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Reclaiming Abjection: The Female Body in
Contemporary Art

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Fine Art

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**Reclaiming Abjection: The Female Body in
Contemporary Art**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the role of abjection within contemporary female art, arguing that abjection functions as a critical feminist methodology through which women reclaim autonomy over their bodies. Drawing on various perspectives of psychoanalytic and feminist theory, particularly Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection from her book *Powers of Horror* (1980) and Luce Irigaray's collection of essays titled *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) that explores how the female experience is shaped by symbolic systems, the study explores how the female body has been culturally regulated through ideals of purity, containment and control.

Through visual and contextual analysis, this dissertation considers how contemporary female artists engage with abject materials and processes, including the maternal body, bodily fluids and decay. The chapters are structured to reflect a chronology of embodied female experience, beginning from the maternal relationship, through bodily fluid as a marker of physical and emotional development, to decay as an inevitable condition of embodiment. Works by Carolee Schneemann, Helen Chadwick, Yapci Ramos, Poppy Jackson and Anya Gallaccio are analysed to demonstrate how abjection is not simply presented for shock value, but is used deliberately to challenge the shame and repression imposed on female bodies.

The study argues that by making abjection visible, these artists resist the cultural expectation that women distance themselves from their own bodily processes. In doing so, contemporary female art reclaims abjection as a site of liberation rather than dysfunction, asserting the female body and its functions as something that can exist without censorship.

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Introduction

i. Introduction to Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is a form of therapeutic treatment and way of understanding that was founded and developed by Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud from the late 1890s until his death in 1939. Freud theorised that the unconscious plays a central role in shaping thought, emotion and behaviour.

Psychoanalytical theory is grounded in the idea that repressed memories, impulses and internal conflicts continue to influence waking experiences, even when they remain outside of consciousness. Through the analysis of dreams, early experiences and spontaneous associations, psychoanalytic therapy seeks to find the connections between past events and present emotional conflicts. This process allows individuals to recognise and work through unconscious material that continues to structure their responses and behaviours (Freud, 1917, p.11). Beginning with Freud and later expanded by writers such as Carl Jung, psychoanalytic theory offers a way of thinking about how people form a sense of self and how hidden impulses shape their actions.

ii. Introduction to Feminism

Alongside the development of psychoanalysis, the feminism movement revolves around the social, political, and cultural structures that shape women's lives and often limit their freedoms. Although the term 'feminism' began to gain popularity in the early twentieth century, the movement's roots stretch back much earlier; Mary Wollstonecraft argued as early as 1792 that women were denied educational and social opportunities that men took for granted (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p.4). Throughout its development, feminism has consistently challenged the ways patriarchal systems position women's bodies, voices, and experiences as secondary or less valuable than men's. Early feminist writing focused on legal inequalities, while later theories examined the subtler ways gender expectations influence behaviour, identity, and representation. A key aspect of feminist theory is how ideas about femininity are constructed and

maintained through language, social constructs, and culture (Beauvoir, 1949). These discussions highlight how women are often defined in opposition to men, and compelled into roles that frame them as passive, nurturing, or emotionally 'excessive'. Feminism therefore provides a critical framework for questioning how such assumptions are formed and how they continue to shape women's understanding of themselves.

iii. Introduction to Feminist Psychoanalysis & Abjection

Psychoanalytic feminism combines psychoanalytic and feminist theory by exploring how the unconscious, sexual difference, and identity formation are shaped by gendered experience. Writers such as Karen Horney and Luce Irigaray rework classical Freudian psychoanalytic ideas, arguing that earlier theories often misrepresent or overlook women's psychological development (Irigaray, 1974, p.13, p.26). The idea of 'abjection' is a complex theory that was coined by Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her 1980 book *Powers of Horror*. The concept of the 'abject' is described by Kristeva as; "...what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 4). In Kristeva's theory, the 'abject' refers to what is rejected in order to maintain a sense of self and what lies between the inside and outside of a body. Involuntary bodily functions such as urination, vomiting, or decay after death evoke feelings of 'abjection' because they oppose societal norms of what is considered controlled cleanliness. Kristeva theorises that this feeling originates in the separation from one's mother during early childhood, and describes the discovery of a sense of self that is separate to the mother as the first experience of 'abjection' as she describes; "...abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 5). Consequently, the 'abject' becomes closely tied to the maternal and the feminine and relates to what society often represses or determines 'unclean'. She argues that the earliest experience of abjection occurs in early childhood, through the perceived 'rejection' from the mother due to the child's realisation of a sense of self that is separate from the mother. The maternal body becomes a site of both comfort and rejection, marking the boundary between what is considered part

of the self and what must be expelled. Kristeva's theory places the maternal and the feminine at the heart of subject formation, making abjection a key process in understanding identity.

French philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, offers a related but distinctive critique in her collection of essays; *Speculum of the Other Woman* published in 1974. She argues that within Western culture, women are reduced to mirrors or reflections of male identity, rather than seeing them as subjects in their own right (Irigaray, 1974, p.31). Her analysis questions the structures that position women as passive, and she highlights how language itself can reinforce these patterns. Irigaray's work challenges the idea that femininity must be defined through lack or absence, and instead emphasises the importance of acknowledging women's own symbolic and bodily experiences. Together, Kristeva and Irigaray provide a foundation for understanding how the unconscious is shaped by gender, and how ideas about the female body are formed through both psychological and cultural processes.

