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Trauma and the Female Body in a Patriarchal South Africa

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to achieve catharsis, which can be described as a means of laying out the prevalent and inevitable, and working through the effects thereof towards acceptance. Along with my practice, this article acts as a documentation of this process from an autobiographical stance. Although this article speaks of my own body – my own trauma and story – it is not solely for me for I am not alone. My body, its trauma and story, is not one of a kind, but one amongst thousands in our country. I contacted four women, and asked them a series of set questions regarding pain and power in relation to their body. The written and visual responses from these women, along with my own experiences, have been incorporated throughout this article and in my artistic practise as a fine artist. My corresponding practical work serves as a narrative of the relationship between mind and body. Additionally, it addresses problematic societal topics through the use of representational imagery, screen printing, collaging techniques, colour, and the use of juxtaposition. With reference to the Möbius strip, as used by the feminist author Elizabeth Grosz, and theories from Freud, Spinoza, and Nietzsche amongst others, I address the correlation between, and dependence of, the mind and body – that is, the psyche and perceptual. Due to the scrutiny of the female body in society, my practical work incorporates the body and is centred on the importance and capabilities of the body as a visual platform of communication between the internal and external. I additionally focus on the way in which the female body is represented, oppressed, characterised, and limited by a patriarchy. I look at the female body in the context of current South Africa where rape culture thrives and other toxic societal attitudes towards gender and sexuality have been normalised. I aim to bring attention to the value and impact of the invisible mind and to challenge the way in which the female mind and body is viewed in current South Africa.

Contents

Abstract.....	2
List of Figures	4
Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1: Trauma and its effect on the body	10
Chapter 2: the story through the body.....	18
Chapter 3: the female body and its context in current South Africa	23
Conclusion	29
Appendix A.....	31
Sources.....	37

List of Figures

- Figure 1. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: “Scars remind me that I healed”*. 2018. Screen print on 200gsm paper. 29.7 x 42cm. Photographed by author.
- Figure 2. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: Power found through Pain*. 2018. Screen print on 200gsm paper. 29.7 x 42cm. Photographed by author.
- Figure 3. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: “the Sensuality and Beauty of being a Woman”*. Screen print on 200gsm paper. 29.7 x 42cm. Photographed by author.
- Figure 4. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: Hungry for Perfection*. 2018. Screen print on 200gsm paper. 29.7 x 42cm. Photographed by author.
- Figure 5. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: Different stories, Same Struggle*. 2018. Screen print on 200gsm paper. 29.7 x 42cm. Photographed by author.
- Figure 6. Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Flowers in a Glass and Fruit*. 17th century. Oil on canvas. From Encyclopaedia Britannica website.
- Figure 7a. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: Ouroborus*. 2018. Video still of time-lapse video.
- Figure 7b. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: Ouroborus*. 2018. Video still of time-lapse video.
- Figure 8a. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: The Strength and Power of a Woman*. 2018. Video still of time-lapse video.
- Figure 8b. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: The Strength and Power of a Woman*. 2018. Video still of time-lapse video.
- Figure 9. Stéphanie Pereira, *Inside Out*. 2018. Photographed by author.
- Figure 10. Sophie Mayanne, *Behind the Scars*. 2017-2018. Screenshot of Instagram page.
- Figure 11. Stéphanie Pereira, *Inside Out: “Do you have a boyfriend?”*. 2018. Collaged screenprint. Photographed by author.

Figure 12. Stéphanie Pereira, *Inside Out: “Oh so you don’t mind if I invade your space then.”*. 2018. Collaged screenprint. Photographed by author.

Figure 13. Stéphanie Pereira, *Inside Out: This is MY space!*. 2018. Collaged screenprint. Photographed by author.

Introduction

For women, especially, the body is a very personal and somewhat consuming entity in our current social context. With references to the written and visual responses from myself and four women as testimony, I address the close relation between mind and body that can lead to correlating mental and physical pain. I address trauma; its causes and effects on both mind and body. From an autobiographical stance and through medical research, I address the impact that trauma has on the individual woman, especially in regards to the impact of mental damage and a consequential incommunicable internal. That which we cannot physically see is very difficult to communicate, as well as understand and empathise with. However, although mental damage is invisible, this does not make it invalid or absent. My art and this article constitute ways in which incommunicable internal trauma becomes externalised and communicated, so that healing can be affected.

I will discuss theories and notions around trauma and the female body from a discursive analytical approach. With reference to Sigmund Freud and Baruch Spinoza, I discuss the relation between mind and body and further explain the crippling, long-lasting effects of trauma due to patriarchal behaviour and sexual violations in particular¹. I also make reference to different feminist theories when addressing the context of the female body in a patriarchal society.

With reference to South Africa's prevalent rape culture, I address patriarchal oppression and micro-aggressions that form the basis of gender-based violations and sexual offences. The female body and its representation in this cultural and social context are complex and sensitive matters to address, from an autobiographical stance. Although I, as a proud young woman, aim to celebrate women and our bodies through my practical work, I fall subject to this prevalent patriarchal oppression. I experience misogynist thought and patriarchal hostility and harassment on a daily basis. Through the use of floral symbolism, collage-like techniques, and juxtaposition in my practical work, I hope to draw attention to the correlation between a pervasive social landscape of patriarchal oppression and trauma.

I aim to empower myself and other women through defiant corporeality in the context of a patriarchal rape culture that enforces an oppressive corporeal femininity. As women, we are

¹ I use "patriarchal behaviour and sexual violations" as a blanket which refers to the micro-aggressions, gender-based violence, misogynist thought, patriarchal oppression, etc. that I address throughout my paper.

pressurised to obediently conform and feel the need to live up to the patriarchal ideal of femininity. Consequently, many women internalise the struggle, manifesting in a war between psyche and body. Furthermore, there is an expectation for women to manage situations of assault with gentleness. Even movements like #MenAreTrash ²are met with defiance from a significant number of men. Through qualitative research for the purpose of proving the struggle of women, I asked four other women a set of questions regarding pain, power, and their body. From their verbal, written, and visual responses, I drew inspiration from their stories and created my *Pain and Power* series (Figures 1-5 & 7-8) which includes five screen prints and two time-lapse videos. The 5 prints (Figures 1-5), which reflect resemblances to vanitas (Figure 6)³, are comprised of still photographs from the time-lapse videos (Figures 7a-8b) of wilting flowers, as well as the visual imagery from the women. Within the series, I assigned individual titles to each print and video, some of which are direct quotes from the women. For ethical reasons, these women remain anonymous and are referred to by number. It became apparent that some of these women had never acknowledged or answered these questions for themselves and I am to honour their bravery. Additionally, the anonymity of these women reflect how their struggles are shared experiences with thousands of South African women. The purpose of contacting these women was to help demonstrate and prove the reality of women in our patriarchal society. According to Dante (2015), catharsis can only be achieved once the stressor of trauma is released. Through this process of documentation, discourse, and visual representations, I aim to relay and address difficult – but prevalent – issues in society in an attempt to achieve catharsis.

