



Duncan of Jordanstone  
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The Power of Women's Pain

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Fine Art

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## **The Power of Women's Pain**

Exploring women's portrayal of pain through the female gaze as a form of  
reclamation in art

Exhibition dissertation proposal submitted in partial achievement of the requirements  
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## **Abstract**

*The Power of Women's Pain* is an exhibition that allows a unique exploration into the repossession of the brutality and power that womanhood's pain holds when reclaimed by women, presenting negative emotions into artworks which employ a strong indescribable visual message that many women can relate to, without needing to converse through words. The pain illustrated in all of these artworks felt by the woman artist depicts either a mental, or physical pain, or both depending on the specific work discussed. The women's works shown stand unashamedly tall, wearing pain as a badge of honour and pride rather than one of shame and embarrassment. There is power in reclaiming a negative association as instead a feeling of power and strength, displaying all aspects of it honestly and candidly. The energy of resilience is strong with each and every one of these artists' works.

This paper is a curatorial exhibition proposal to display a collective of nine artworks by multiple women artists, situated in Tate St Ives between the seasons of late December and late May. It will be open to an audience of selectively only oppressed genders, from all ages. The creation of this grouping of works has taken inspiration and influence from contemporary film, the individual yet grouped life experiences of women as a collective, and prejudiced ideas against women throughout history. The aim in grouping these artworks together is to allow a projection of a visual message which describes and accurately presents both the personal and shared pain that women experience throughout their lives, and the resilience taken to power through those moments and share it publicly and boldly in an artwork, without the influence of men's ideology in the work's portrayal. The exhibition showing will therefore be a safe space, with acknowledgement of shared pain and relativity amongst all oppressed genders. A cold-swimming workshop was going to be introduced side-by-side the exhibition where Tate St Ives is situated on Porthmeor Beach in St Ives, Cornwall. This idea however dissolved upon further research displaying the negative effects, rather than positive healing effects it would have on some of the women audience members included, prompting additional research into the history of the overlooking and silencing of women in other areas of life.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge and give my appreciation to the many women in my life who have shaped me into the woman I am today: friends, family, strangers, celebrities, but in particular I salute my mother, Wendy Bainbridge. She is a powerhouse of a woman who first began my interests in art and feminism whilst being a single mother to young children, encouraging us to follow in her artistic footsteps, unapologetically. She's the first woman I met who reclaimed her pain, and used it as a source of power refusing shame.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to Alan from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design's art practice workshop for his assistance and never-ending support whilst helping me create my exhibition model.

Above all, a massive thank you goes to my dissertation advisor Dr. Helen Gorrill for providing me with endless support and encouragement during the writing of this exhibition proposal dissertation. Her teachings will have an impact on me for years because of her inspiring wisdom and kindness.

## **Positionality Statement**

This dissertation's origins have been in process for over twenty years from taking personal accounts and experiences which influence my life as a woman who has been raised and surrounded by mainly women my entire life. This encircling power of womanhood's profundity and deepness as a collective has inspired my artistic practice, alongside this paper.

This paper acknowledges that women's pain extends beyond the category of 'woman', with other gender identities such as non-binary identifying peoples experiencing similar discussed themes, however the research will focus primarily on those of solely women-identifying artists to allow for a more focused in-depth look at specifically only women's personal experiences of pain, depicted through art.

## Introduction

*The Power of Women's Pain* is an exhibition that aims to challenge the long-standing tradition of the objectification of women in art, featuring women-made artwork which refuse to have their pain objectified too. For too long, women's experiences have been side-cast, ignored, and not given the attention that they rightfully deserve. This history of ignorance has been proved by the contrasting market value between male, and female artists showing that artwork made by men earns roughly double the average price of money than that by women in UK auctions (Gørrill, 2020).

The artworks that touch on these distressing subjects experienced by women created by male artists tend to be interpreted in clouded and dishonest ways, usually interfered by negative perceptions of women built-in through years of conditioning by history and media. However, as men tend to have a higher reach of attention in the art world compared to women (Shaw, 2019) (McAndrew, Arts Economics and artseconomics.com, 2025), their misconstrued portrayals become the general believed 'truthful' idea on how women should present themselves when in pain.

In art, the works made by men which depict women all seem to have similar traits of being too exaggeratedly beautified and therefore commodified to be able to truly display a real sense of depth of the suffering that women have faced in life. Women earn 40% less than men in the UK visual arts sector, displaying a clear separation and distinction from how men's work is received more highly of than women's (Glasgow, DACS & University of, 2024)

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In this exhibition, both personal and shared experiences by women are reframed into a brutal and honest visual manuscript, depicted in ten distinct artworks spanning painting, performance, print, sculpture and photography. Each artwork featured displays a different articulation of pain that either the artist themselves has experienced, or what women as a shared body experience, explained specifically by a woman artist's work.

Art can be used as a voice to express and document opinions, emotions, and experiences. For some, it is a reason to keep living despite the hardships faced in life: “I am not sick. I am broken. But I am happy to be alive as long as I can paint”, said Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), an artist who suffered from a long series of extreme pain throughout her life (both physical, and mental), but survived by making artwork (Kahlo, 1953).

