

A Thesis Presented to
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A Timeless Place Where Women Heal through Art Therapy:

Informed by an Art Historical Background

By

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“The metaphor of crystallization is used to explain how in an environment saturated with artistic imagination, a small creative act, seen as a seed, will grow. The growth, then following ancient traditions of the arts, reveals the seed’s full meaning with the clarity and order of a crystal.”

Paolo J. Knill, PhD

“I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way - things I had no words for.”

Georgia O’Keeffe

“Some of the most destructive violence does not break bones,
it breaks minds.”

Bruce Perry, Child Psychologist



Figure 1. Lillian Rodriguez, *Reap*, 2015, Acetate photograph, magazine images, book text, 29" x 60".

The history of women has unfolded much like that of our earth. Used for our ability to perpetuate the evolution of the (hu)man race, we have been raped, reaped and caged, as we do today to our land and its creatures. These forces that began with biological roles still exist in full force and are now saturated in every corner of culture. Women are no more liberated now than we have been in the past, but the powers of oppression we face today are far smarter. These forces are so ingrained in every part of society that we quickly become desensitized. My piece, titled *Reap*, brings to light the blatant relation of women's bodies to the landscape. Not only in form have women's bodies been seen and treated as land, as the reclining female nude has often resembled a vast natural scenery, but the parallel of woman and land also exists in their mutual objectification for patriarchal benefit. Just as the earth is stripped of its natural biodiversity to fuel man's corporations, women are stripped of their individuality and personage to fuel men's sexual appetite. *Reap* presents a woman's torso, absent of any form of identification, patterned with a rock like texture that becomes the ground that the farmers are harvesting. The tilling and ravishing of her segregated body parts evokes the male pornographic gaze that diminishes a woman's body to her organs sexual of interest.

Another facet of this oppression exists in the media's role of altering the landscape of a woman's body to better fit male needs. Much like land has been reformed to create civilizations around the world, women are bombarded with advertisements, music videos and pornography that force them to adapt themselves to certain beauty ideals or face the life of solitude that accompanies unattractiveness. I have included both male and female farmers in *Reap* because it is not only men who perpetuate these standards. By conforming to the projected ideas of sex and beauty, women are fueling the fire.

The text attached like a body-tag to the torso's nipple, suggesting a lifeless form, reads, "the moral sense of mortals is the duty, we have to pay on mortal sense of beauty." The quote is taken from Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita*, which is relevant to my exploration of all forms of cultural treatment of women. Nabokov seems to be addressing the dangerous nature of what we define as beautiful, and how the responsibility falls on each individual to become aware, to question and to reject these ideals, which are treacherous to both mind and body, both female and male. In terms of the mold women are funneled into in mainstream society today, no more relevant slogan could be applied than a "mortal sense of beauty."

Relief Through Release

Creative expression can reveal to us facets of our subconscious that we may have repressed, lied to ourselves about, or misunderstood. It often comes from a hidden chamber of the mind, exposing that which we cannot easily access. In this way, art making can be a powerful source of therapy. Interpreting our own work sheds light on what we are struggling with, how we are processing it, and how we can heal. This has been my experience creating artwork in my senior year. After a traumatic experience I had in a relationship last year, I have come to view one of the main benefit of my art making to be its cathartic, therapeutic and healing powers.

This negative experience has been the gateway to my interest in feminist studies, art therapy, and art as personal healing. As Judy Chicago stated, “it seems obvious that a woman artist who goes into her studio every day and sees the clear evidence of her abilities will see that the values of the society which define her as passive and inferior, cannot be right. If she challenges those values, she will inevitably challenge others as she discovers in her creative journey that most of what she has been taught to believe about herself is inaccurate and distorted.”¹ Upon reading “Female Imagery,” the Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro essay from *Womanspace Journal*, published in 1973, and coming across this short passage, I began to put my studies of feminism, women’s art history, and art therapy in context with my personal experiences as a woman artist who has been in an abusive heterosexual relationship.

There are inarguable differences in the way men and women are treated in educational and institutional situations, in their careers, religious communities and day-to-day interactions. Disregarding financial, political, and physical disparities imposed on women, throughout my life I have still found it impossible to be in a situation and not feel somehow treated as inferior to

men, objectified or not taken as seriously, because of my gender. Even in friendships and relationships, there always seems to be some aspect of life where men assert their ingrained sense of superiority, even if in an unconscious manner. Then there are the more extreme situations, which I have also experienced: being in an emotionally, sexually and physically abusive relationship; being told that I am inferior as “the woman,” that I am bound to let my emotions get in the way of logical reasoning, and should therefore listen to the man.