The first chapter explains trauma through a scientific approach, using medical analysis to clarify and understand the cause through to its implications and long-lasting effects. As trauma results from a trigger or stressor, I look at stress and the body's reaction to it as a starting point when identifying the cause for trauma. I then look at traumatic stress which is caused by an event, and the way this stress affects the individual. With reference to Dante's article, I unpack the different components of trauma and discuss human reactions and emotions and how these may develop into mental disorders. With emphasis on post-traumatic

² #MenAreTrash is a movement against patriarchy, rape culture, sexism and female abuse.

³ Vanitas is a genre of still-life painting which includes "collections of objects symbolic of the inevitability of death and the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures." (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1998).

stress disorder, I develop the discussion towards “Rape-Related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (Glanville, 2012:63) for the sake of addressing South Africa’s rape culture. I aim to highlight the trauma and damaging effects that sexual violence causes. With reference to the Möbius strip, as used by Grosz (1994), I explain the relation between mind and body. Using the Möbius strip and the Spinozist account, I identify and discuss the explanations for the long-lasting and crippling mental damage that is caused by sexual violence. The Spinozist account regards the mind and body as “one and the same” (Grosz, 1994:11), therefore supplementing my argument when discussing the critical impact that a damaged, although invisible, mind can have on an individual. Reference is made to my original *Inside Out* series (Figure 9) which illustrates the contrast between the damaged psyche and the visage of a visibly fine body. To further aid my argument, I make reference to personal experiences of sexual violations – and the consequential mental damage – of four women, as well as my own. I look at the pain that the trauma brings and, with reference to Dante (2015), view it as stored energy that needs to be addressed and released in order to work towards achieving catharsis.

The second chapter discusses the role of the human body as a visual record of a life and as a vehicle through which the incommunicable internal experiences are communicated to the external world. I address the stories that bodies are able to tell through visible scarring or ‘etchings’ into the skin. I also look at scars as a proof of a history, emphasising its connotations with healing and its relation to catharsis. With reference to the four women, as well as myself, the importance of scarring in this article refers to visual representations of a damaged psyche. The use of flowers in my practical work, both wilted and in full bloom, serves as metaphors for the female body – and by association, mind. The flowers help to translate the stories of the four interviewed women and my own in a way that positively emphasises the beauty and power behind each story. In this way, I aim to eradicate the stigma of women who have been sexually violated. With reference to Grosz (1994), I discuss the ways in which bodies become instruments as the “being-to-the-world” and are stigmatised and “fictionalised” in society by social narratives.

The third chapter focuses on the female body and its context in a patriarchal society. I discuss the ways in which the female body has been appropriated and limited by society and patriarchal oppression. With reference to misogynist thought and patriarchal philosophies, I address the objectification of women’s bodies and its association with nature and the perceptual. Using various feminist views, I discuss how the biology of women is used to

denote them an inferior status within society. With reference to the presence of misogynist thought in social media, I discuss the pressure that is put on the female body and the damage that such ideals can cause to the body and mind. I also discuss the ways in which society reinforces the foundation for rape culture in South Africa through micro-aggressions and patriarchal discourse. Reference is made to my reworked *Inside Out* series (Figures 11-13) which serves as a narrative of patriarchy. I explain the use of specific flowers, indigenous to South Africa, in my *Pain and Power* series to make specific reference to the prevalent rape culture that South African women fall victim to.

My two main sources of information have been from Elizabeth Grosz and James Glanville. Although Glanville's study concerned spousal rape and pastoral counselling, I found the data and statistics about trauma and rape to be very informative. *Volatile Bodies*, by Elizabeth Grosz, addresses femininity as ascribed by patriarchy, the demands made on the female body to conform to certain specifications in society, and critically examines the association of corporeal femininity in contrast to the conceptual man. Grosz engages with the dispute and uncertainty of the correspondence between mind and body, internal and external. I feel this particular reading to be a very important source of information as Grosz discusses her own anxieties and uncertainties as being a major cause for the delay of completion for the book, as well as her "passion and intense fascination" for fuelling its eventual completion. Additionally, she does not intend to pander to the "male philosophy", as she says, that has long since been in place with regards to her subject matter. It is every one of these reasons that have allowed me to resonate completely with Grosz as the autobiographical component of my research paper inevitably brings up my own anxieties that potentially compromise the progress through this paper and its research.

Chapter 1: Trauma and its effect on the body

In this introductory chapter, I consider philosophical perspectives on the relation between body and mind in order to frame my discussion of the effects of trauma. There are contradictory theories about the body and its relation with the mind. The one account sees the two as completely separate entities, and the other sees them as one in the same. In order to address and work in accordance with trauma, it is necessary to understand what trauma is. Through medical research and a discursive analysis, I will define the term trauma and its nature, in order to eventually achieve catharsis.

According to Weaver et al. (2004), ‘trauma’ derives from the Greek word meaning ‘wound’. The origin of this word is significant when understanding trauma’s impact on individuals, as physical trauma causes suffering in the form of wounding and disabling of the body. In a similar way, psychological trauma causes suffering to the psyche in the form of intrusively toxic thoughts and feelings. The question arises as to whether trauma is the object, subject, or abject. Sigmund Freud poses the question of how the distinction between the “objective” and the “subjective” is made, but clarifies that this kind of conclusive separation is not possible as the psychical can never be isolated from the perceptual (Grosz, 1994). Baruch Spinoza claims that the mind and body are different aspects of the same substance and therefore can never be separated from each other, whereas Descartes asserts that the mind and body are two “irreducibly different and incompatible substances” (Grosz, 1994:11). Grosz uses the Möbius strip⁴ to explain the relation between body and mind:

“Bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives.[...] The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another.” (Grosz, 1994:xii).

Whether the trauma is physical or psychological; in order to understand trauma, one would have to look at the cause of it. This is known as the stressor. Every form of trauma is developed from an initial sort of stress that developed after the individual’s reaction to that stress.

⁴ The Möbius strip is an infinite loop with one continuous side and one edge.

Stress

Glanville (2012) references a description by Leaf (2007) of stress being the response from body and mind to any pressure that disrupts normal balance. Stress is related to both physiological and psychological aspects (Glanville, 2012:45). Glanville also notes that according to Davies (1995), “stress” can refer to particular causes or the result, psychologically and physiologically, of external and internal pressures that become the trigger for stress. A trigger or “stressor” (Glanville, 2012:45) can stem from positivity or negativity, and can be real or imagined.