The artists featured in this exhibition are Judy Chicago (b.1939), Ana Mendieta (b.1948), Sara Gregory (b.1967), Annegret Soltau (b.1946), Yayoi Kusama (b.1929), Frida Kahlo (b.1907), Flora Parkes (b.2005), and Marina Abramovic (b. 1946). All of the represented artists come from a range of upbringings in a series of different geographical and cultural contexts, with much of this impacting their lives as women, and is featured in their artworks which illustrate pain and hardships.

With the relative theme of pain throughout all of these artworks, the proposed date of exhibiting would be from late December until late May to signify the solace and cold isolation felt during the winter season and the symbolisation of rebirth and expression during blooming Spring. This represents the loneliness and shame initially felt during painful experiences, wanting to hide away like an animal during hibernation, followed then by the power of rebirth and change used to overcome and reclaim these stories through art, blooming into a stronger person. The selected choice of space to hold the exhibition of *The Power of Women's Pain* at is Tate St Ives, located in Cornwall, England, This gallery has been chosen since the Tate group has a reputation which is considered to be a contemporary-leading and progressive institution, with its multitude of posters advertising for people to view their women artist exhibitions, this can be seen in the exhibition display by the Guerrilla Girls at Tate Modern, a powerful art activist group which fights for equality for women, people of colour, and LGBTQIA+ people's (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2023).

These posters would suggest the idea that the gallery commits to a well-balanced inclusivity of genders and has therefore addressed the gender imbalance in art over a series of years. The reality is that Tate has only considered controversial issues more so in recent years with the rise of social media users on apps like Instagram who have the

ability to publicly address organisations on difficult and political issues which are hard to ignore and escape. The White Pube, a progressive and contemporary pair of writers and podcasters who called out the Tate angrily for the gallery's choice of artwork as their wall mural in its new restaurant. The artwork featured themes of slavery, specifically during the Black Lives Matter movement (The White Pube, 2017).

Tate has had decades to raise women artists, yet only in the financial year of 2020 - 2021 was the percentage of male and female works in its galleries deemed the closest to being somewhat equal, with 36% of purchased works being those of female artists (McMillan, 2021). This is still an insultingly unbalanced percentage, showing how even in perceived progressive and open-minded times of the twenty-first century, women are still facing gender injustice in the arts, even by notable influential organisations who have had the power and resources to change this for decades. By selecting the Tate institution, it will address this lack of female artist representation whilst also sending a confrontational message to not only the Tate, but also to other world-renowned galleries, instrumenting that women demand more acknowledgement in the art world and this is one of the multitudes of ways to overcome the ignorance that women artists have experienced.

Specifically choosing Tate St Ives as the location is because it faces the ocean, sat on Porthmeor beach in Cornwall. The seaside links to the historical Victorian medicinal era where doctors prescribed the remedial healing process for women to be sent to the seaside, which supposedly helped in easing the discomfort of pain and illness. Once healed, afterwards they would return to their wifely duties of childbearing and housekeeping once 'fixed', which were impaired and halted whilst sick with illnesses (John, 1795). During 1879, the young female doctor Mrs. Hoggan, MD discussed in a speech (and later pamphlet) to the Women's Union Swimming Club the importance of swimming as an ailment for women's ill health, stating that it restored balance to the nervous system (Hoggan, 1879). The oceanside view inside Tate St Ives used beside the artworks in *The Power of Women's Pain* can be used as a form of healing processes for the pain which has been featured in the artworks.

A specialised model of the selected room of Tate St Ives which faces the ocean has been handmade by me in the contemporary art practice workshop to be able to visualise the preferred layout of artworks for this exhibition.

This exhibition is unique in its field due to its progressive nature in choice of audience, and theme of displaying multitudes of types and sufferings of extreme and shocking pain by only female artists, rather than instead using non-selective gendered artists whose work features generalised and vague depictions of pain through a construed gaze.

The work in '*The Power of Women's Pain*' is not select to just women's issues, but also other issues like mental health, which all genders can experienced. This exhibition focuses specifically however on the experiences of women, examining how their pain — physical, emotional, and mental — has been represented, suppressed, and now reclaimed through art by female artists in a new lens. These artists have asserted and explored the strength and survival it takes to go through these experiences (either from themselves or through others) by documenting it in artworks that deserve to be seen collectively and proudly in an exhibition such as *The Power of Women's Pain*.

## Chapter One – Curatorial Thesis

The foundation of the exhibition *The Power of Women's Pain* derives from the need to counteract the historical punishment that female artists have faced when presenting either their own pain in works, or other women's. For too long, women's personal experiences on pain have been romanticised and dismissed by men. Power is now able to be held by these women as they reclaim the feelings of pain as their own through their individual personal lens in art. Pain is not an indicator of shame in this exhibition, but one of resilience. By coinciding pain and womanhood, a sense of solidarity and strength is felt throughout the collection to and from women. Recognition is forcefully given alongside the due credit and praise that these artists and situations deserve. These women are known as not just subjects of pain, but authors too as they re-count the unpleasant stories in different mediums of art themselves. In this exhibition, the positioning of who is in charge to tell these stories is swapped. Rather than seeking sympathy, the focus of these collective artworks in a closed grouping is instead on gaining recognition, allowing the dismantling of pity and weakness which has been imposed by the 'male-gaze's' construed erection of what a beautiful woman's trauma looks like. The 'male gaze' is a term that was coined by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 short essay '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*'. In this essay, Mulvey critiques Hollywood film and its common use of sexism throughout, focusing particularly on the objectification that women face in film (and therefore life), with these women's main objective is directed to be something that looks good physically, with a highly sexualised edge. The women quietly dance around the male actors, usually in the form of a love-interest. She has no real purpose when it comes to driving the film's plot forward, as she is only given a few scripted words of significance. It is instead the man's job to take and control the action of the story, responding to the women as just something to be looked at: a spectacle from an active and erotic gaze, directed both by the male actor itself, and the use of lighting and camera angles (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 6–18).

