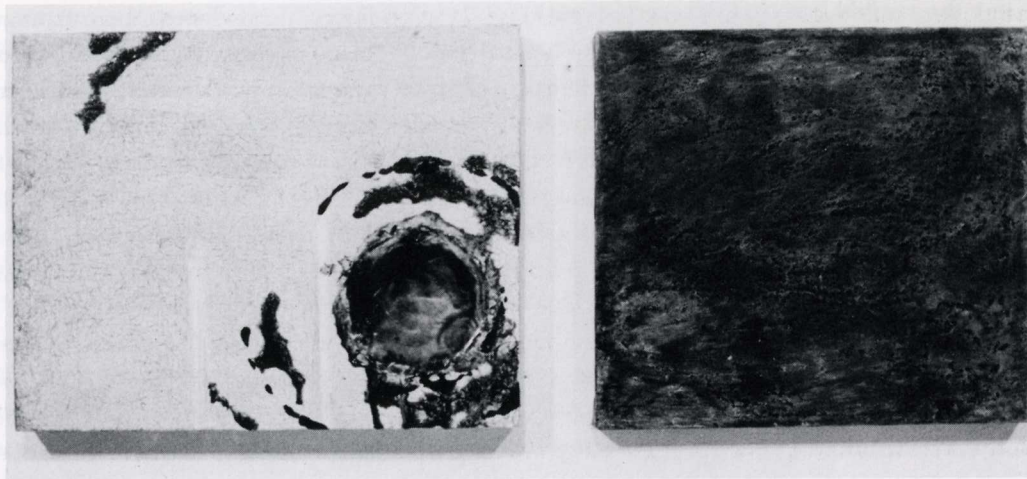


Fig. 3. Shirley Irons. *Origin*, 1990. Blood, glue, and hair on canvas, 12 x 28 in., Private collection.

Mira Schor's paintings define the female condition by rendering the sexual organs — the penis as well as ova and breasts. In *The Daughter's Seduction*, Jane Gallop writes: "The inequities between men and women are based upon a general societal confusion between penis and phallus. The answer to this problem is not to alter the phallocentrism of discourse (a philosophical/political answer) but to separate the symbolic phallus from the penis (real or imaginary.)" She continues: "The penis is what men have and women do not: the phallus is the attribute of power which neither men nor women have. But as long as the attribute of power is a phallus which refers to and can be confused (in the imaginary register?) with a penis, this confusion will support a structure in which it seems reasonable that men have power and women do not."<sup>11</sup> Mira Schor's painting *Patriotism – On the Blood of Women* (Fig. 6), confirms that we pay for the aggression of war with our progeny and that the price of patriotism is the loss of blood relatives. In Schor's *War Frieze*, body fluids, milk and sperm ebb and flow from one sexual organ into another as rhythmic volumes swell to bomb-like forms and contract to the flat lines of cardiac arrest.

<sup>12</sup>Susan Sontag. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 105.

In the age of AIDS we are aware more than ever that blood, traditionally considered the purveyor of life, can also convey disease. The transmission of the HIV virus through "blood or sexual fluids of infected people or from contaminated blood products"<sup>12</sup> has sparked public interest in hematological structures and functions. Using blood as a medium, Shirley Irons removes the life force from its customary arena to redirect its creative potential. Once oxidized, the blood's hemoglobin changes from primary red to sienna. In *Origin* (Fig. 3), Irons pairs two small panel paintings — one encrusted and the other crackled. The hairline crackling effect of the left panel is accomplished by using hair clippings, and the crusty scab-like panel on the right is made from blood in a glue base. The symbolic and the material body are collapsed into a single visual entity. In *Origin* signifiers of individuality assume their opposites — abstraction, universality, anonymity.

It is paradoxical that under a microscope the pandemic becomes the signature of specificity. A drop of blood, a strand of hair, a stain of urine or semen bursts into an intricate pattern of hermetic physiology. Throughout her career Kiki Smith has examined the body from the inside out. She reminds us that the body is primal. She dares to broach the taboos of pathology, death, even putrefaction, because she believes that healing begins when the source of fissure is confronted. For Smith, the body is enlisted as a metaphor for psychological, emotional, and physical dichotomies within the individual. In addition, her art speaks to broader societal fragmentation. *Untitled* (Fig. 1), scattered and disjointed like ancient ruins, warns of self-destruction from within. Copper and silver leaf cover forms that rise in relief above the surrounding plane surface of the floor. The still, mummy-like female figure, like a pre-historic fetish, is an empowered referent.

As a technical term, relief refers to a mode of sculpture in which forms and figures are distinguished from a surrounding plane surface, but it can also mean the removal or lightening or something oppressive, painful or distressing.<sup>13</sup> The nine women artists in this exhibition look to the latter definition to redefine the female ideal by casting off imposed modesty, submissiveness and passivity in order to assume power, fulfill intellectual ambitions, enjoy sexual pleasure and determine their own destiny.