The body’s reaction to stress in three stages

Glanville (2012) credits Salye (1976), Olpin and Hesson (2013), and Coon and Mitterer (2010) when discussing the body’s response to stress. According to Salye (1976), the body responds to stress in three stages. The “Alarm Reaction” (Salye, 1976) is one’s initial reaction to a stressor. The body’s immediate reaction is to lower its resistance and functionality. As the body begins to recover from this shock and lowering of resistance, the individual will respond with the “fight or flight” approach. According to Olpin and Hesson (2013:38) several body systems are activated at this stage, particularly the nervous and endocrine systems. Stress hormones such as adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol pump through the bloodstream, enabling the individual’s response to be prepared for physical activity. The next stage is known as the “Resistance Phase” (Salye, 1976). This stage occurs if the stress continues causing the stress hormones to remain activated in the blood stream. According to Coon and Mitterer (2010:431), the initial indications for psychosomatic disorders will start appearing during this stage. The body may not return to its normal, functioning state even if the threat has passed, as the perception of a threat may still exist. This results in hyper-arousal, which will later be discussed during the four components of trauma. The third stage, known as the “Exhaustion Phase” (Salye, 1976), is when the stress is prolonged and has persisted for some time. This persistence diminishes the body’s resources to respond to the stress as the hormones used to energise the body are depleted.

Traumatic stress

According to Glanville (2012:47) traumatic stress is caused by a specific event (i.e. trigger) and the reaction of the individual toward that event. Glanville (2012) notes that according to Weaver et al. (2004:23) the magnitude of impact that an experience can have on an individual

is dependent on the personal meaning and level of emotional sensitivity of the individual. Other factors such as the nature, severity, and duration of the trauma along with its frequency will also influence the individual's response. Glanville (2012:49) credits Armfield (1994) in stating that factors such as psychological disorders, self-esteem, and coping skills unique to each individual will impact the individual's susceptibility to, and experience with, the traumatic stress which could lead to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. An individual will experience physical, emotional, and mental reactions during a traumatic event (Glanville, 2012:50).

Glanville (2012) notes the different areas of the brain that are involved during traumatic stress. The hippocampus, hypothalamus, and amygdala collectively form the "limbic system" of the brain (Glanville, 2012:50). The limbic system regulates emotions, memory, ability to absorb information, and survival instinct or self-preservation.

A common response to a traumatic event is for the individual to experience vivid flashbacks, resulting in the individual reliving the event. This activates the chemicals and hormones associated with the trauma, causing the individual to feel a loss of control and believe that they may be 'going mad'. It is during this type of response where an individual may use the coping mechanism of dissociation, another one of the four stages of trauma.

Components of trauma

According to Dante (2015), there are four physiological components of trauma which, to a certain extent, are always present in people that have endured some form of trauma. This trauma can be from specific traumatic experiences or events, or a series there of that lead to trauma. Dante lists the four states to be; hyper-arousal, constriction, dissociation, and tonic immobility.

Hyper-arousal refers to a state where the sympathetic nervous system is turned up and adrenaline levels are abnormally high. This state is characterised by increased heart-rate and breathing, jitteriness, racing thoughts, anxiety, and panic attacks.

This is followed by the next state, constriction. This can be considered to be somewhat of a psychological protection. Constriction of the body and narrowing of perceptions and focus is the result of a mind and body that is focused on the threat from hyper-arousal. Constriction affects muscle tone, posture, and breathing. When this state of protection can no longer

contain hyper-arousal, or causes exhaustion of the body, the last two states, freezing or dissociation, are used.

Dissociation is the most common and subtle symptom of trauma. It enables people to endure severe traumatic experiences. Lacking focus, ‘zoning out’, selective hearing, and memory issues are common symptoms of dissociation. Dissociation between parts of the body is also common, such as the separation between mind and body, self and emotions, thoughts and sensations, and self and memory. Cohen (2011:409) describes dissociation to be similar to a “trance state” in which awareness of the individual’s surrounding space is altered. According to Scheel (1999) self-harm and substance abuse as a coping mechanism is associated with dissociation. However, this Spinozist account counters Cartesian Dualism⁵, as self-inflicting damage on the body is caused by damage to the mind. Dante (2015) elaborates in saying that freezing, or tonic immobility, is considered to be the last resort of survival state. No pain is experienced and the feeling of numbness is prevalent. An accumulation of this frozen store of energy resulting from the trauma can remain in the body and manifest as anxiety, depression, somatic dysfunction, as well as psychosomatic and behavioural problems. The subjective nature of stress and trauma leads to different emotional reactions which vary depending on the individual. All emotions are valid as each experience is unique. According to Glanville (2012:53) the feeling of numbness, varying intense emotions, or a fluctuation between the two opposite spectrums are expected. The influence of trauma on the psyche can be detrimental to the individual as feelings of anxiety, fear, self-blame, guilt, shame, and loss of control are typical.

Reactions to trauma

The problem with some of these emotions, such as guilt and shame, is that the victim may not speak out about their experience. This inaction allows the damage to manifest and develop, instead of seeking the help they need. According to Glanville (2012:53), due to the bodily reactions that accompany the mental and emotional reactions, physical aching of muscles and tension headaches are likely. This is another example of the Spinozist account as the body and mind experience reactions coincidentally. The combination of an overstimulated mind and an exhausted body is one that is unsustainable and could cause extreme damage for the individual’s overall well-being and functional existence. A hindrance of this kind may lead to a post-traumatic stress disorder.

⁵ Cartesian Dualism refers to Descartes’ account on the mind and body.

Main symptoms of post-traumatic stress

Post-traumatic stress is categorised as a mental disorder and was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980 (Glanville, 2012:47). According to Glanville (2012:56) there are three main symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, also commonly referred to as “PTSD”. The symptoms affecting the memory, categorised as “intrusive symptoms” by Glanville (2012:56), appear through the form of nightmares, vivid flashbacks and unwelcome, intrusive thoughts. The next symptom, “avoidance and numbing” (Glanville, 2012:56), occurs when the individual avoids anything that would remind them of the traumatic event. This includes people, thoughts, places, and activities. Some victims may also experience numbness, especially towards positive feelings of love and happiness. The use of harmful substances to achieve a numbing of the pain and the traumatic memories is another coping method. The combination of numbness, detachment, and avoidance could have a destructive impact on the individual’s well-being and functional existence. The symptom of “hyper-arousal” (Glanville, 2012:56) is one that could continue long after the initial traumatic event took place. According to Friedman (2009:68), individuals with PTSD often develop other psychiatric disorders. The most common of these disorders is Major Depressive Disorder, Anxiety Disorders, and Substance-related Disorders (Glanville, 2012:57). There is no set duration for the effects of PTSD as everyone will have their own, unique experience. A change in behaviour, mood or anxiety levels have been known to occur around the anniversary of the traumatic event.