The woman is never seen as an unsightly being, even during scenes of torment and breakdown, she is still made to be cleanly and put together; dignified. Never do we seem

to see the truthful insights to life as a woman in film, with the true depth of their scars and insecurities from life on show. An example of a film which the male gaze can be seen through is Alfred Hitchcock's award-winning 1954 film '*Rear Window*' (*Rear Window*, 1954). The film follows a broken-legged photographer who begins to observe, watch, and spy his fellow neighbours' lives through his window angled camera in boredom as he heals from his injury. There are many scenes which follow the women actors and how they present themselves when they believe they are not being watched and perceived, yet despite the women's lonesomeness though, they are still portrayed as delightfully proper and beautifully graceful. This perverse habit of violation of people's privacy by the man brings attention to topics like consent and moral code, whilst clearly relaying the filtered way that women were perceived by men in that period: as "eye candy", said and rehearsed by Miss Torso (Cosma, 2016).

The performance of the male gaze is so prolific in film (which is used as a source of inspiration and therefore reflection of everyday life), that it has therefore embedded itself into contemporary culture. The male gaze has become such a normalised act in modern media, which is consumed daily at a fastening rate with the quickening evolution of technology, it is difficult not to partake in such acts yourself through mimicry. Habit takes form, and until self-awareness is realised through exposure to such terms and theories, the entrapping cycle continues. Acts of sexism on the self are hidden in plain sight every day, even when alone and nobody is watching, the latched-on parasite that is the male gaze watches. Conditioned and built-into the psyche of life, it wholly affects the display and act of oneself.

Artwork which is featured in *The Power of Women's Pain* has been created by women who have become subject to life's pains and horrors, displaying it in their art through honest, candid and purposefully non beauty conforming ways. These acts are what can be known as the *female gaze*, opposite to the wider-known term of the 'male gaze': The '*female gaze*' is a subversion to the original male gaze, displaying the direct opposite of what the attributes that the male gaze idealises: poised, perfected, clean, non-diverse, non-offensive, dishonest and silent beauty. The female gaze represents a more honest and candid point of view towards women, acknowledging their wishes and desires alongside

their faults and self-doubts; essentially opposing the idea that women are purely just a passive sexual object for men to look at and desire. The female gaze shows more of what's actually there, lying under the surface - the ugly and undignified, the extremely messy and dirty, the loud and hungry: the true underbelly of what not just men are like, but also women, displaying their complex unique characteristics in their personalities and lived experiences (French, 2021). The female gaze as a theory is not directly credited to Laura Mulvey with her original coining of the phrase 'male gaze', but she definitely started its conception.

Throughout this entire exhibition, the female gaze is considered greatly as a critical standpoint for which the exhibition needed to be experienced by from the audience. This in part emphasises and solidifies the positional view of the female gaze as the audience is considered as of more than just an object, but a person with expressive thoughts, emotions and opinions too. The male gaze, whether purposeful or not, affects all women – including the artists. However, by the women artist's bringing attention to such painful, taboo subjects (which is the male gaze's fault due to its lack of visibility and discussion on such issues through objectification, therefore enforcing shame on its experiencers) in these artworks, they are ultimately creating their work through the female gaze, unknowingly or not. The female gaze is one of active choice and therefore resilience, challenging the routine of male gaze by doing the opposite of its typicality; the artists are fighting against the habitual male gaze that has been built into women's perception.

The expressions of pain onto canvas and other grounds by these female artists lies as a testimony and achievement to the suffering experienced, rather than one of displayed exaggerated aesthetics to spectacle at and be tantalised at for men. Survival, resilience, and shared humanity is a collective theme expressed throughout the exhibition in using pain as a tool for protest and power throughout these artists works. Displaying pain in the context of an art exhibition can be used as a reasoning in coming together and healing both mentally and physically - encouraging emotions of understanding and sympathy being shared in a unified space. This applies to all participants involved, from artist to artist, artist to audience member, and audience member to audience member.