I want to be a resource for women who have had similar struggles. In my own experience and dealing with the aftermath, I have become very interested in psychiatry and various methods of therapy. I have also become interested in the art practice of women specifically, and how it can heal and hinder them in many aspects of life. In applying the healing strategies of creative expression to my own life, I have discovered an interest in trying to help other women in similar situations. With this in mind, I began the Women’s Arts Therapy Group at the Alfred University Counseling Center. Along with the group’s counselor and graduate student intern, the group members and I explored the healing properties of creative expression that we may or may not have previously acknowledged as present in our personal artwork. The power of the mind to heal itself is fascinating, but even more astonishing is the lasting power that a painful experience can have on a life. Suffering, oppressed, yet resilient women should be able to have the kind of outlet that I find through making art. I have brought this opportunity to those who are too afraid to speak, those who do not know how to find a sense of release. Just by gathering these women, together for a common cause of healing and catharsis, we have found a sense of solidarity, hope and reconciliation. By creating a place where women can begin to heal, I have done the same for myself.

However, because the members of the Women's Arts Therapy Group are currently students in the School of Art and Design, we make work in a world that is viewed in a much different light than that of art therapy. We have all encountered issues with how our personal work is received, and how these receptions are filtered through the lens of "the woman." As Judy Chicago so aptly put it, "there is a contradiction in the experience of a woman who is also an artist. She feels herself to be 'subject' in a world which treats her as 'object.' Her works often become a symbolic arena where she establishes her sense of personal, sexual identity."² Chicago also provides a comment on this dissonance of the woman artist, who asks, "'How does the vulnerable center inside me affect my perception of reality? Where is the mirror in the world to reveal who I am? If I repeat the shape of my question many times, will that shape be seen?'"² Women need to create their *own* mirror to reveal themselves to the world. Too often and too thoroughly do the men who have run our world for most of civilization define us.

Chicago comments that even for women artists who *are* able (and privileged enough) to create their own identities through art, they are still ignored by the patriarchal institutions in place.² What better way to battle the feeling of a world that doesn't care by creating a group that does care? This is what brought me to the idea of the Women's Arts Therapy Group. Instead of trying to address this global issue on a global scale, I have created a smaller way to tackle it, on a personal, local level. This is how I believe all problems of such magnitude need to be dealt with: from the ground up. Bringing this catharsis to others has been a source of healing for me, as I have always felt helping others when you cannot always help yourself is the most important thing to do. It is also an act of rebellion by making visible the invisible experience of being a woman. A small triumph over the oppressor by the oppressed.

Throughout my research of feminist theory, I have come to realize how urgent the need for change is. This is nothing new, unfortunately, but for me, this recent recognition is part of what sparked my need to initiate the Women's Arts Therapy Group. What better way to begin to address a worldwide political, educational, ontological and art historical issue than from a place close to home? Realizing the effects of a strongly patriarchal, and heavily misogynistic, society on my own life has been eye-opening, and I am aware that my peers are experiencing similar awakenings. These varying areas of personal and global studies that I have been exploring, including art therapy, art history and feminism, have culminated to involve the artwork I am making for my Senior Thesis Show, research in my current Women | Art | History class, my own personal experience, and finally the Women's Arts Therapy Group I have founded in collaboration with the Alfred University Counseling Center.

Because I have used my art making practice successfully as a therapeutic process, I believe that it can help others in similar ways. Everyone has a different method of learning that best suits their individual psychological preferences and tendencies, so naturally, everyone will respond better to certain types of therapy over others. While "talk therapy" is the most common method practiced by the Counseling Center, I feel that, because of the large population of art students present in Alfred who utilize the services at the Counseling Center, there should be an option of art therapy. I believe artists and art students will naturally respond well, or even better, to art therapy than the more traditional method of talk therapy. This is why I began the Women's Arts Therapy Group. It is exclusive to women not only because I, and other group members, feel that it is easier to open up about our issues to a female only audience, but also because being a woman comes with a different set of experiences and possible traumas that men will (most likely) never have to encounter.