Rape-related trauma

When addressing South Africa’s prevalent rape culture, one needs to note the direct link between Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Rape Trauma Syndrome ⁶(Hartman, 1993:511). The syndrome is not considered to be an “illness or a personality disorder” (Glanville & Dreyer, 2013) but rather, as Leslie (2003:38) puts it, a “normal response to an abnormal traumatic event”. Furthermore, Glanville (2012) notes that according to the South African Department of Correctional Services (2008:12), Rape Trauma Syndrome is considered to be a type of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but cannot solely be diagnosed as PTSD. Diagnosing a rape victim with PTSD runs the risk of the victim being considered as a “disorder to be corrected” (Glanville, 2012:63) instead of an individual in desperate need of help and

⁶ Rape Trauma Syndrome was the first syndrome that was formulated to understand the trauma from the perspective of the victim (Leslie, 2003).

healing. According to Glanville (2012:63), the term “Rape-Related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” has been used and refers to four major symptoms. According to Jasper (2007:31), reliving the traumatic event, social withdrawal, avoidance, and physiological arousal characteristics are the major symptoms.

According to Astbury (2006:5) out of all the stressors causing trauma, including those from natural disasters, trauma caused by sexual violence is the stressor most likely to lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Astbury believes that victims of rape are the largest group of individuals who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. According to Glanville and Dreyer (2013) rape victims are prone to experiencing clinical depression, panic, anxiety, phobias, and suicidal thoughts and attempts. According to Glanville & Dreyer (2013) illnesses and afflictions such as depression, victimisation, and stigmatisation relate to Rape-Related Post-Traumatic Stress.

Another form of trauma, known as “Secondary Traumatization” (Glanville & Dreyer, 2013) is related to rape. This trauma refers to that experienced after the event from interactions, persons, or institutions that directly involve the event. The legal system is a good example for how Secondary Traumatization may be instigated. The current protocol for reporting a rape is often emotionally and physically intrusive, insensitive and abrasive to the victim. This would therefore discourage the victim from speaking out about their experience. As Glanville & Dreyer (2013) have concurred, a damaging response to a rape victim would be that of judgement and questioning what the rape victim did to provoke or invite the act. Stewart conducted formal interviews with a number of female rape victims and found that some women had not reached the point “of being able to seek support” (2007:75) due to fear of reactions. Stewart found it disturbing to learn that some of the women who did seek support were met with “inadequate support and even outright betrayal” (2007:75).

Personal and qualitative research findings

From an autobiographical stance I empathise with these women. The aftermath of a rape is a long process. The first step in this process is self-realisation and coming to terms with what has happened. The written responses that I received from the four women I interviewed illustrate this point. A common occurrence among the responses was the use of distractions to avoid addressing the issue and acknowledging what had happened, how it made them feel, and why it made them feel a certain way. These distractions manifested in the form of binge-eating, starving themselves, or even both as a way to distract themselves from their pain.

Starvation was also utilised as a discipline in which to gain a sense of control as they felt that they had no control over their mind. One woman described the relationship that she once had with her body as separate from herself. Subject 1 viewed herself (psyche) and her body (perceptual) as two different entities working against each other. When asked “Are there any specific traumas that your body has been through, and/or memories about your body that are defining to you?” the four women replied with cases of medical operations, eating disorders, alcoholism, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and sexual violence.

Although sexual violation is a physical act, I agree with the Spinozist account where the mind and body is seen as “merely different aspects of one and the same substance, inseparable from each other.” (Grosz, 1994:11). The physical inflictions on my body, as well as those of the women, lead to severe disruption of the mind. It took me two and a half years to come to terms with my rape. Instead of avoidance, I accepted my feelings and past and chose to proceed with the next step in seeking help. It is only then that the healing process can begin.

Addressing damage and pain

It is extremely hard to talk about pain, and as Stielau (2015) puts it, language fails us when we try to actually communicate about pain. Stielau (2015) also states that to speak to another about the events of the physical and emotional body is to believe that the listener can conceive of and understand this pain. Empathy is complex, as it is difficult for human beings to truly imagine the feelings of others that are outside of our own peripherals and personal experience. However, for the sake of healing the pain that traumas cause, speaking out and verbalising the pain tends to break the issue down to manageable facts. These facts can be labelled, discussed, and solutions may then be endeavoured. Feelings are not meant to be expressed in words as they are felt, but feelings also have the tendency to be all-consuming to the point of irrationality and madness. As Dante (2015) states, the symptoms of trauma will remain with the individual until the stored energy of the trauma is released. If the trauma was caused to the physical body then the release should be experienced by both mind and body. Freud reinstates that “the physical cannot be unambiguously separated from the perceptual.” (Grosz, 1994:30).

Practical work

The series of prints that I created, titled *Inside Out* (Figure 1), explores the effects of trauma and the relationship between mind and body; the psyche and the perceptual. If the trauma

isn't physical in nature, but affects the mental aspect of a person, the lack of obvious and external signs is often the reason for the dismissal, misunderstanding, and ridicule of mental damage. As mentioned before, empathy for another's pain is close to impossible. With little or no visual evidence of damage (trauma), its crippling and long-lasting – sometimes permanent – effects are disregarded and difficult to communicate. This body of work addresses the marriage of the damaging effects of trauma on the mind, and the visage of strength and wholeness portrayed by the body and the pressure to conceal this damage.

In conclusion, trauma is subjective as each victim will have unique factors that influence their experience. The distinction between trauma as the object or subject is inconclusive as the Spinozist account explains that the two are not independent. Body and mind are two components of one entity. Trauma inflicted on either component will have an impact on both. The crippling trauma that results from rape, or any kind of sexual violations, becomes a stored energy that affects body and mind. Such trauma needs to be acknowledged and addressed in order to be released to achieve catharsis.

Chapter 2: the story through the body

This chapter follows the previous chapter in the discussion of the relation between psyche and body. Both theories that I discuss assign great significance to the body and how it interacts with the world. I discuss the importance of the perceptual body, as both the communicator for a silent internal and the visual diary of a life.

The body as a visual record of a history

Hatton (2016) believes that we grow and learn about ourselves through our senses. These create our perceptions of life. Hatton (2016) describes the body as being a “map” of a history, being the narrative of a life. The body records a lifestyle, accidents and illnesses, encounters, and emotional experiences. According to Grosz (1994:12) the body should not be seen as a fixed state of being, but rather as a series of processes in becoming. Grosz describes the body image as a distinguished and fluctuating record of the intensities that the individual experiences. She continues in saying that it measures the psychical and physiological changes that the body experiences through its everyday performances. (1994:83).