A reflection of this exhibition being used as a form of a healing space will be seen in the promotional use of wild-swim sessions at *Porthmeor* beach at the same time as this

exhibition. Porthmeor beach is where Tate St Ives is built facing, resting on its shoreline surrounded by sand and waves. Artists for decades have followed in pursuit of St Ives's long-lasting light and beautiful landscapes which allowed artists like Barbara Hepworth (B. 1975) to use the sunlight for ideal long-periods of time to create her sculptural artworks which were constantly inspired by her environmental surroundings (Johnston, 2025). Hepworth said that "the sea, a flat diminishing plane, held within itself the capacity to radiate an infinite number of blues, greys, greens and even pinks of strange hues" of Cornwall were a constant source of inspiration in her sculptures with the sceneries vibrant and unique colourations (Hepworth, 1970, p. 30). The use of sunlight itself surrounding Tate St Ives in Cornwall can be used too as another way of healing, factually through science. When the human body gathers a necessary amount of "the fundamental nutrient" Vitamin D, it allows "the healthy cycle of bones, muscles, and teeth" through regulating the quantity of phosphate and calcium which is in the body, according to the National Health Service (National Health Service, 2020). The benefits of the sunlight will be received during the wild swim sessions ran during mornings which the exhibition runs from.

## Chapter Two: Curatorial Choices

The exhibition *The Power of Women's Pain* has been chosen to be shown in Tate St Ives's oceanside front-facing room, along a curved wall. The choice of this room was so the therapeutic melodic waves of the ocean would be seen at the same time as the viewing of the paintings by the audience members of the exhibition.



Figure 1 - 'Gunsmoke' by Judy Chicago, 1971, offset photolithograph, 16 x 20 inches

'Gunsmoke' by Judy Chicago is one of Chicago's earlier feminist works, usually that of which featured shocking and controversial scenes. This artwork of hers in particular discusses violence against women as a gun is being forcibly shoved into a nude woman's mouth (Turner Carroll, 2022). With the rise of sexism and violence against women in recent years, this print is definitely still very relevant today, despite being from 1971. This work will be presented on the first floor, surrounded more so by artworks that feature themes of physical pain than the amount on the ground floor which feature more mental pain.



Figure 2 - 'Red Flag' by Judy Chicago, 1971, photolithograph, 16 x 20 inches

'Red Flag' is another artwork by Judy Chicago, why is why they will be situated next to each other in the exhibition space. It is quite rare to see menstruation depicted in art nowadays, or even anything mainstream. This was one of the first widely accepted images depicting menstruation in Western Art (Chicago, 1971), so it was very shocking for the time for its honesty. There is still a feeling of shame and embarrassment around menstruation despite it affecting 2 billion of the people on Earth (UNICEF and WHO, 2022). Menstruation is a period of time (about a week, maybe longer or shorter) where the womb's inner lining sheds out of the uterus and vagina and is typically collected by period hygiene products like sanitary towels, tampons, or diva cups. Most people with wombs experience this from between the ages of 8 years old and 15 (NHS, 2019). This artwork has been chosen as it clearly displays the female gaze by not shying away from truthful 'ugly' things, with men typically thinking issues like this are too disgusting to discuss. The feeling of pain is felt with the model, bleeding out in front of us vulnerably. However, she waves the tampon like a red flag proudly, showing it off for us to see it.



Figure 3 – *'Untitled (Rape Scene)'*, by Ana Mendieta, 1973, photograph, 20 x 16 inches

This artwork by Ana Mendieta was inspired by the brutal killing and rape of a student on her university campus, Sarah Ann Ottens. Mendieta invited her classmate's round to her apartment, but they found the door ajar, and with her hunched over the kitchen table, hands tied, undressed from below, and smeared in blood (Fateman, 2018). It was a purposeful performance piece which she orchestrated to bring attention and consolidation about Otten's unfortunate and unfair death. This artwork was made to address the rise of sexual assault and violence against women, sending a message to display the true horrors and pain that is experienced, displaying the extreme severity of the situation, even if you do not know the victim.



Figure 4 – *'Henry Ford Hospital'*, by Frida Kahlo, 1932, oil on metal, 12 x 15 inches

Also above on the first floor is *'Henry Ford Hospital'*, along the right-hand side. Frida Kahlo throughout her life suffered with extreme pain, from polio at the age of six to her untimely death at forty-seven as a result from the pain of her injuries from a tram accident she experienced when she was eighteen years old. During this tram accident, a pole dislodged and completely went through her core, piercing through her body and pelvis, resulting in never-ending surgeries and pain as she tried to paint her way through the hardships (FridaKahlo.org, 2020). One of the hardships she encountered was the multiple miscarriages she faced as a result of her forever-changed womb during the tram accident. She desperately wanted a child with her lover Diego Rivera, another famed Mexican artist like her – however it never came to fruition (Wright, 2023). *'Henry Ford Hospital'* is such a heartbreaking artwork, seeing Kahlo trying to come to terms with the fact she's lost another soul she desperately loved, reflecting on mortality and the importance of life whilst still sat in the location that she lost her baby in. This is a piece of art that will resemble a sense of pain to people who have experienced

miscarriage in particular, with whether it being purposeful or not it still definitely leaves an impact on the person.