While abjection is well established within psychoanalytic and feminist theory, its application to the analysis of the female body in contemporary art remains complex. Addressing it directly is vital as it exposes the cultural boundaries placed upon femininity and shows how female artists reclaim and transform those boundaries. This study argues that abjection operates beyond provocation, serving as a critical method through which female artists challenge how their bodies are culturally regulated. The chapters are structured to emulate the chronology of female bodily experience through sub-themes of abjection: beginning with the maternal body and relationship at birth, progressing through bodily fluid as a marker of puberty and sexual development, and concluding with decay as an endpoint of embodiment. These distinctive but connected forms show that abjection is not a single event but an ongoing aspect of female identity. In doing so, this study demonstrates that abjection is essential to contemporary female art practice, not for shock value, but for revealing and reshaping how the female body is culturally defined.

Chapter One: The Maternal

1.1: Analysis of Interior Scroll

Carolee Schneemann is an American performance and installation artist born in 1939, who, in her own words, “wanted [her] actual body to be combined with the work as an integral material” (Schneemann, 1979). The use of her own image and physical presence is a fundamental and intrinsic part of her practice. Through live performance and its documentation, she explores themes of sexuality, abjection, and the politics of the female form in a direct and visceral way.

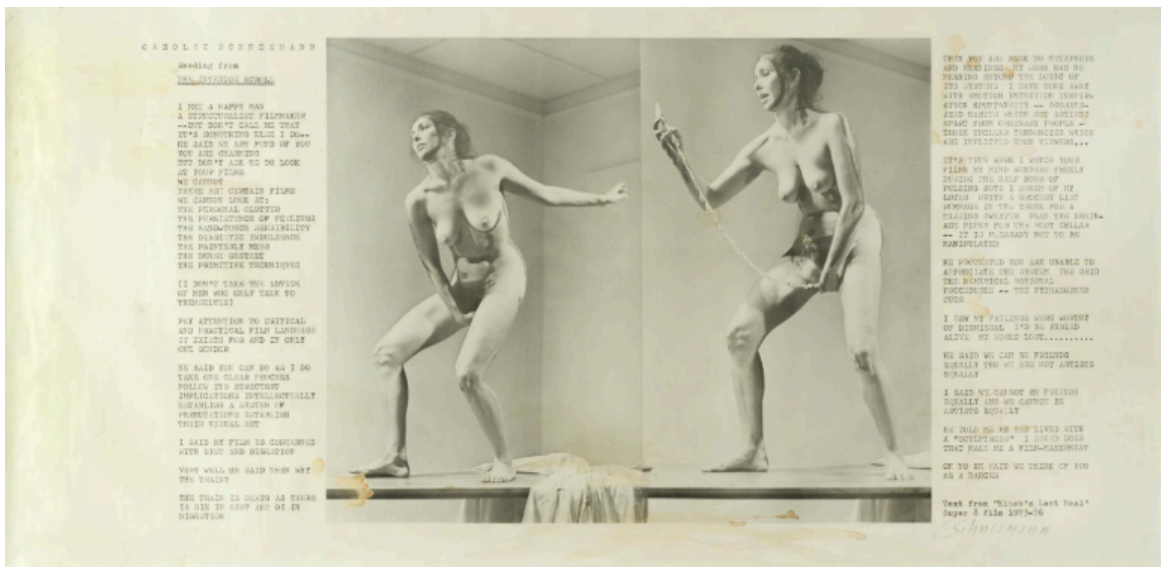


Figure 1.1: *Interior Scroll*, Carolee Schneemann (1975); Beet juice, urine and coffee on screenprint on paper; 905 x 1830 mm

One of Schneemann’s most well-known works is *Interior Scroll* (1975), a performance that exemplifies her use of the body as both subject and material. The work is divided into two distinctive parts. The first part of the performance shows Schneemann atop a table in front of an audience where she gradually begins undressing and paints lines of dark paint across her body and face. She then adorns an apron and begins reading from her own artist book; *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter* (Schneemann, 1973), first published in 1973. During this section, she adopts a series of poses reminiscent of a traditional life model.

The second part of the performance, and perhaps the most renowned, shows Schneemann removing her apron and extracting a long, narrow scroll of paper from her vagina. She proceeds to read aloud a passage transcribed from her film *Kitch's Last Meal* (Schneemann, 1973-76). The scroll itself, which was later altered and covered in beet juice, coffee and urine, can be seen alongside images of Schneemann taken during the performance and serves as the documentation of this transformative piece.

In her book, *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva describes the maternal body as central to the experience of abjection, describing childbirth as a "...scotching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death) horror and beauty..." (Kristeva, 1982, p.155). This duality between "horror and beauty" can be seen clearly in Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, which shows the body as both a medium of language and of abjection. The act of extracting a scroll from her vagina blurs the link between the inside and outside of the body and transforms the body from a private object to a public experience. Schneemann transforms her body into medium, and shows her vagina as a powerful and generative space rather than a passive void. Kristeva's focus on the maternal body is closely tied to the vagina as a place of both birth and abject transformation (Kristeva, 1980, p.101). This link is mirrored in Schneemann's performance, where the act of pulling the scroll from her body is similar to the physical experience of childbirth. Schneemann, however, reframes this experience as an act of liberation and creativity by using her own writings on the scroll. Similarly, the first section of her performance shows her undressing and redressing in an apron and covering herself in paint. This could be seen as a transformation in and of itself, and could be associated with Kristeva's theory on abjection, and the concept that the first experience of abjection is a realisation of a sense of self that is separate from the mother.