The communicable body

As Grosz puts it, the body is often considered to be a “signifying medium, a vehicle of expression” (1994:9), or a way to communicate the private psyche⁷. The body serves as a “two-way circuit for the transmission of information” (Grosz, 1994:9). Outside information from the individual’s surrounding environment is experienced and absorbed through the five senses of the body, simultaneously as internal information from the otherwise sealed and incommunicable psyche is expressed through visual signs of the body. Grosz describes the body as a way for an individual to express their “interiority” (1994:9) as well as the vehicle through which an individual can “receive, code, and translate” (1994:9) the external world. The Spinozist account corresponds with this view of Grosz. Grosz (1994:12) notes Spinoza’s claim that, at any given point, the state of the body is a utility of the body’s inner composition, and the influence of external factors. The on goings of the body as a system is so interchangeable between internal and external; through secretion of the pores or absorption of the skin. Grosz adds from Anzieu (1989) that the skin is “fundamental” and often taken for granted until it is wounded. She carries on by saying that as the surface of the body, the skin

⁷ The private psyche refers to ideas, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and effects on the mind.

is the platform for the “articulation of orifices” (1994:36), erotic arousal, cuts and wounds, and the medium through which the body’s internal functioning communicates.

Scars

Grosz (1994:36) describes the cuts and scars of the body as creating “a kind of landscape” on the surface. I find a body full of scars to be a body with many stories. In today’s culture, scars are considered to be something to be ashamed of or to be covered up. I came across a body of work, or a project as Lanquist (2017) calls it, titled *Behind the Scars*⁸ (Figure 10) by a photographer called Sophie Mayanne. The photographer showcases scars of different people and uncovers the stories behind them in a positive way. The scars are from life-threatening operations, medical procedures, accidents, or incidents of self-harm. Along with each portrait that Mayanne posts is a description in the words of the individual photographed. The descriptions include the history of the scar/s and the implications that it brought. Mayanne’s reason for creating this project is to promote self-love and body positivity.

Scarring and healing

Lanquist (2017) suggests that body positivity is a process that changes every day, just like scars. She believes that healing and catharsis is associated with body positivity, which is forever changing. Healing is called a process because it is not a fixed state. Scars are sometimes beloved as they remind one of healing and victoriously over-coming (Lanquist, 2017) However, these same scars also provoke memories of pain. When asked “What about your body makes you feel/remember pain?” the four women (Subject 1, 2, 3, and 4) all mentioned the scars from the pain that they physically inflicted on themselves. Subject 4 recalls pain from memories of sexual violation and believes that her body expresses emotional pain or distress through sickness and body pains. This coincides with the Spinozist account as the body is regarded as the vehicle of communication. Subject 3 describes her scars as being reminders of a dark time. However, she says that they also remind herself that she healed and that whatever happens, she and her body will always heal.

One of the five prints that formed part of my *Pain and Power* body of work, titled *Scars remind me that I Healed* (Figure 1), was inspired by the pattern created by the most

⁸ Having its platform on her Instagram page, the body of work includes photographs of different people, though mostly women, of different age, race, and cultural background, showing their scars.

prominent scars on my left wrist. Associating scars with the white roses was in attempt to show the beauty within my scars. I am not referring to aesthetic beauty but rather the beauty in acceptance, healing, and pride in positivity. The scars that are left behind after any physical harm on the body become a part of the person and demonstrate a kind of proof of their history. Lanquist (2017) describes scars as being more than tissue left after an injury. She views them as etchings into the skin of memories and stories, as well as proof of experiences and pain endured. At the pinnacle of her anorexia, Subject 1 recalls her scars as being “victorious reminders” of when she chose to hurt herself instead of eating. Now, she describes it as reminders that she did not die. Referring to one scar in particular, she views it as a small price to pay instead of death.

Practical work: symbolism

The recording of the wilting process in the time-lapse videos of the flowers reflects the pain that the four women have experienced. It echoes situations in which their bodies have felt completely depleted; be it from starvation or from low points in their lives after various events including sexual abuse or assault. According to Glanville (2012:44) South Africa has one of the highest rape statistics in the world which highlights the hardship that South African women live with. The use of indigenous flowers like the Arum Lily, ‘Vygies’⁹, and Proteas in my *Pain and Power* series (Figure 1-5 & 7-8) was to relate the stories told through the body to those of South African women in particular. The use of the hardy Protea is to signify the resilience of women, and the hardiness that we have developed. The print *Power found through Pain* (Figure 2) from *Pain and Power*, is a dedication to the strength of women.

As discussed in the previous chapter, PTSD is very common and likely among rape victims. These victims bear the burden of a right that was stripped from them, yet they still carry on. The video titled *Ouroborus* (Figures 7a & 7b) is inspired by the tattoo of a snake that Subject 1 wears on her forearm. Ouroborus is a myth of the snake that devours its own tail to sustain its life; it is an eternal cycle of renewal. The fluctuating state of the flowers in the time-lapse videos, between wilted and in full bloom, symbolise the ever-changing story of the body. Additionally, it symbolises the different occasions where women have felt immense pain but found the strength to heal again. As Subject 2 mentioned in her response, she has her good days and her bad days. Subject 2 also mentioned her body as being a canvas for her tattoos.

⁹ Vygies is a colloquial term for the South African weed-like succulent, mesembryanthemums.

She went on to explain that each tattoo represents a different chapter of her life. Her skin became her visual diary of experiences, memories, and the things that she has come to appreciate about herself. She explained that her tattoos allowed her to learn to love herself because she now sees her body as a work of art, “something so different and beautiful”. The print, *the Sensuality and Beauty of being a Woman* (Figure 3), from *Pain and Power* is a previously collaged image that I created from still photographs of the flowers from the time-lapse videos, as well as imagery that Subject 1 sent to me in response to “What about your body brings you power?”. The image includes two of her tattoos, both of which being flowers, as well as two white roses that represent the two accounts of rape that she experienced.

The use of the five white roses in the time-lapse video, *The Strength and Power of being a Woman* (Figures 8a & 8b), represents the four interviewed women and myself. The flowers are metaphors for our bodies, and the symbolic nature of the white rose is that of purity and innocence. The wilting of the roses in the time-lapse video represents the loss that each woman experienced after their trauma of being sexually assaulted. However, the flowers do not remain wilted in the videos; they re-erect themselves, proving that their (our) self-worth cannot be taken away by anyone. ‘Purity’ is up to the woman to evaluate and deem. The reason for using the white roses to represent the woman’s rape is to counter-represent the stigma of rape and to re-assign meaning to the woman. That is, meaning that is positive, reinstates value, and proves strength.