Figure 5 - '*Thorny*' by Flora Parkes, 2025, acrylic paint on wood with metal spikes and wire, 40 x 15 cm available at [https://www.instagram.com/florap\\_art/](https://www.instagram.com/florap_art/)

'*Thorny*' is a piece by Flora Parkes, which discusses abortion rights with the symbolic motif of a coat hanger. This piece was inspired after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 in America (Planned Parenthood, 2022). This overturning allowed legislation to be given back to each individual state, allowing them to put whatever blockings and preventions they wanted when it came to people getting abortions. In these situations, women do not stop getting abortions - they stop getting safe abortions (Honigman, Davila and Petersen, 1993). This prompts danger and references back to second-wave feminism where the coat hanger motif was first introduced as it resembled the lengths women had to go to stop pregnancies: Self-surgery using a non-sterile, broken wire hanger. Healthcare is a right to all, so why are women so impacted by it? The rose painting in the centre represents the floral depiction of a vagina, with the metal spikes referring to a rose's damaging thorns, looking like weaponry.



Figure 6 – ‘*On the Birth Table I*’, by Annegret Soltau, 1978, gelatin silver print with thread overstitch, 23.5 x 19 inches

Continuing with the theme of pregnancy, next to Frida Kahlo’s ‘*Henry Ford Hospital*’ painting will be Annegret Soltau’s thread overstitched photograph ‘*On the Birth Table I*’ from 1978. This is from a series of photographs depicting Soltau’s changing body as she went through the multiple stages of pregnancy over nine months, however this one felt the most powerful to me. Pregnancy isn’t a usual area that’s covered in art as many artist mothers are overshadowed and pushed out of the scene, made to believe that their main job should be looking after the children; solely a child bearer – not someone with skills and interests. That means that the incorporation of this photograph in *The Power of Women’s Pain* will give a refreshing touch to an art exhibition, allowing credit to be given to the mother’s that birthed and perhaps too raised us into who we are today. Every human on Earth was made within a womb, so credit is long overdue. This gives acknowledgement to the mothers who did so, feeling their body stretch and rip with every month, and push on the birthing table in the hospital. The embroidered stitches represent

these factors to Soltau, alongside the physical scars she got from giving birth to her children. (Soltau, 1978)

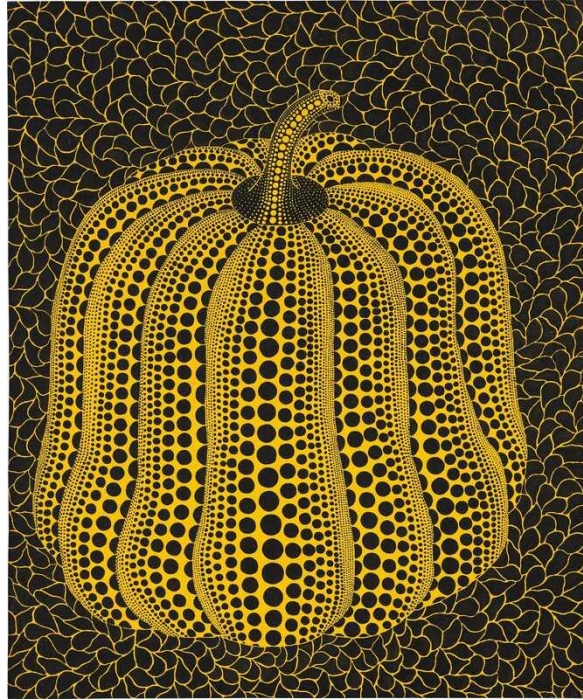


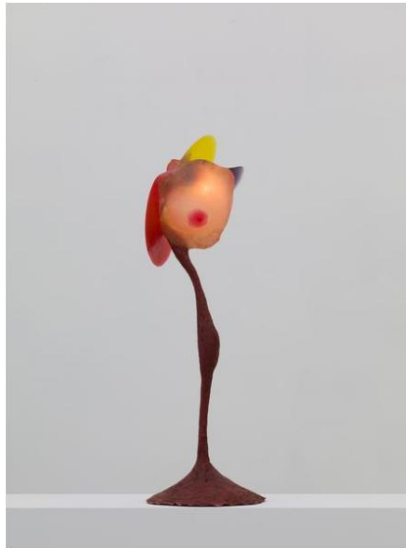
Figure 7 – ‘PUMPKIN by Yayoi Kusama, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 23 x 28 inches

Yayoi Kusama’s work ‘*Pumpkin*’ will be situated on the ground floor of the exhibition, as artworks that mainly discuss mental pain are being situated down lower so there are near separate sections for each type of pain discussed: mental (most ground floor) physical (most top floor). ‘*Pumpkin*’ is an acrylic on canvas painting depicting a yellow pumpkin covered in black dots and repetitive patterns. Pumpkins are a regular motif in Kusama’s work as they represent her hallucinatory struggles with mental health, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). This applies too to her use of repetitive polka-dots. Kusama currently willingly resides in a psychiatric institution in Tokyo. She uses art as a way of coping with the pain that her mental health gives her, instead encouraging and playing with the visions it makes her see, allowing her to have fun and be able to portray it into an artwork. (Allsop, 2014)