Schneemann's performance directly challenges the patriarchal fear of the maternal body that Kristeva describes as both vital and threatening. By revealing what society seeks to repress; the fluids (seen in Schneemann's use of urine in the altered scroll), and abilities of the female body (Schneemann's use of her

own vagina); *Interior Scroll* can be seen as an embrace of abjection, a collaboration with what must be expelled in order for the subject to exist. Schneemann embodies this abjection rather than rejecting it, turning it into an opportunity for female empowerment and shows an appreciation for the maternal experience. In this way, Schneemann embodies Kristeva's assertion that horror and beauty can co-exist within female space and the feminine experience - and that it cannot and should not be ignored by social or aesthetic constructs.

1.2: Analysis of *The Labours I-X*

Helen Chadwick is a British artist born in 1953. She was a multi-disciplinary artist whose work is considered some of the most influential within contemporary conceptual art and was hugely influential until her death in 1996. Chadwick is associated with psychoanalysis through her connection with the artistic movement known as 'body art' which focuses on using the body as medium and is particularly relevant amongst female artists that use their own bodies within their work.

Chadwick's work relates heavily to Kristeva's theory of abjection, as it often includes her own image and references to bodily processes that could be considered to elicit a sense of abjection, such as organs, urine, and decay. A large element of her practice focuses on the female form, particularly in *The Labours I-X* (1983–84). This photographic series of 10 images shows Chadwick in different poses, each time cradling a wooden sculpture that represents an important stage in her life from birth to the age of 30. As the series continues, the sculptures grow larger and heavier, making them increasingly difficult for her to hold, symbolising her physical and emotional growth throughout her life. When viewed through the lens of Kristeva's theory, *The Labours I-X* can be analysed as an exploration of the first experience of abjection as the realisation of a sense of self that is separate from the mother. As Chadwick progresses through the series, her choice of stance and pose is significant. In *The Labours I*, she sits and seems to shelter the small sculpture with her arms and upper body but by *The Labours V*; the sculpture is beginning to overwhelm her and she begins to stand. Within the pieces, Chadwick's body can be seen as a

representation of ‘the mother’ that during the child’s early years, is protective and occupies a larger portion of the child’s sense of identity but as the child develops; the sense of self is recognised and the kin (mother) as referenced by Kristeva, becomes a separate entity. Throughout the series, the image of what could be considered ‘the mother’ attempts to continue with her protective instincts but struggles to do so as the child grows, as seen by the sculptures becoming larger and Chadwick’s pose becoming more strained until she is seen almost struggling to stay upright as she holds the last sculpture in *The Labours X*.



Figure 1.2, Figure 1.3, Figure 1.4: *The Labours I, The Labours V & The Labours X*, Helen Chadwick (1983-4a-c); Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, hand-tinted; 760 x 760 mm

This theory is supported by an article written by Stephen Walker titled *Helen Chadwick’s ‘Composite Images* from 2015. He argues that *The Labours I-X* and its correlating project *Egos Geometria Sum* (1982-3) "...[emphasise] the separation, even the autonomy, of the surface within this broader process of self-emergence." (Walker, 2015). The concept of *The Labours I-X* being a representation of the first experience of abjection is one that can be supported through visual analysis of the work itself and by using the framework of Kristeva’s original abjection theory.

1.3: Analysis of *Piss Flowers*

Another of Helen Chadwick's works that directly engages with abjection is *Piss Flowers* (1991–2). This sculptural piece consists of 12 bronze casts of packed snow, which Chadwick and her partner urinated into. The bronze is then coated with white enamel, giving it the appearance of the original snow they were cast from and then placed onto pedestals that are representative of bulbs. The



Figure 1.5: *Piss Flowers*, Helen Chadwick (1991-2a); Enamelled bronze; approx 700 x 650 x 650mm

pieces are usually displayed on outdoor surfaces or artificial green floors, creating the impression of a grassy environment. This choice of location is vital in creating the sense of a collection of 'flowers' in a field of grass. This work is arguably Chadwick's most renowned piece that defined her career and solidified her as a key figure within abject art. When discussing Kristeva's theory of abjection and the 'rejection from the mother' experience, the creation of *Piss Flowers*, introduces an interesting source for analysis; specifically when focusing on the symbol of the flower itself. Flowers have long been connected with the maternal, from their visual similarity to female sexual organs to their links with birth and growth. For example, in Egyptian mythology, the god Nefertum was said to be born from a lotus flower, which symbolised vitality and rebirth (Hart, 2005). In Christian iconography, the Virgin Mary is often associated with lilies; as author Marian Horvat explains in her paper discussing the symbol of the lily, "the white petals [symbolis[e] her pure virginal body and the golden anthers the radiance of her soul" (Horvat, 2016). Carnations also frequently appear in paintings of the Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus, linking flowers to motherhood. In Christian symbolism, carnations are often associated with maternal love and devotion, because of the Christian belief that the flower bloomed from the Virgin Mary's tears at the crucifixion. A clear example of this is *Madonna of the Carnation* (1478-1480) by Leonardo Da Vinci, where the Virgin Mary is shown holding a small red carnation while cradling the infant Jesus. In this painting, the carnation has many symbolic meanings: it highlights the nurturing relationship between the



Figure 1.6: *Madonna of the Carnation*,
Leonardo da Vinci (1478-1480);
Oil on panel; 620 mm × 475 mm

mother and her child, symbolises the Virgin's purity and maternal care, and also foreshadows Christ's future suffering. In the context of *Piss Flowers*, this historical layering of meaning reinforces the connection between floral imagery and ideas of the maternal, while Chadwick's addition of urine introduces an element of physicality and abjection that challenges the idealised and sanitised representations of womanhood.