One of the main sources for all of the troubles women face not only in the art world, but in day-to-day life, lies in language and labeling. “Man” is the universal identifier. I am a *woman*, I am a *female*; I am therefore grammatically relative to the male. These linguistics might seem like banalities, but after considering how they have affected my understanding of my own identity, and gender as a whole, I realized that the fundamental personal pronouns of “he” and “him,” which are the default parts of speech when referring to any person, subtly but firmly enforce man as the “absolute zero.”³

This pushes women to the place of “the Other,” establishing humanity as male. Therefore, one can easily come to the conclusion that the art historical canon is completely male centered. It is written by men, reviewed, critiqued and decided by men, and until very recently, almost exclusively comprised of male artists.⁴ This is where women artists begin, from a position far below that of the male artist. The title of the Women | Art | History class points also to an issue; one would never come across a Men’s Art History class because we understand that art history already belongs to men. As Simone de Beauvoir opportunely points out, “a man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male. ...A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man.”³ This assertion of woman as “the Other,” the subcategory, reveals the immense trials that even the most privileged women had in embarking on a life in the arts.

I believe that women were (and still are) able to find comfort, relief and healing from these struggles through their art. While this is an important understanding to have while viewing their artwork, art made by women should not be defined as “female art” or only valued and understood as a psychoanalytic process, as work by artists Lalla Essaydi, Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta are seen as by the patriarchal canon writers that decide how art should be read. While

these three artists may have very strongly visible personal narratives in their work, their art should not be defined as such because they have had “women’s experiences.” That said, expressing woman-specific traumas through art is not only a powerfully effective coping process, but it makes for widely-accessible art that is a historical portrayal of the timeless trials of women.

This project consists of two main areas: art history and art therapy. I was fortunate enough that the Women | Art | History class was offered this spring semester. It has very thoroughly filled in the gaps I have in my knowledge about women artists and their experiences throughout history. Much of what canonical art history fails to confer (in terms of the representation of female artists) has been covered in this class. I found that the work by three artists and how they dealt with their troubles through their artwork resonated with my own experiences. The accounts of Frida Kahlo, Lalla Essaydi and Ana Mendieta fell in line with much of what this Honors Thesis deals with in terms of art therapy.

Healing in Context

Frida Kahlo, who lived from 1907 to 1954, is a classic example of a very well known and widely referenced female artist. Kahlo was married to the very influential artist Diego Rivera, who undoubtedly boosted her reputation and exposure that would have been more limited had she remained single. Aside from her association with a strong male figure, according to Janice Helland in her essay *Culture, Politics, and Identity in The Paintings of Frida Kahlo*, it was also Kahlo’s severe physical issues resulting from a bus accident, and her firm political and nationalist beliefs that led to her artworks being “exhaustively psychoanalyzed and thereby whitewashed of their bloody, brutal, and overly political content.”⁵ Helland disputes the view of

Kahlo's art as simply a woman lamenting her difficult life by alerting her readers that Kahlo's "physical pain should not eclipse her commitment to Mexico and the Mexican people."⁵ There are so many other aspects of Kahlo's character that should be focused on beyond the fact that she was a woman. Her nationalist pride and political interest along with her talents in painting and printmaking are valuable characteristics for any person to have, despite their gender.

The tendency to treat Kahlo's art as a psychoanalytical autobiography is supported by writers Ann Sutherland Harris, Nancy Kulish, and Linda Nochlin.^{5 6} Helland references the discussion by Harris and Nochlin, who also support the argument that "she turned to herself and her own peculiarly feminine obsessions and dilemmas for subject matter."⁷ While I agree that this is relevant to the interpretation of Kahlo's work, why should it stand out as a significantly female phenomenon? I disagree with Harris and Nochlin's conclusion that Kahlo's "obsessions" are "peculiarly feminine." I would be surprised to find artwork by a male that doesn't reference *some* dilemma that he may have faced.

With a similar gaze, Kulish approaches the discussion of Kahlo's work from a solely psychological perspective. Because Kahlo's life was so thoroughly recorded in her personal diaries, it is easy for one to read about her life and point to where those issues manifest in her artwork. However, this availability of access to the artist's personal life should not encourage critics to ignore other crucial aspects and motivations of her work. Kulish embraces this gender-limiting position when she states, "the famous painting *Henry Ford Hospital*, which helped to establish Kahlo as a revolutionary voice for female experience, depicted, with graphic force, the agony of her miscarriage in 1932."⁶ There is no question that *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) addresses the trauma of Kahlo's miscarriage. The part of Kulish's statement that I have trouble reconciling is the declaration of Kahlo as a spokeswoman for "female experience." Clearly only

women are able to physically experience a miscarriage, but to make such a broad generalization not only ignores Kahlo's other work and the themes addressed, but devalues the work with the label "female," the established "other."