Figure 8 – ‘Heat’, by Sara Gregory, 2024, oil on board, 13 x 16 inches

Over the past two years, Sara Gregory has been making a series of paintings reflecting on her experiences as a woman going through pre-menopause. All of the painting’s experiences are by memory, as she decided to start taking HRT to help ease the pain of her symptoms. These were hot flashes, brain-fog, fatigue, and more. Now that she is on HRT, she is feeling much better and gets less of the awful symptoms which she used to experiences. These paintings were created to raise awareness and share her frustrations as she knew so little about pre-menopause and suddenly had to deal with it. The lack of *information* and education on pre-menopause made her feel even more lost and isolated. ‘Heat’, instead of her other menopausal inspired artworks, has been chosen to represent the heartburn and hot flashes she experienced, but also to refer to the burning rage that was felt inside of her when she was so greatly confused as she had to suddenly learn to cope with it. The series has gained “international attention”, which Gregory is very proud of – saying that “older women should be celebrated for the life experience, accumulated wisdom and strength that they bring.” (Gregory, 2025)



*Figure 9 – ‘Lampe’ by Alina Szapocznikow, 1967, coloured polyester resin and electrical wiring, 16 x 5 x 7 inches.*

*‘Lampe’* is a sculptural piece made by Alina Szapocznikow as she struggled through her diagnosis of breast cancer, and the tumours that grew from it. Each part of her body felt like its own separate piece, which is why she made multiple artworks that were direct casts of the sections of her body. She suffered and eventually died from her breast cancer diagnosis, but not before she could express its effects in her through her art – therefore reclaiming the pain she was bestowed. (Szapocznikow, 1967)



Figure 10 – ‘*Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful*’, by Marina Abramovic, 1975, film.

A projection will screen Marina Abramovic’s “*Art Must be Beautiful, Artist must be Beautiful*” performance in the centre of the exhibition via projection on the ground floor. The 1975 film is an hour-long performance that captures Marina using a thick bristled hairbrush to comb through her hair, slowly getting louder and harsher as she grows more and more frustrated with the repetitiveness of the task. This represents the draining motivation and anger that is felt when beauty pressures are forced upon women, day after day having to seem presentable to others in order to be respected. (Abramovic, 1975)

### Chapter 3 – Curatorial Aims and Influences

Exhibitions that inspired the making of *The Power of Women's Pain*, has been exhibitions like *Women in Revolt* (2024) which exhibited at Modern Two of the National Gallery in Edinburgh. Linsey Young, the curator for this incredible exhibition used a diversity of artists, but mainly women artists. The exhibition was to uphold and let women express themselves without holding the burden that their art may be overshadowed by a man like it has been in history. Some selected artworks were ones specifically chosen that made an impact on feminist art, with original protest posters and filmed interviews documented throughout the gallery. This felt like a healing space, a point of reclamation too, so it greatly inspired the curating of this exhibition in giving women the attention they greatly deserve. (Modern Two, 2024)

Another greatly inspirational exhibition has been Dundee's Cooper Gallery workshops of Grace Nduruti's '*Compassionate Rebels in Action*'. This exhibition discusses the impact of protest and speaking up for what's right, involving matters like race and feminism, says Cooper Gallery. A workshop which was organised was about the act of meditation and creating writing proposals as a form of healing and reflection (*Ndiritu, 2025*). This really inspired me to look into creating my own workshop in *The Power of Women's Pain*, and see if it is a feasible option.

The noun 'wild swimming' according to Cambridge Dictionary means "swimming for enjoyment in rivers, lakes, the sea, etc., rather than in swimming pools" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Interest in wild swimming sessions have risen in popularity in recent years, with Google analytics showing that terms like "wild swimming" received a massive surge attraction between April to October of 2020 with 71,000 searches recorded. The year previous in 2019, there was only 36,600 searches made regarding this term. This is a huge increase of 94%, in a report published by Outdoor Swimming Magazine on outdoor swimming in the United Kingdom (Griffiths, 2021). In the same report by Outdoor Swimming, a survey ran from November and December 2020 with 2196 responses recorded from new and regular swimmers answering why they chose to swim outside. In

that survey's executive summary, 43.4% of people said that "health and wellbeing" was the main reason that they chose to swim outside (Griffiths, 2021b). These findings can reflect that open swimming has been used as a way of healing for years, with people finding great benefits to their health as a result of this choice of exercise and its setting. Not only this, but there has been proof that cold water swimmers (another term to refer to open water swimming, and can be used interchangeably) can possibly hold less of a chance of developing Alzheimer's due to the elevated level of RBM3 proteins which they develop. They nicknamed RBM3 as the "cold-shock protein". The experiment was run by a team of scientists in 2020 at the University of Cambridge, and Berlin who looked at specifically a group of people who regularly did cold-water swims. However, RBM3 so far has only been experimented on mice for its ability and effectiveness against the deaths of brain cells linked to progressive neurodegenerative disorders, and Alzheimer's disease (Preußner et al., 2023). This holds little promise as to what the actual stone-cold facts of the actual scientific health benefits are in cold water swimming, as humans are not mice. This links to the dehumanisation and objectification that women face, seen especially during healthcare contexts.