Chapter Two: Bodily Fluid

2.1: Analysis of Materials within 'Piss Flowers'

There is an obvious link between *Piss Flowers* (1991-2) and Kristeva's theory of the abject, as the use of urine immediately situates the work within a space where the boundaries of the body are crossed. Urine is a substance that sits between the inside and outside of the body and is therefore associated with contamination, impurity, and loss of control. Kristeva describes the abject as that which disrupts order and challenges the stability of the subject (Kristeva, 1980, p.4) and the inclusion of urine in the creation of *Piss Flowers* directly reflects this. As a material, it opposes cultural expectations surrounding cleanliness and bodily control, especially in relation to femininity, which is often idealised as pure, contained, and sanitary. Chadwick deliberately engages with this contradiction by pairing an elegant and feminine symbol - the flower - with a material considered uncomfortable or inappropriate, particularly when linked to the female body.

The use of urine in *Piss Flowers* becomes even more significant when read through the lens of femininity. Social expectations frequently position women's bodies as passive and ornamental, and bodily fluids are rarely associated with socially acceptable forms of femininity. Fluids such as urine, menstrual blood, or



Figure 2.1: *Piss Flowers*, Helen Chadwick (1991-2b);
Enamelled bronze; approx 700 x 650 x 650mm

vaginal secretions are commonly seen as disruptive to the idealised image of the woman as clean and restrained. Chadwick's choice to centre urine as the generative force behind the sculpture directly challenges these expectations. Instead of suppressing or sanitising bodily functions, she turns them into the foundation of a carefully crafted artwork. This act reframes what is

usually rejected or hidden and presents it as something that is not only visible but foundational to the work's meaning.

Hanna Segal's concept of symbol formation provides a useful way of understanding this transformation. In her article, *Notes on Symbolic Formation* (1957), Segal describes how symbols emerge from the integration of internal experiences with external reality. Her statement that "The process of symbol formation is... a continuous process of bringing together and integrating the internal with the external" (Segal, 1957, p.6) aligns closely with Chadwick's method. By using urine to carve a cavity in snow, which is later cast into bronze, Chadwick turns an internal, bodily substance into a durable external object. The resulting sculptures function as permanent forms generated through a temporary fluid material. This transformation mirrors the psychological process Segal describes, in which internal states are externalised into symbolic formations. Through her choice of medium, Chadwick creates a physical example of how the psyche might handle that which is intimate, unstable, and potentially anxiety-provoking.

Chadwick's use of urine carries a feminist significance through its engagement with the abject in a way that reclaims female bodily autonomy. Women are often expected to distance themselves from the messy or disruptive aspects of their bodies, and the abject is typically associated with uncontrolled or excessive femininity. By utilising urine as a creative substance rather than something to be concealed, Chadwick challenges the cultural impulse to regulate or sanitise female bodily function. The act of both Chadwick and her partner producing the flowers as a shared act further complicates gendered assumptions about bodily fluids; however, Chadwick's authorship and the floral symbolism inevitably position the work within a feminine context. The pieces become a site where femininity is not purified nor idealised but rooted in process and the reality of the physical body.

In this sense, *Piss Flowers* can be read as a reclamation of abjection. Instead of accepting the cultural pressure to keep bodily fluids hidden, Chadwick reclaims urine as a material of creation, transformation, and visual beauty. This shift is significant as it challenges the cultural tendency to associate women with the abject in a negative, controlling way. By using an abject material to produce a carefully constructed artwork, Chadwick demonstrates that the abject can be a source of agency rather than shame. The work

invites viewers to reconsider what is deemed unacceptable or disturbing and to recognise how these reactions are shaped by social ideas about the female body.

2.2: Analysis of ‘Red Hot’

Born on the Canary Islands in 1977, Yapei Ramos is a contemporary artist whose practice frequently explores the body, identity, and the tensions between intimacy and exposure. Working across photography, video, and performance, Ramos often places her own body at the centre of her work, using it as a medium through which emotional, psychological, and physical experiences are explored. Her work engages with themes of vulnerability, desire, and discomfort, making the body both subject and material. This positions Ramos within a wider group of contemporary female artists who use their own bodies and image as a way to challenge social expectations surrounding femininity. Her work often touches on ideas that relate closely to Kristeva’s theory of the abject, especially in the way she highlights aspects of the body that are usually hidden or repressed. Through this approach, Ramos disrupts the boundaries between what is considered acceptable or desirable and what is dismissed as excessive, uncomfortable, or too revealing. Ramos’ engagement with the abject is particularly evident in her performance and film piece titled *Red Hot* (2018), where physical exposure and intimacy create a visual language that confronts the viewer with the raw and unfiltered aspects of female embodiment.