The body as a reflection of society

Grosz (1994) believes that bodies become emblems, messengers, and symbols. Everybody has the power to decide what it is that their bodies portray as it is not upon anyone else to make that decision. When a woman’s power and freedom of her own body is taken from her, without her consent, it cannot change the value of her body because it was not her choice to begin with. She is not obligated to adopt any stigmatisation or resentment because of the harm inflicted by another. Grosz theorises that bodies are “fictionalised” (1994:118) by society. She describes it as being placed into various “cultural narratives and discourses¹⁰” (1994:118) which themselves are only by-products of culturally established principles and representational forms created within society. Grosz explains that bodies somewhat fall

¹⁰ Cultural narratives and discourses created by man through social laws and rights in society.

victim to social practices. A body, originally pure and unjaded, becomes subject to mere pretences when lead to live certain narratives.

The body to the world

As stated by Grosz (1994:87), a person's body is their "being-to-the-world". It becomes an instrument, as it receives information and knowledge, thus generating meaning. Grosz theorises that it is only in virtue of being or having a body that makes it possible for objects to be available for the person. If an individual was only psyche, with no perceptual, the individual would not be able to experience or exist in the world with its objects. This means that the meaning that is generated through the psyche is only possible through the tangible and perceptual body. This coincides with the Spinozist account and reiterates the effects of the mind on the body, and vice versa. Grosz notes Foucault's view of the body as an instrument of power, the "materiality, almost a medium, on which power operates and through which it functions." (1994:146). Grosz continues to reference Foucault with the belief that the body is moulded by many "regimes" (1994:148) and, through eating habits or moral laws, can be poisoned by food and laws.

The body is influenced by many external factors. Through scarring and development, it becomes a proof to a history that is comprised of many stories. To conclude and in keeping with the Spinozist account, we learn that the mind, although invisible and incommunicable, also affects the body External factors affect the body, physically, and also affect the mind, emotionally. External factors govern the way in which our bodies grow in response to its surroundings, and the information that our mind absorbs and internalises.

Chapter 3: the female body and its context in current South Africa

As discussed in the previous chapter, our bodies are our physical identities in a living narrative. For women, especially, the body is a very personal and somewhat consuming entity in our current social context. Based on personal experiences – as well as through conversations with many other women – I believe that there is a great deal of social pressure on the aesthetic of women and their bodies. I believe that the culturally established principles and representational forms that were mentioned in the previous chapter are largely influenced by social media in today's society. Our patriarchal society reduces femininity to corporeal limitations and objectification of women. Femininity and womanhood have been associated with nature and the perceptual and thus subpar to masculinity, as masculinity is associated with the mind. This association implies that men are more rational, intelligent and powerful thereby deeming them more deserving of superiority. Patriarchal and misogynist thought consider the female body and its purpose to be of biological and sexual importance. Female bodies are thus seen as objects to be possessed and used.

Patriarchy and the female body

Grosz references Locke and the liberal political tradition with the theory that the body is seen as a possession or “property of a subject” (1994:8) with the ability to acquire power. According to Grosz (1994:8-9), the understanding of the body according to Descartes's theory of Cartesian Duality and the liberal political tradition is not unlike patriarchal philosophies. Grosz feels that this understanding of the body triggers versions of feminist theory, as patriarchy is considered to be “the system of universal male right to the appropriation of women's bodies” (1994:8-9). According to Glanville and Dreyer (2013), the social system of patriarchy is considered to be the foundation of all oppression and a key influence of abuse against women. Glanville and Dreyer (2013) notes of Rich's definition of patriarchy (1986) as being “the power of the fathers: a familial social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play”. There have been many feminist political struggles and movements that have been ignited in attempt to challenge and eliminate patriarchal mentalities. These movements directly address women's bodies and aim for change in societal mentality where ownership and control of the female body is returned to women.

The hindering biology of the female body

The particular nature and biological makeup of a woman's body allows for natural cycles such as menstruation, maternity, pregnancy, lactation, etc. Egalitarian Feminism views these specificities as the reason for women not receiving the same rights and privileges that men have been accorded by patriarchal culture as the importance of woman is associated with the body and reproduction abilities, and man with intellect. However, like Eco Feminism and the feminist Epistemologists, Egalitarians also view these specificities of women as abilities that men will never be able to possess. Grosz (1994:15) elaborates on this Egalitarian view by describing the woman's body as a way of living and an access to knowledge that men cannot gain or experience. Regardless, both views reflect patriarchal and misogynist assumptions that the woman's body is more natural and directly related to the perceptual world than a man's body. Egalitarian feminists believe that the female body prohibits women from equality and superiority. They see the body as a hindrance and an "obstacle" (Grosz, 1994:15) to overcome in order to achieve equality.

Hindrance assigned by society

According to Grosz, Social Constructionism feminists do not see the feminine body as an obstacle to overcome but rather a "biological object" (1994:16) with political representation and function. They believe the distinction between male and female to be socially assigned. Social Constructionism views run parallel with Grosz' theory in which the body is regarded as the raw material for influences by social ideologies. Constructionists believe that it is not necessarily the biological makeup of a woman, but rather the ways in which society has given meaning to the biological differences between men and women that are oppressive to women.

11

The 'female body' and the 'male mind'

Grosz states that misogynist thought has found a "convenient" (1994:14) self-justification for regarding women as secondary to men by limiting women to bodies that are represented as frail, imperfect, and emotionally affected. Grosz continues that patriarchal oppression finds self-justification by linking women far closer to body and nature than men. This limitation of

¹¹ The distinction between the "real" biological body and the "body as object of representation is a fundamental presumption." (Grosz, 1994:16-17).

identification restricts the woman's social and economic roles to that of biology. Male and female oppositions have been linked to mind and body oppositions. Grosz believes that femininity has been represented in a way that presumes women's bodies are incapable of men's achievements. According to Grosz (1994:14), culturally, the defining characteristics of women have been that of female sexuality and the woman's ability to birth life. These characteristics, by nature, imply vulnerability of women with the need for special treatment or protection. According to Grosz (1994:14), misogynist thought relies on essentialism, naturalism and biology. The assigning of femininity with corporeality allows men to be associated with conceptual power, but at the same time able to fulfil corporeal needs and satisfaction through women's bodies and services.

Societal pressures on the female body

Grosz (1994:14) believes the hostility that misogynist thought directs toward women and femininity is evident through the ridiculing and scrutinising judgement of women's bodies. In the interviewing process, Subject 2 recalls developing insecurities as a child after she had left the modelling industry due to her "ugly duckling phase". She recalls this phase after puberty when she started developing acne and was made aware of her lack of body curves. She confessed that these insecurities lead to six years of anorexia. The print from *Pain and Power*, titled *Hungry for Perfection* (Figure 4), addresses the pressure that women experience and the pain that they cause for their body by starving themselves and denying their body of individuality and health. I created the print using still photographs of the wilted roses from the time-lapse video as well as a photograph from Subject 1's visual responses. She remembers the time that anorexia almost took her life because of insecurities that stemmed from society. Subject 1 recalls "external pressures and ideals" as being one of the instigators for her eating disorders.