During the research process in the proposal of this exhibition dissertation, a different source was found identifying instead the negative effects that women face during cold swimming activities – specifically the 'cold plunge' craze of suddenly dipping into an ice bath with extremely cold water (usually between 10-15 degrees Celsius, or colder) for short periods of time as part of cold-water immersion therapy (CWI). Open water swimming can apply too under CWI (Geng, 2025). The National Centre for Cold Water Safety states that cold water between 10-15.5 degrees Celsius "can kill you in less than a minute. It's actually so dangerous that it kills a lot of people within seconds" due to the multiple stages of shock and bodily freeze people go through after taking a cold plunge swim (National Centre for Cold Water Safety, no date). This emphasises just how dangerous open swimming is to all, especially in colder climates like the United Kingdom. Though despite the dangers of cold-water swimming applying to all genders, it does specifically hold a higher risk to women according to Dr. Stacy Sims, a women's health advocate and exercise physiologist, who groundbreakingly was one of the first few doctors to address this issue (Sims, 2015). In a podcast with neuroscientist Dr. Andrew

David Huberman on 'Huberman Lab', the pair discussed how women react differently than men when open water swimming, and that women should take this into account when applying the same regulations to themselves as male open water swimmers do. Dr. Stacy Sims describes this as a "temperature nuance that sets sex difference", describing that when women jump into these ice-cold pools of water, it causes a "severe constriction and shutdown" of the body, giving the body an extreme rise in stress levels. Women reportedly work the most well when receiving the perfect dopamine response from these cold-water plunges at around 16 degrees Celsius, not colder, says Dr. Stacy Sims. Any colder than this temperature is enough to instead offset the severe constriction survival impulse that the body makes during cold water swimming, preventing the automatic responses the body uses to counteract it (Huberman and Sims, 2024)), which is very dangerous for women. This is because the male and female human bodies compensate for the loss of core bodily temperature in different ways.

The anatomy of male and female bodies differs, specifically with where the storage and quantity of muscle mass versus bodily fat lays as "men have more lean mass, and women have more fat mass than men. Men are more likely to accumulate adipose tissue around the trunk and abdomen, whereas women usually accumulate adipose tissue around the hips and thighs" (Bredella, 2017), says Dr. Miriam Bredella, a musculoskeletal radiologist and professor of radiology at New York University Langone Health (Bredella, 2025). Using this information, Dr. Stacy Sims in a podcast with motivational speaker and author Mel Robbins on 'The Mel Robbins Podcast', Dr. Stacy Sims touches more on the difference with men and women's anatomy and how it is affected by cold swimming, saying that because women have more body fat than men, women tend to "vasodilate and vasoconstrict first" to regulate temperature loss (Robbins and Sims, 2025). Vasodilation means when the muscular walls of blood vessels relax, allowing blood vessels to widen. This allows enhanced blood flow to areas of the body lacking nutrients and oxygen, reducing blood pressure. Vasoconstriction is the opposite of this. (Ramanlal and Gupta, 2023). Men will vasoconstrict, and automatically begin to shiver to produce heat to counteract the cold. Shivering begins thermogenesis, the process of heat production in organisms (von Loeffelholz and Birkenfeld, 2022). Women's first response to a sudden change in environmental temperature is to severely vasoconstrict, however if it is too

cold, they can't start shivering as the body is too preoccupied by the narrowing of the blood vessels in order to redirect warmth to the body's core in order to look after its vital organs, says Dr. Stacy Sims. Vasoconstriction in women has been seen to be influenced significantly by female reproductive hormones, like estrogen (Manal Fardoun *et al.*, 2025). As men have significantly lesser amounts of estrogen compared to women (Bruce and Collier, 2024), there are greater effects and risks on women's health with cold water swims and plunges when additional figures like temperature are not considered thoroughly enough. Although there may be benefits in other areas like socialising and growth in sense of self-worth (Costello *et al.*, 2019) with open water swimming, the activity however is clearly not all physically positive, in regard to women. This lack of accessible information on risks to women who go open water swimming can be greatly linked to the overlooking and dismissal that women regularly face in healthcare as patients.

Not only does sexism affect beauty expectations set on women, which can affect their mental and physical health indirectly (for example, the ideal of skinniness prompting obsession on preventing weight gain which can then eventually form insecurities and types of eating disorders, like anorexia for example (Paterna *et al.*, 2021)), it also directly affects women's healthcare by prompting dismissal and misdiagnosis of legitimate health concerns as there has been so little research done specifically on women patients illnesses and symptoms due to internalised prejudiced ideas of insignificance and unimportance regarding women built into culture throughout history. Robert Pear reported on this neglect of women in medicine in the New York Times, discussing that the General Accounting Office obtained information that the National Institutes of Health (which financed several of these medical trials) were "designed to include women, but not in numbers high enough to allow analysis that would definitely measure different outcomes for men and women" (Pear, 2000).

This could be linked to the sexist belief that women are more dramatic than men, resulting in believed exaggerated responses to illnesses and pains. This can lead doctors

to dismissing women patient's complaints, a more normalised occurrence, experienced by women patients with a lack of empathy from their doctors.