The problem lies in what is considered a specifically "feminine obsession or dilemma," as mentioned earlier.⁷ As Judith Butler discusses in her 1988 essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, gender is a performed construct, and every one of our actions, thoughts, and words contribute to this consolidation of a gender stereotype.⁸ By doing away with these presupposed categories of what is male and what is female, we can change the discourse about women's art to bring it to the same place where men's art exists.

Kahlo went through many traumatic and typical experiences that a woman faces throughout her life. From multiple abortions, a miscarriage, and devotion to a cheating husband, she also experimented in bisexuality and androgynous appearance, as evident in her painting *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, painted in 1940.^{9 10} In Gannit Ankori's book *Critical Lives: Frida Kahlo*, she provides many examples of how Kahlo used her artwork, specifically her self-portraits, as a source of understanding and healing from the adversity she faced.¹⁰

In *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (figure 2), lyrics from a song are painted into the scene. Relating to the cutting of her hair, they read: "Look, if I loved you it was for your hair, now that you are hairless, I don't love you any more."⁸ Her choice, and these lyrics, point to the widespread issue in the early 20th century, and today, of gender stereotyping. In Kahlo's time, as well as in modern times, hair relates directly to a woman's sexuality. Choosing to cut her hair, and symbolically remove (one of) her physical symbol(s) of sexual appeal, Kahlo makes a

statement that she does not want to be under the thumb of patriarchal, domineering society any longer. This move towards androgyny and away from the position of subaltern, and the recording of it in her painting, proves yet another function of art: its ability to provide a “canvas” for testimony and civil rebellion.

Kahlo’s miscarriage was a particularly agonizing time for her, physically and psychologically, and “although it is possible that Kahlo never fully recovered from the trauma of her miscarriage, a lithograph she completed on 11 August 1932 exhibits the beginning of a healing process and a transformation.”¹¹ In this piece (figure 3), Kahlo was able to express her physical and emotional reaction to the pain of a miscarriage in a visual language. This may have been her only outlet for any sort of expression with a husband who, according to Kahlo, was frequently absent and having affairs with other women. In one first-hand account, Kahlo relays,

When I became pregnant, Diego began to broach the subject of having our marriage legalized. Yet he would also shout and threaten that if the child cried and disturbed him, he would toss it right out the window. He would say that if the child grew up to be anything like me, he would really cry with grief and disappointment. All in all, Diego was very annoyed at having to play the role of a father.¹²

While it may not have seemed so at the time, having a miscarriage probably saved Kahlo and her child from a long life with an abusive husband and father. Having this outlet to voice her traumas not only made for very powerful artwork by Kahlo, but was also a source of catharsis for a woman who seemed to have no other way to release her hardships.

It is not the case, however, that all of the value of Kahlo’s work lies in the psychoanalytical and narrative nature of her paintings. While her work is an extremely revealing

and informative window into the artist's life and the cultural climate of the time, it should not be seen as simply a woman's artwork depicting a woman's trouble, as Helland suggests as a concern.⁵ Significance lies in "a staggering array of non-biographical historical, literary, artistic, scientific, philosophical and political sources, Kahlo's paintings coalesce into an unprecedented visual discourse on identity."¹³ In my opinion, identity is the true common denominator running through the many veins of the artwork's motivation, aesthetic elements and interpretations. Identity not as a woman, but as an artist and powerfully influential member of society.

Kahlo's artwork has informed many artists since her time. Decades later, the work of Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, who lived from 1948 until 1985, comes to share dialogue with that of Kahlo's.¹⁴ "Mediated by the specificities of culture and historical moment, they reveal the body as marker of identity, as border between multiple awarenesses of self, and the source of complex images that challenge the specularization of the body in Western representation."¹⁴ Both women deal with issues of nationalism and the position of being stranded between two cultures, never really belonging wholly to one. Mendieta is another example of a woman artist who dealt with political, emotional, and nationalistic turmoil throughout her life and used her art practice as a way to understand and cope within her own mind and to portray her experiences to the world. In a statement about the piece *The Body as Trace* (1973-77) (figure 4), Mendieta says,