Red Hot (2018) is a video installation work in which Yapei Ramos records herself writing singular words on the tiled wall of a shower using her own menstrual blood that she collected each month. Each screen shows a slightly different moment of this repeated monthly performance, producing a collection of close-up, intimate views



Figure 2.2: *Red Hot*, Yapei Ramos (2018a);
18 channel video installation

of the shower walls. The clinically white tiles contrast with the deep red of the blood, creating a strong visual contrast across the installation. The words themselves are applied roughly, with fingers or the palm of Ramos' hand, giving them a smeared, visceral quality that emphasises the rapidness of the action. The camera remains close, often including partial views of Ramos' nude body such as her back, hands, or chest so the viewer is positioned within the private space of the bathroom rather than as a detached

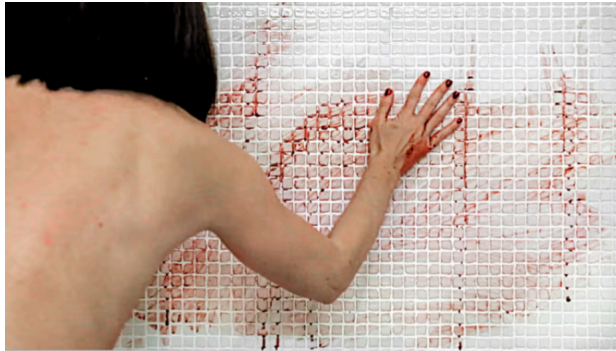


Figure 2.3: *Red Hot*, Yaptic Ramos (2018b);
18 channel video installation

observer. As the film progresses, Ramos begins washing away her blood from the tiles, revealing the clean white tiles once more. The act of writing and then washing the blood away gives the film a cyclical structure, with traces of her writing dissolving before new marks are made. Across the wall of screens, this repetition produces a sense of

collected bodily time, where each mark becomes a record of a physical and emotional state. The scale of the installation also plays a crucial role; the vertical stacks of screens suggest the structure of a human form, surrounding the viewer and emphasising the intensity of the act. In its overall visual form, the work balances simplicity with an unsettling immediacy, using repetition, colour, and closeness to highlight the tension between the body, its fluids, and intimate rituals that usually remain unseen (Walsh, 2018).

Luce Irigaray's writing on abjection provides a useful way of understanding the cycles of creation and erasure that structure *Red Hot*, particularly in relation to menstrual blood, cleansing rituals, and the possibility of reclaiming what has been culturally decided as impure or unclean. Menstrual blood occupies a central position within the understanding of abjection; it is a substance repeatedly framed as unclean, excessive, and something to be carefully controlled or repressed, especially in relation to femininity. Ramos challenges this directly by making her own menstrual blood the primary material through which the work takes form. The process of writing with her own blood using her bare hands, allowing it to

sweep across the tiles, emphasises the very fluid that is usually treated as unacceptable for public display. By choosing the bathroom - an intensely private space concerned with hygiene and bodily maintenance, especially when in relation to menstruating - Ramos further shows the contrast between what should remain unseen and what is now being deliberately shown.

The repeated washing away of the blood is crucial to the performance of the piece and vital to its relationship with abjection. In mainstream cultural terms, cleaning functions as a way of restoring boundaries, re-establishing the separation between the body and the world, and returning the subject to a state of supposed purity. Ramos' gesture complicates this directly; the cleansing action is not the final step but part of an ongoing cycle of writing, erasing, and rewriting. The blood is removed not to eliminate the abject but to make space for its return. In this sense, the work mirrors the rhythms of menstruation itself - an embodied cycle of expulsion and renewal. Ramos' insistence on repeating the act monthly turns the performance into a ritual in itself, one where the abject is not rejected but continuously reserved and acknowledged.

This process directly relates to Irigaray's account of how abjection can be pushed to its limits as a means of reclamation. Irigaray writes: "And perhaps, at the bottom of the pit, she finds her purity again. In this way, the blood, the sores, the pus that others clean away and she absorbs will wash her clean of all stain. She is pure at last because she has pushed to extremes the repetition of this abjection, this revulsion, this horror to which she has been condemned, to which, mimetically, she had condemned herself" (Irigaray, 1974, p.199). This description provides a striking parallel to Ramos' work. Irigaray frames female encounters with abjection as something they endure repeatedly. Yet by exaggerating that abjection - through "pushing it to extremes"(Irigaray, 1974, p.199) - a woman may paradoxically find a form of liberation or "purity," not through sanitising herself but through confronting and reclaiming what has been used to undermine her.

2.3: Analysis of ‘Constellation’

Continuing with the use of menstrual blood as a medium, *Constellation* (2015) is a live performance piece by British artist Poppy Jackson, whose work often explores the relationship between the body and the spaces it occupies. The two-hour performance took place at Fuse Art Space in Bradford, where Jackson remained completely naked throughout, using her body as the central focus of the work. During the



Figure 2.4: *Constellation*, Poppy Jackson (2015a); Containers of menstrual blood from various contributors, stick and compact mirror painted white; 2 hour performance

performance, small tubs of menstrual blood, donated by members of the public following an online call-out, were placed around the performance area. Jackson dipped her fingers into these tubs and applied small dots of blood onto her skin, gradually forming a scattered pattern across different areas of her body. She then repeated this action across the surrounding space, using first her fingers and later a long stick to extend her reach. This allowed her to dot the walls, ceiling, and higher points in the space, expanding the marks beyond her body.

Throughout this, drips of blood were allowed to fall from the ceiling and from her own body onto the floor, contributing to a sense of the material completely surrounding both Jackson and the audience. As the performance progressed, these marks built up into a varied pattern, visually referencing the title of the work through the gradual collection of individual points into a larger pattern. The contrast between the red of the blood and the pale tones of Jackson’s skin, as well as the stark surfaces of the gallery space, created a striking and deliberate visual impact that was observed by the live audience.