Female body as an object

Subject 4 speaks of the feeling that her body is always on show, as she felt that men treated her like a "trophy" to parade for other men. This is an example of patriarchal and misogynist thought as the woman is reduced solely to her corporeal and aesthetic value. Men see her body as an object to claim, use and to flaunt for other men in a competition of male bravado. The patriarchal attitude of men having ownership of women and seeing their bodies as objects is one that is engrained in our societal foundation. Glanville and Dreyer (2013) note

that one of the earliest definitions of rape was one that addressed the act of one man damaging the property of another man.

The oblivious foundation for rape culture

The series titled *Inside Out* (Figure 9) that was mentioned in the first chapter is a visual representation of that which is not visible. The hybrid-like screen prints portrayed the damage of trauma on the mind that the body aims to conceal due to society's lack of support and understanding. Sadly, I have found this state of ignorance and lack of empathy to be the same for sexism. Gender-based violence is so engrained in the fabric of our society, that the careless micro-aggressions that form the foundation for rape culture are readily brushed off and belittled. I wanted to liken these two manifestations and societal problems by reworking the original prints of *Inside Out* (Figure 9), with the use of a collage-like technique and juxtaposition, and by assigning additional and specific titles to each print. The additional titles, namely "*Do you have a boyfriend?*" (Figure 11) and "*Oh so you don't mind if I invade your space then.*" (Figure 12), were inspired by a personal encounter I experienced with an oblivious man who presumably thought that he was paying a compliment to me. The implication of his words is that a woman's space would not be invaded unless it already 'belonged' to another man. The ignorance that underlies man's interaction is the issue that I feel to be the most detrimental as it opens the door to patriarchal behaviour that only intensifies and manifests towards a more aggressive rape culture. This ignorance is the reason for the existence of movements, as mentioned earlier, such as #MenAreTrash. Some people respond to #MenAreTrash with #NotAllMenAreTrash but they fail to understand the movement as:

"#MenAreTrash does not only apply to men who abuse and kill women and children but also applies to those men who cat-call women and are complicit when it comes to the injustices women experience in the workplace, men who listen to stories of woe about the female lived experience but still do nothing about it because "It's not my problem, it wasn't me so, I did nothing". The hashtag is about how men as a group or collective have created a world that is unsafe for women to live in." (Matebese, 2017).

This particular movement is against patriarchy, rape culture, sexism, and female abuse. There is not one day where I am not met with invasive stares, unwelcomed catcalls, whistles, blown kisses, winks, pet names being shouted, car-horns, or derogatory gestures. This is my reality during my walk to and from university campus every day, but this reality is not only mine.

The assigning of the title *This is MY space!* (Figure 13) of the third print of the reworked *Inside Out* series is my firm and valuable response to South Africa's unfortunate rape culture.

The print titled *Different Stories, Same Struggle* (Figure 5) from *Pain and Power* was created from a still photograph after a wilting process of a bouquet of different flowers. The origin or specie of flower did not matter as the inevitable happened when flowers are stripped of moisture. The bouquet of different flowers represents all women, regardless of age, race, or origin. I believe that to be a woman is to know struggle and suffering. In our patriarchal society, women are routinely expected to bear the burden of managing situations of assault with an impossible amount of grace and meekness. The response of "*this is MY space*" (Figure 5) is a personal achievement as it is one that serves as proof towards achieving personal catharsis.

Floral symbolism and PTSD

The use of flowers as being representations of women and strength is an on-going theme that I have used in my work this year. As mentioned in chapter one, PTSD can have long-lasting effects. For a great deal of victims, those effects occur around the anniversary of the traumatic event.

In the past years after my traumatic event in 2011, I would always experience an overwhelming sense of sadness and heightened sensitivity around the 25th of March. It was interesting to note that this year, during the month of March, I anticipated the feeling of sadness but instead noticed a new, almost obsessive, attraction to plants and flowers. When searching magazines for collage imagery, I found myself spending hours cutting out all kinds of bright and beautiful flowers from the pages. The ways in which I used the flowers in my collages alluded towards bright tones of positivity, beauty, exuberance, growth, fertility and elegance. For "*Oh so you don't mind if I invade your space then.*" (Figure 12) and *This is MY space!* (Figure 13) from the reworked *Inside Out*, the use of flowers in both prints represents my space, and the space of women. I found the flowers to be suiting as they, in themselves, are delicate yet have so much meaning and importance in society¹². I continued with floral representation in *Pain and Power* (Figures 1-5 & 7-8) where I made direct and obvious links to the flowers and women. In that body of work, the flowers were used when wilted and lifeless (Figures 7b & 8b) but were also used as sturdy representation for resilience, power, and

¹² Flowers are notorious for special occasion decorations, the beginning of Spring and life, gestures of love, etc.

beauty (Figures 7a & 8a). I have come to believe that my obsession around my anniversary has significant importance in my search for catharsis. The subconscious attraction to the brightness, life and beauty of flowers, and all that they symbolise, suggest a change in my emotional state from the anxiety and unexplainable sadness that I had experienced annually, up until this year.

In conclusion, the consequences of patriarchy are so deep-rooted and naturalised into society, that most people appear to be unaware of its existence and damaging repercussions. However, there are many feminists that have been challenging the 'patriarchal norm'. It is through movements, such as #MenAreTrash, that this oppressive mentality can be exposed and thus counteracted, thus bringing about a much-needed change in society. Addressing the problem is the first step in a long process to achieving equality and catharsis.

Conclusion

From personal experience and medical research, I have addressed the effects of trauma on the body and the correlation between the internal and the external - the psychical and perceptual. The Spinozist account regards the mind and body as 'one in the same' and therefore not as separate entities. The impact of trauma affects the mind and the body as the mind processes stress and ignites certain aspects of the brain which lead to physical reactions of the body. Traumatic stress can result in long-lasting, sometimes permanent, damage of the victim-mentally and physically, or mentally which manifests and results in self-afflicted physical damage. PTSD can result from traumatic stress and can persist long after the traumatic event has occurred. There is a direct link between PTSD and victims of rape as the trauma often scars the victim. The psychical pain that manifests within a rape victim often leads to depression, anxieties and other mental disorders. My body of work, titled *Inside Out* addresses the relation and damaging effect between mind and body.

Grosz's (1994) use of the Möbius Strip views the body and mind as extensions of each other. The body records a history of a life with many stories that communicate an otherwise incommunicable internal. The body absorbs its environment and relays the information to the mind which in turn, internally processes the information and generates meaning. Stories that are told by the body, especially through scarring, create a landscape of the body which society has deemed 'imperfect' and of lesser value.