I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by a feeling of being cast from the womb (nature). My art... is a return to the maternal source. Through my

earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body.¹⁵

Clearly one of the main purposes of Mendieta's work is to create and provide parts of her life that she feels are missing. This sense of absence translates visually into her use of the silhouette as the lack or trace of her body, as seen in her *Silueta* series (figure 5). Because of her exile from Cuba and thereafter life as an orphan and foster child, the migratory identity that she grew up with cultivated her personal sense of estrangement. The silhouettes reference her unique and individual form, yet because the physical body is absent, they leave the viewer with a feeling of a shadow, an imprint, which is all one really leaves when their life is nomadic, as the critical years of Mendieta's life were.¹⁵ It seems only natural that Mendieta's draw towards the "maternal" is so strong, since that aspect of her life was limited post-exile.

The color palette of Mendieta's work is in part decided by the landscape she chooses in which to install these pieces, but her addition of red in a few of them clearly reference the womb, the maternal source, that she discussed when referring to *The Body as Trace*. The connection between womb and nature, between woman and nature, is manifested strongly in Mendieta's work, and acted as a prominent stage for her expression and actualization for this missing part of her life.¹⁶ The body leaves a footprint wherever it goes, so it is only expected that the sites Mendieta chose for these pieces exist along her path from Cuba to Iowa, where she was relocated after her exile from Cuba.¹⁷ This may have served as a kind of reconciliation for her. Despite the pieces being ephemeral, they represent *some* permanence in a life that was heavily transient. Mendieta's work may not be created for the sole purpose of personal healing or catharsis, but in the process of creating art for the world, she rectifies past adversity.

However, the one adversity that Mendieta could not rectify, her early and untimely death, still remains an enigma. In September of 1985 she fell to her death out of the 34th story apartment she and her husband, minimalist artist Carl Andre, shared.¹⁸ The New York art world took sides, and many agreed that Andre pushed, or threw, her out of their bedroom window. Continuous tension between the two around the competitiveness of their art careers, coupled with a nearby doorman's claim that Mendieta was crying "no," points to something more than an accident. Interviews with Mendieta's friends reveal her fear of heights, her excitement about the future of her art career and the heavy drinking that the couple often partook in. Andre later suggested that Mendieta committed suicide; but again her friends retorted that she was not in the least bit depressed.¹⁸ Similar to Kahlo's situation with Diego, Mendieta found herself working against, instead of with, her husband's reputation in the art world, which, according to his initial arrest, led to her death.¹⁸ In a final word against Andre, Mendieta's friend, artist Dotty Attie spoke of the artist and her ambitions, saying "she [Mendieta] told me that she was making new work and that she was going to give up drinking and smoking because women artists did not get recognition until they were old. She said that she wanted to live long enough to savour it."¹⁸ With all that Mendieta had to look forward to, it is difficult blame those who claim that Andre killed his wife. It is also hard to understand how someone could look past the evidence against him and the benefit he would reap once a main competitive figure and perceived career threat was removed from his life.

The final artist of discussion, Lalla Essaydi, born 1956, is very explicit about her use of personal experience as fuel for her artwork.²⁰ In an interview with Imani M. Cheers from PBS, Essaydi states, "my work is really autobiographical, it's about my own experiences growing up in Morocco and living as an adult in Saudi Arabia for many years."¹⁹ This statement may seem

like a given, as this is true for many artist's work, but looking into Essaydi's past reveals that these "experiences" are something she is still trying to resolve. She uses her art as means to healing, clarity and rebellion against the reputations that work against her as an Islamic woman.²⁰

Essaydi spent much of her childhood in a *harem* in her home country of Morocco. In an artist statement presented to the Brooklyn Museum, she explains, "when a young woman disobeyed, stepped outside the permissible space, she was sent to this house. Accompanied by servants, but spoken to by no one, she would spend a month alone. In this silence, women can only be confined visions of femininity."²¹ To many Westerners this method of discipline seems extreme and abusive. Part of Essaydi's goal is to show her audience that Muslim women are not the passive, oppressed girls that they are often depicted as. The value of Essaydi's work lies in her ability to present Islamic women as not just as equals to Western women, but as human beings.²¹ Because of her experiences as an insider in the Islamic world she is able to achieve this. By doing so she is not only healing her past powerlessness in a patriarchal system, but altering the mindset of those who encourage a misogynistic tradition.