Figure 2.5: *Constellation*, Poppy Jackson (2015b); Containers of menstrual blood from various contributors, stick and compact mirror painted white; 2 hour performance

Kristeva's concept of abjection, particularly when applied to bodily fluids, allows for a meaningful comparison between *Red Hot* (2018) and *Constellation* (2015). In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes how certain substances, when expelled from the body, threaten the subject's sense of cohesion: "...body fluids...are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (Kristeva, 1980, p.3). Menstrual blood is a significant material within this framework as it disrupts bodily boundaries and marks cyclical change. Ramos negotiates this tension through repetition as *Red Hot* quietly exposes the abject but maintains a clear boundary between the subject and the viewer, where the bathroom and the camera act as a buffer. The audience sees the blood, but it remains controlled, its distance maintained by the screen and the framing of installation. Ramos invites confrontation in a private space, but maintains a degree of separation between her body and the viewer's experience. Jackson, however, pushes into something far more immersive. Kristeva writes that the abject "...is a border that has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva, 1980, p.3), and in *Constellation* this encroachment becomes literal. The audience stands within a space marked by menstrual blood, surrounded by dots that cover the walls, ceiling, and floor. They do not observe abjection at a distance - they become woven within it. The distinction between performer, material, and viewer dissolves into a powerful collapse of boundaries that Kristeva identifies as fundamental to the logic of abjection (Kristeva, 1980, p.4).

This distinction is reminiscent of a quote from Irigaray that says: "She bathes in a blood that flows over her, hot and purifying" (Irigaray, 1974, p.200). In *Red Hot*, Ramos' use of menstrual blood remains intimate and cyclical, utilising repetition as a way of reclaiming something that is usually hidden. In *Constellation*, however, this process is taken further; Jackson moves beyond repetition into full physical immersion. By using donated menstrual blood across her own skin and dispersing it throughout the performance space, she creates something much closer to the "bath" Irigaray describes, not as metaphor but as a direct and visible action. What Irigaray describes as purification through repetition becomes, in Jackson's work, intensified through live exposure and full physical immersion.

Jackson embodies Kristeva's notion of the abject as something that rejects borders by forcing the abject into communal proximity. The work is not more abject than Ramos', but it explores a different angle: Ramos reveals abjection whereas Jackson compels the viewer to share it. Both performances confront the culturally imposed censorship around menstruation, but Jackson expands this into a spatial confrontation that mirrors the immersive quality Irigaray associates with bodily fluids. Both reclaim the menstrual experience, but Jackson's live performance amplifies the abjection into a shared and all-encompassing experience.

Together, *Red Hot* and *Constellation* therefore demonstrate that abjection can be reclaimed not as a means of shame, but as an embodied method for reasserting autonomy over the female body. In doing so, both artists challenge the social demand that menstruation remain invisible, revealing abjection as a means through which femininity can be reclaimed rather than regulated.

Chapter Three: Decay

3.1: Analysis of 'Carcass'

Having explored abjection through the maternal experience and material presence of bodily fluids, another further aspect of inevitable bodily experience is decay. Here, abjection is not encountered through expulsions or rejection but through processes of breakdown, dissolution and loss of form. While menstrual blood and urine marked boundaries between inside and outside, decay engages the body at the level of transformation, showing how abjection continues beyond the living body into the unstable matter it leaves behind. Helen Chadwick's *Carcass* (1986), is a key example of decomposition that becomes not only a biological state but a critical exploration in reconsidering the value, beauty and meaning attached to the female body.



Figure 3.1: *Carcass*, Helen Chadwick (1986a);
Organic waste, acrylic or glass; 2290 x 610 x 610 mm

Carcass (1986) by Helen Chadwick is a large sculptural installation consisting of a tall, transparent glass column that was eventually reconstructed out of Perspex due to the organic matter inside beginning to leak (Buck, 2025). The 2 meter tall column was packed with fruit and vegetable matter collected and replenished throughout its display, creating a shifting interior that moved, burped and bubbled as the decomposition and fermentation processes progressed. The clear perspex casing allows the viewer to see the entire transformative process, from the initially intact produce to its eventual decay into slime, liquid and disintegrated pieces. This internal activity contrasts with the stability of the column's exterior, producing a tension

between the sculpture's neat architectural presence and its volatile internal changes. The contents do not

remain still; gases build up, liquids collect, and the material visibly breaks down causing leakage, making the process of decomposition itself part of the work's experience.

Chadwick's handling of decomposition extends the sensory reach of the work beyond sight alone; while the column's transparency invites close visual inspection, the implied smell of fermenting matter and the suggestion of movement within the packed contents evokes a multi-sensory experience. The sculpture can be understood to evoke bodily processes of bodily decomposition as referenced by the title. The column functions like an internal organ on display, its interior echoing the instability associated with mortality.

Through her artistic choices, Chadwick's work shows decay not as something hidden or undesirable, but as essential to understanding materiality and embodiment. The contrast between the structured containment and the internal unpredictability produces a discomfort that is both aesthetic and conceptual. The sculpture's proportions contrast the unsettling processes occurring within, making decay visible rather than concealed. This shift towards instability and collapse aligns *Carcass* with wider feminist ideas about how idealised forms are imposed on women, and opens up a critical space for understanding decay as a symbol of effeminate abjection.

In *Carcass*, Chadwick uses the slow breakdown of fruit and vegetables to draw attention to how strongly food is tied to ideas of femininity, discipline and cultural value. The rotting material becomes a way of considering how instability and change are treated socially, especially when connected to women's bodies. Kristeva's writing on decay is particularly helpful here; she describes decay as a "...privileged place of mingling, of the contamination of life by death, of begetting and of ending" (Kristeva, 1980, p.149). This sense of being



Figure 3.2: *Carcass*, Helen Chadwick (1986b); Organic waste, acrylic or glass; 2290 x 610 x 610 mm

caught between states is clearly visible inside the column: the material begins as orderly layers and slowly turns to liquid and pulp, producing a visual mixture of life and inevitable decay that cannot be ignored. The transparency of the structure forces the viewer to watch these changes as they happen, rather than allowing decomposition to remain comfortably out of sight. This confrontation with decay becomes especially significant when read through a feminist lens, as the cultural regulation of women's bodies is closely tied to ideals of purity, self-control and containment - qualities that decomposition fundamentally refuses.