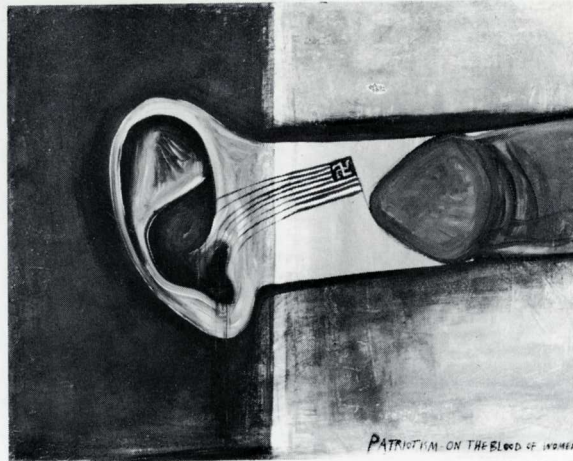
Susan Edwards  
Curator  
Hunter College Art Galleries

<sup>11</sup>Jane Gallop. *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 96-97.

<sup>13</sup>See Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriman Company), 1977.



Fig. 6 Mira Schor. *Patriotism – On the Blood of Women*, 1989. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in. (photo: Pelka/Noble Photography)



The availability of gendered body parts — penis, breast, sperm, and ear — to a symbolic narrative of the circulation of power in our culture is perpetuated by patriarchy's hardy survival as an actual political system really run by a plurality of biological males.

In representation, the penis has usually been veiled, not-to-be-seen so as to better protect the power of the phantom phallus. It is worth risking the pitfalls of binarism, tit for tat-ism, in order to give the penis an airing and a viewing if, by so doing, some aspects of the transmission and abuse of authority in private and civic daily life might become subject to speculation and debate. This isn't "essentialist," it is symbolist in methodology and realist in political content.

In the past decade painting has not been the favored space for feminist representations and visual pleasure is tarred by its historical link to male eroticism. I would reclaim painting as the space to explore a female and feminist erotics of visuality, and would reassert the potential for painting to be a space of visual and material investigation. For me this consists of a consistent shifting between an inch-by-inch attention to paint as an abstract and conceptual language and a tender crafting of illusionistic details, including pictured words, with and within that language.

Mira Schor

## CHECKLIST

### Helen Chadwick

*The Philosopher's Fear of Flesh*,  
1989

Cibachrome transparencies, birds,  
eye maple light box  
20 x 60 x 5 1/2 in.

Courtesy of Ehlers Caudill Gallery,  
Ltd., Chicago, Illinois

### Maureen Connor

*Don't Touch*, 1991

Stainless steel, toaster elements,  
rubber

58 x 15 x 26 in.

Courtesy of the artist

### Nancy Davidson

*Don't Lie*, 1990

Steel, cloth, paint

67 x 32 x 9 in.

Courtesy of Richard Anderson  
Gallery

*Loving Touch*, 1991

Wood, cloth, paint

108 x 156 x 12 in. (variable)

Courtesy of Richard Anderson  
Gallery

### Orshi Drozdik

*Beta Chain*, 1989

Porcelain, lead, glass, copper and  
steel

66 1/2 x 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 in.

Courtesy of Tom Cugliani Gallery

*Explain How an Organ Became Sick*

Porcelain, stainless steel, sand  
blasted glass

44 x 30 x 8 5/8 in.

Courtesy of Tom Cugliani Gallery

### Shirley Irons

*Origin*, 1990

Blood, glue and hair on canvas

12 x 28 in.

Private collection

### Shelagh Keeley

*Untitled (Visceral Knowledge)*, 1990

Steel shelf, six wax tablets

Tablets approximately 7 x 10 in.,  
each

Shelf width: 54 in., Width: 6 in.

Courtesy of the artist

*Untitled*, 1990

Drawings on paper, wax, pigment,  
pencil and charcoal

10 1/2 x 9 1/2 in., each

Courtesy of the artist

### Mira Schor

*Patriotism - On the Blood of  
Women*, 1989

Oil on canvas

16 x 20 in.

Courtesy of the artist

*War Frieze - segment*, 1991

Oil on linen and canvas

12 x 320 in.

Courtesy of the artist

### Jeanne Silverthorne

*Untitled*, 1990

Rubber latex, self-hardening clay,  
hardware

91 x 165 x 20 deep

Courtesy Christine Burgin Gallery

### Kiki Smith

*Untitled*, 1991

Paper, sculptmetal, copper and silver  
leaf

2 x 15 ft.

Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Joe  
Fawbush Gallery