An area with a particular lack of focus in healthcare has been on women patients with endometriosis, a chronic disease that causes extreme inconvenience, discomfort and pain through symptoms like bloating and painful cramps during periods as the similar cells of the womb grow in unexpected other areas of the body (National Health Service, 2022). Although endometriosis affects an estimated "10% of women in the reproductive-age group, rising to 30% to 50% in patients with infertility and/or pain" (Rogers *et al.*, 2009), the disease is severely dismissed as unimportant. In a survey of 4,371 diagnosed endometriosis people from the United Kingdom, it was found that almost half of the patients had gone to visit their General Practitioner 10 or more times before a diagnosis was reported, says the charity Endometriosis UK (Endometriosis UK, 2024). This reflects how severely women's health is regarded as unserious, even from top professionals like doctors. This disregard of women's concerns can be linked to the idea that women are deemed to be "crazy" and "difficult", purposefully exaggerating their responses for attention (Merone *et al.*, 2022). In the same report by Endometriosis UK, 78% of people who were diagnosed with endometriosis went through a situation with either one or more doctor stating that the patient was making a 'fuss about nothing', or relative comments questioning the seriousness of their symptoms by other medical professionals (Endometriosis UK, 2024).

Education on women's health issues has been greatly neglected with most historical medical surveys and tests focusing on primarily men, seeing them as the 'main', 'primary', and 'default' body (Journey To Healthcare, 2024). As a result, women are put into the same category as men despite the hormonal differences and that medication may react differently to each gender, causing possible adverse side-effects. This displays the importance society associates to men, placing them on high pedestals mean whilst women must sit below in silent pain. This is greatly linked to the amount of misogyny that has been built up over time throughout history, harming women.

This however is not an accusation that all male doctors are misogynists who purposefully intend to disadvantage their female patients with misinformation, as doctors are also at risk of harm with this absent information on aspects of women's health. However, it does affect women more so in regard to physical pain and their quality of living with health issues, compared to doctor's possible feelings of guilt and potential risk of negative reputation.

Because of these concerning results, the intended workshop for open water swimming in Porthmeor Beach will no longer proceed alongside *The Power of Women's Pain*. *The Power of Women's Pain* as an exhibition has been made to give light to women's portrayal of pain, without the interference of men illustrating that. As the exhibition is seen as a healing space, continuing with the cold-water swimming practice would defeat the idea of the area being a healing practice as the ocean during the selected time frame of the exhibition actually has anti-healing properties due to the cool temperatures of St Ives's Porthmeor beach during Winter and Spring. During these seasons, the ocean in Porthmeor beach is on average 10.5 degrees Celsius (World Beach Guide, 2025). Since activities like cold water swimming actually prove a negative health affect to women, ignoring this information would be hypocritical to the moral of the exhibition since the male gaze has infiltrated and done additional elements of harm to the audience, a collection of only oppressed genders. Although the harmful effects may not impact all participators as not all featured will be women, it is unfair to leave out women when they have experienced enough exclusion by men throughout history.

My specialised exhibition model was created in the contemporary art practice workshop to allow me to get an accurate and professional scope on what my exhibition may look like in the front facing room at Tate St Ives in Cornwall.

I painted the piece fully white, before editing the flooring online to see if that made any difference. The white floors were too plain compared to bold bright red floors. Red is a very powerful and attention-grabbing colour, so by using it in an exhibition that discusses women's pain, it's not only referencing the colour of blood, but also symbolising how

these women artists refuse to have their pain ignored and changed anymore. They are confident and unapologetic, not hiding anymore behind shame which has been forced to be thought by them.



Figure 11 – Exhibition model with proposed artworks for ‘*The Power of Women’s Pain*’ at Tate St Ives with red flooring



Figure 11 – Exhibition model with proposed artworks for ‘*The Power of Women’s Pain*’ at Tate St Ives with white flooring

## Chapter 4 – Other Sources of Influence

Other sources of influence in the writing of this exhibition proposal have been film, like director Sofia Coppola's *'The Virgin Suicides'* (2006). This film follows the young beautiful Lisbon sisters as they navigate their teens struggling desperately with the pain of mental health issues. The film discusses themes of the male gaze and how damaging it can be, as all the neighbourhood boys love these girls and can clearly see their suffering, but don't bother to do anything about it – they only see the girls as beautiful prizes to be won, dismissing their pain in order to keep up their beautiful image in their eyes. (Devereaux, 2019)

Another influence in starting this dissertation is the television series *'Fleabag'* (2016) written and directed by Phoebe-Waller Bridge, which follows Fleabag along her chaotic life as a young British woman. A very impactful quote from the series goes: "Women are born with pain built in. It's our physical destiny. Period pains, sore boobs, childbirth, you know. We carry it within ourselves throughout our lives. Men don't. They have to seek it out." (Bridge, 2016). This spoke to me and opened my eyes to the internalised pain women must deal with throughout our lives, so why must it be seen as a shameful thing? Women are brave and resilient for having to put up with so much mess and prejudice, furthering the exploration of *The Power of Women's Pain* and its impact on women reclaiming their pain as a source of strength.

## Conclusion

To conclude, *The Power of Women's Pain* is an exhibition that will follow the artworks of multiple different women artists and their exploration of reclaiming women's pain through the female gaze in a brutally honest, candid way. Instead of being surrounded by feelings of shame and embarrassment, the exhibition proposed in Tate St Ives will be held as a form of healing space, allowing in only audience members of oppressed genders. They will have likely experienced similar themes displayed in the artworks. By these women artists having theirs and other women's shared painful experiences of life being put on show, feelings of shame will be torn down as power rises up with the strong imagery surrounding the scene.

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