Food is a charged material within the history of femininity. It is often used to frame expectations around appetite, control and ultimately value. Luce Irigaray explores the idea of food as a feminine material in *Speculum of the Other Woman* by stating that; "Alone in her crypt, her cave, her den, her womb, she is given just enough food by those who hold power to ensure that the city is not soiled and shamed by her decay" (Irigaray, 1974, p.218). Irigaray's description of the woman nourished "just enough" so that "the city is not soiled and shamed by her decay" highlights how female decay is framed as a threat that must be controlled. Her use of the word "decay" is crucial; it marks the female body as something that risks spilling beyond acceptable limits, something culturally managed through restriction rather than supported through care. Food, in this sense, becomes a tool for containing the female body, keeping it intact enough to preserve the appearance of purity while preventing any visible signs of change or deterioration.

In relation to *Carcass*, this statement reinforces how Chadwick's use of decomposing food resists the expectation that decay should remain hidden. Rather than preventing decay, she allows it to unfold openly, exposing the very processes Irigaray suggests must remain hidden to maintain the illusion of feminine containment. By making decay visible, Chadwick turns food into an abject feminist material - one that reveals the cultural pressure to suppress instability in women's bodies and the anxieties that arise when that suppression fails.

In a more contemporary context, British psychoanalyst Susie Orbach discusses this directly in her 1993 book; *Hunger Strike : The Anorectic's Struggle As a Metaphor for Our Age*. She argues that women are taught to manage or suppress hunger as part of maintaining an idealised feminine identity, stating that “[Women] must feed others but restrain [their] own desires for that very same food” (Orbach, 1993, p.10). This creates a familiar contradiction in which women are expected to present themselves in a way that is visually appealing and carefully controlled, while privately restricting their own appetites to sustain that appearance. Through this lens, Chadwick’s decision to allow food to rot openly pushes against the cultural pressure for women to appear orderly, contained and self-restrained. Instead of aligning with the polished image associated with femininity, the work emphasises excess, fermentation and rotting. The fruit inside *Carcass* becomes a challenge to the idea that appetite must be managed and that anything suggesting indulgence or excess should be hidden.

Another aspect of *Carcass* is the deeper historical link between women and food, particularly the way fruit has been used symbolically to judge female behaviour. The story of Eve’s temptation in Genesis Chapter 3 of the Bible is especially relevant here. In the biblical narrative, Eve is persuaded by a serpent to eat the forbidden fruit and then offers it to Adam (Gen 3:1-7). This moment has been repeatedly interpreted as a failure of female restraint; Eve’s appetite and desire becomes the reason for humanity’s fall. Across Western history, this story has supported the idea that women’s desire, especially when linked to food, is excessive and dangerous. Eve’s act is not simply disobedience; it is presented as an uncontrolled indulgence, reinforcing a cultural expectation that women must regulate their appetites to avoid disorder or ultimate disaster.

Seen in this context, Chadwick’s use of fruit takes on feminist significance. In *Carcass*, the fruit is neither polished nor symbolically ‘perfect’ as it is often depicted in Christian iconography (Sill, 1975, pp. 53–54), but allowed to decay, ferment and collapse. This visible breakdown rejects the moral weight historically placed on women’s appetites and disrupts the symbolic legacy of Eve’s temptation. By allowing the fruit

to rot openly, Chadwick refuses the expectation that women must remain pure, contained and controlled, reclaiming decay and appetite as material processes rather than moral failures.

3.2: Analysis of ‘Stroke’

Anya Gallaccio is a contemporary artist who was born in Scotland in 1963. Her work frequently engages with organic materials and processes of transformation, often allowing works to change, deteriorate or decay over time. Her installations regularly use organic materials such as flowers, chocolate or ice, highlighting impermanence and challenging expectations of preservation within the typical gallery space. Her large-scale installation, *Stroke* (2014) is a key example of this approach, placing material instability and sensory experience at the centre of the work.

Stroke (2014) that was originally displayed at Jupiter Artland in Edinburgh in 2014 and again in Renfrewshire in 2024, is an immersive installation in which an entire gallery room is coated from floor to



Figure 3.3: *Stroke*, Anya Gallaccio (2014a);
Dark chocolate covered walls; Installation

ceiling in dark chocolate. The walls are covered in a thick, glossy layer of the material, producing a rich, visually seductive surface that dominates the space. The colour is deep and uniform with its glossy coating catching light. What initially appears solid quickly reveals itself as soft and malleable. The scale of the installation

overwhelms the viewer, transforming the gallery into an immersive environment rather than an object to be observed from a distance (Munro, 2014).

The chocolate surface invites physical engagement; visitors are encouraged to touch, lick or smear the walls, and these interactions leave visible marks behind. Fingerprints, streaks and smudges accumulate across the surface, gradually disrupting its original smoothness. The smell of chocolate fills the room,

introducing a strong sensory element that closes the distance between looking and bodily desire. This scent, combined with the silken texture, gives the work a seductive quality, while its excess creates a sense of unease. The chocolate appears edible, yet its quantity and placement make consumption impractical, pushing it beyond simple pleasure.