Society assigns its own oppressions and limitations to bodies through cultural narratives that bodies absorb. Patriarchal and misogynist thought have created an oppressive association with women biology in the context of society. Although the female body has been associated with nature and biological functioning, patriarchal mentalities limit it to that of mere sexual, objective, and reproductive value. In addressing patriarchy, which yields rape culture, we aim to counter and eliminate its oppression and limitation of women in society through movements such as #MenAreTrash. There is much ignorance that incites the development of a rape culture. Addressing and highlighting the patriarchy that is rife in South Africa is the only way to bring attention to the problem. It appears that the release of stored energy from my stressor, that Dante (2015) believes is necessary for catharsis, has been through addressing this topic from an autobiographical stance. Through thorough research about the

effects of trauma (especially that relating to rape) and the creative expression and outlet that was experienced through my practical works, I feel I have been able to achieve catharsis.

Appendix A



Figure 1. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: "Scars remind me that I healed"*. 2018. Screen print on 200gsm paper. 29.7 x 42cm. Scan by author.



Figure 2. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: Power found through Pain*. 2018. Screen print on 200gsm paper. 29.7 x 42cm. Scan by author.



Figure 3. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: “the Sensuality and Beauty of being a Woman”*. Screen print on 200gsm paper. 29.7 x 42cm. Scan by author.



Figure 4. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: Hungry for Perfection*. 2018. Screen print on 200gsm paper. 29.7 x 42cm. Scan by author.



Figure 5. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: Different stories, Same Struggle*. 2018. Screen print on 200gsm paper. 29.7 x 42cm. Scan by author.



Figure 6. Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Flowers in a Glass and Fruit*. 17th century. Oil on canvas. Encyclopaedia Britannica website.

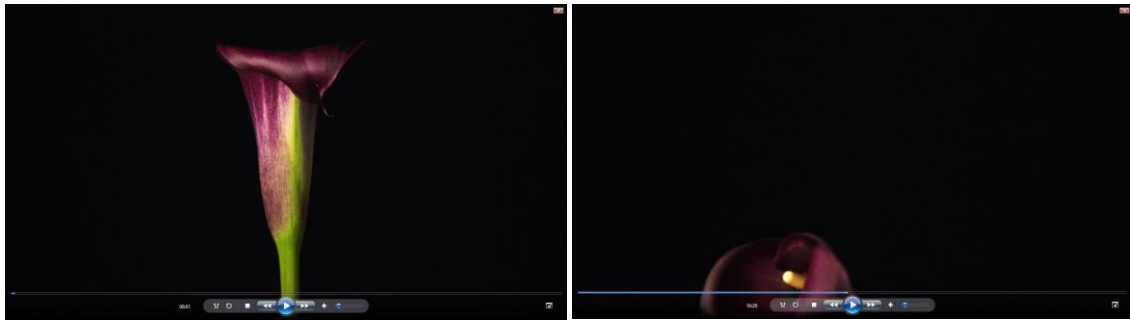


Figure 7a & Figure 7b. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: Ouroborus*. 2018. Video stills of time-lapse video.

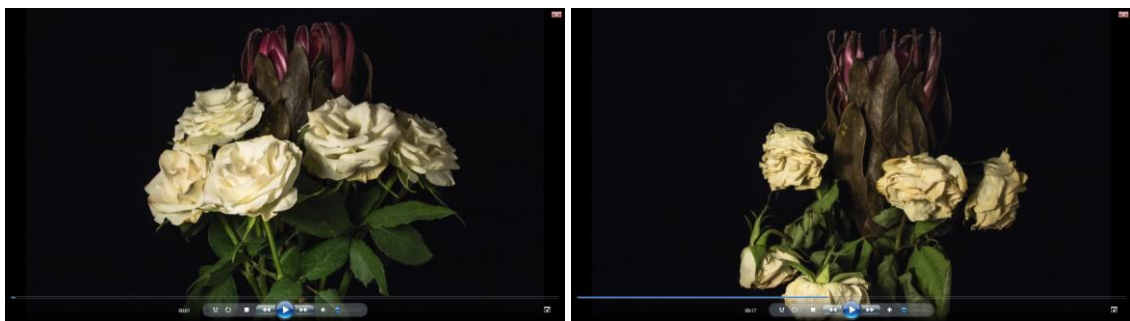


Figure 8a Figure 8b. Stéphanie Pereira, *Pain and Power: The Strength and Power of a Woman*. 2018. Video stills of time-lapse video.



Figure 9. Stéphanie Pereira, *Inside Out*. 2018. Screen print on 200gsm paper. Photograph by author.

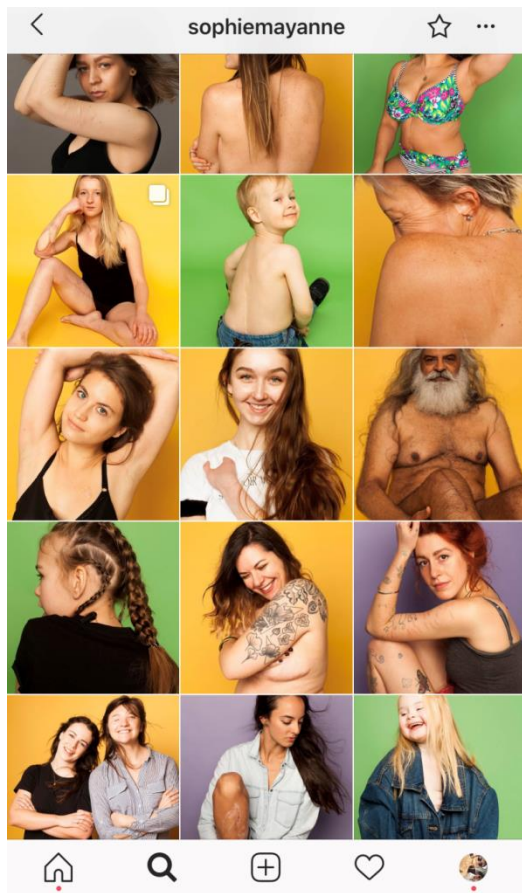


Figure 10. Sophie Mayanne, *Behind the Scars*. 2017-2018. Screenshot of Instagram page.



Figure 11. Stéphanie Pereira, *Inside Out: "Do you have a boyfriend?"*. 2018. Collaged screenprint. Photograph by author.



Figure 12. Stéphanie Pereira, *Inside Out: "Oh so you don't mind if I invade your space then."* . 2018. Collaged screenprint. Photograph by author.



Figure 13. Stéphanie Pereira, *Inside Out: This is MY space!.* 2018. Collaged screenprint. Photograph by author.

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