As the installation develops, the surface begins to record time and contact. Heat, touch and movement cause the chocolate to soften and lose its form, emphasising its instability. The pristine gallery walls are replaced by a material that stains and shifts, undermining expectations of cleanliness and control.



Figure 3.4: *Stroke*, Anya Gallaccio (2014b);
Dark chocolate covered walls; Installation

Visually, *Stroke* sits between attraction and repulsion: the rich surface draws the viewer in, while the accumulating traces of interaction and potential for decay disrupt the idea of a polished, untouched space. Through this transformation, the work foregrounds material change, revealing the gallery space as a site that can be altered by bodies, desire and decay.

Kristeva's writing on abjection is particularly relevant to *Stroke*, especially her discussion of food, excrement and decay in *Powers of Horror*. She identifies food as a primary site of abjection, writing that "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (Kristeva, 1980, p.2). In the section titled *Pollution by Food – A Compound*, Kristeva further describes food as becoming abject at the point where it ceases to be edible, further emphasising the excremental connection, stating that "The virtual impurity of such food comes close to excremental abjection..." (Kristeva, 1980, p.75). This framing is central to *Stroke*, where chocolate occupies an unstable position between nourishment and waste, disrupting the ordered space of the gallery through its gradual degradation.

A key part of Kristeva's theory on excrement follows the belief that it is a more intense form of abjection due to its associations with decay, she writes that "Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death" (Kristeva, 1980, p.71). This understanding helps to situate Gallaccio's use of chocolate within the logic of decay rather than bodily fluidity that could be associated with excrement. In *Stroke*, chocolate occupies an ambiguous position between food and waste. Initially associated with pleasure and indulgence, its placement on the gallery walls immediately undermines this function. The material becomes excessive, unusable and gradually degraded through touch, heat and time. While it is not excrement itself, the chocolate operates as what Kristeva describes as an "equivalent" - a material that has a resemblance to waste and a capacity for decay to allow it to interfere with social order. Its dark colour, smearable surface and saturation of the space evoke contamination without ever fully resolving into something identifiable, producing discomfort through proximity rather than shock-value.

Crucially, this process unfolds through decay rather than expulsion. The chocolate does not emerge from the body, nor does it behave like a fluid. Instead, it softens and deteriorates slowly, registering time through surface breakdown. This aligns *Stroke* with decay as an ongoing condition rather than a momentary violation of boundaries. The gallery, traditionally a site of control and cleanliness, becomes compromised by a material that cannot remain stable. In this way, Gallaccio extends Kristeva's idea that abjection threatens not only the body, but the social structures that attempt to contain it.

By allowing chocolate to linger in this unresolved state - neither entirely food nor entirely waste - *Stroke* exposes how easily materials associated with pleasure are reclassified as abject when they exceed control. This instability is central to the work's feminist significance. As with 'Carcass', decay becomes a means of refusing ideals of order, containment and purity. Gallaccio's installation does not sanitise or resolve the material; instead, it allows decay to consume the space, revealing how social anxieties around appetite,

excess and disorder are managed through exclusion. In doing so, *Stroke* presents decay not as failure, but as a critical strategy for unsettling the boundaries that regulate both material and meaning.

While Kristeva theorises decay and excrement as forces that threaten social order through contamination, Irigaray approaches abjection through the cultural management of the female body itself. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray repeatedly describes women as being positioned close to waste, decay and excess, arguing that femininity is constructed as something that must be carefully regulated to prevent disorder. Her writing suggests that female bodily processes are tolerated only when they remain contained and invisible, reinforcing the idea that decay is not inherently threatening, but becomes so when it is allowed to appear (Irigaray, 1974, p.218) Read alongside Kristeva, Irigaray's work shifts the focus from abjection as a structural disturbance to abjection as a gendered condition, where women are expected to suppress or conceal signs of instability to maintain social coherence. In relation to *Stroke*, this distinction is important: Gallaccio's use of chocolate does not simply contaminate the gallery space, but exposes how materials associated with pleasure and femininity are quickly reclassified as abject when they exceed control.

Conclusion

Ultimately, through visual and contextual analysis, this study argues that women should be able to reclaim their own abjection rather than internalising shame around how their bodies function. Across the artworks discussed, abjection is not treated as something to be corrected, repressed or rejected, but as something that is acknowledged, embodied and deliberately made visible. These practices reject the persistent cultural demand that women remain contained and palatable in order to be socially acceptable. Instead, they insist on confronting processes that are often dismissed as excessive, revealing how deeply these judgements are tied to gendered expectations of control.

By utilising their own image, bodily fluids or sustenance, these artists challenged the belief that the female body must be distanced from its own functions in order to hold value. Abjection, in this context, becomes a means of refusing the shame attached to female embodiment. Rather than separating themselves from the body, these artists align with it, allowing its processes to exist openly and without apology. This shift is crucial, as it reveals that discomfort surrounding the female body is not inherent or natural, but culturally produced and actively maintained.

The works discussed show that to be visible, autonomous and embodied as a woman is to risk being perceived as excessive, improper or shameful. Rather than attempting to neutralise or sanitise this condition, these artists inhabit it, reclaiming abjection as a site of liberation rather than humiliation. Female contemporary art, as demonstrated throughout this study, uses abjection not to shock, but to assert the right of women to exist fully within their own bodies, free from the demand to sanitise or suppress how those bodies work. As expertly described by Julia Kristeva, “the capable woman ... does not escape being grotesque...” (Kristeva, 1980, p.169).

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