Another example where Essaydi's work presents itself as a form of healing and reconciliation from past strife is in her calligraphic art, such as in *Apparel #6* (2003) (figure 6). Because Islamic women are prohibited from practicing calligraphy, her extensive use of it is a clear act of rebellion and an effort against the oppressive forces that ruled her early life.²¹ The fact that Essaydi applies the calligraphy with henna presents a new perspective. "Applying such writing in henna, a form of adornment considered 'women's work,' further underscores the subversiveness of the act."²¹

Essaydi recreates the negative spaces of her past in her present life, visible in *Silence in Though #2* (2003) (figure 7), as if to exercise the luxury she now has of being able to walk away from them. The four walls that once held her captive now exist within the four walls of the picture plane and can do her no more harm. This, I imagine, provides an immense feeling of personal closure. Exposing issues to those who have remained ignorant to them creates a strong sense of personal power. Essaydi summarizes the influence that the past has on her work in a statement about her photographs for the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art:

These photographs are the remains of childhood. Even now they serve as symbolic reminders of my past. It was important for me as an artist to go back and confront the feelings I had attached to this place, to re-encounter the child I once was, in order to understand the woman I had become. I created an imaginary space where the voice of these women, through written text, became both their walls and their freedom, where they can be who they want without restraint or hindrance.²⁰

Essaydi's eloquence displays her desire to liberate the women that are in a similar position to what she once was, and to give them hope that they can overcome the misogynistic oppression that she has.

The lives and artwork of Kahlo, Mendieta and Essaydi provide credible, real-life examples of what my efforts are in initiating the Women's Arts Therapy Group. These three artists not only proved that they had overcome their past struggles through their artwork, but used their work as a form of activism and created awareness for their audiences on such issues.

Male Gaze versus Clinical Gaze

Having others acknowledge or be aware of what someone has gone through is incredibly powerful. This is one of the reasons there have been such positive responses from the group members in the Women's Arts Therapy Group. Receiving empathy from peers in similar situations helps one realize that they are not alone, and forms a strong sense of solidarity. To do so through a common passion, in our case art-making, is even more powerful. We speak a similar language, which is key since at times we find it hard to express our troubles with a verbal language.

The idea for the Women's Arts Therapy Group came to me through my personal sessions at the Counseling Center on campus. Attending one or two times a week for my own sessions was not only necessary, but cathartic and ultimately healing for me given the depression I fell into after the events of earlier that year. Seeing how beneficial these meetings were for me was the beginning of my interest in various methods of therapy, and my status as an artist led me to art therapy. Having seen the effect of my adversity upon my artwork, I began to realize I was subconsciously using my practice as a form of therapy. Whether I intended it or not, my work became about the issues I had faced in an abusive relationship and the depression that resulted. Like a slow drip of water on a flame, each piece that I made somehow soothed the grief that plagued me.

After coming across recent articles about women in the mental health world, I became aware that old ways of viewing women's mental health (e.g. hysteria referring to the uterus) are not rid from today's society. In America, only one out of seven men take psychiatric medicine whereas one out of every four women do.²² Here, the male gaze becomes the clinical gaze. Given

how close I came to taking medication for depression, and how glad I am that I did not, I want women to be exposed to the realities of the medical and mental health institutions and know that there are a variety of other options.

The discrepancy among gendered medication falls back on the modes of thinking that view women's emotions as a sign of weakness, forcing women to be treated as irrational and unreasonable. In contrast, in her article "Medicating Women's Feelings" for *The New York Times*, Julie Holland she claims, "women's emotionality is a sign of health, not disease; it is a source of power."²² Instead of encouraging women to suppress the natural cycles of emotion that *all* humans experience by taking psychiatric drugs, we should strive to work through our troubles in other ways, such as creative expression, and know that it is natural to struggle with depression at times. If medical institutions treat women as they do men, and suggest alternative treatments and therapies, the gendered statistics of patients taking psychiatric medication can be changed.

Art therapy is something that has always intrigued me, but in order to fully realize the potential of the support group I was formulating, I needed to do research on the subject. To begin gathering source material, I searched through syllabi of art therapy courses that university professors have posted online. This gave me a basis of a few key texts that provided me with a fundamental education on the subject. As much of the material I came across was written before 2000, I narrowed down my search down to texts that were written within the last decade, so as to draw from the most relevant and recent research. I also value my experience with art therapy to be very informative and pertinent to my Honors Thesis. Having come across it accidentally has taught me just how important and natural it is for people to use creative expression in a therapeutic manner.

One of the most informative sources I have used in my studies is Cathy A. Malchiodi's *Expressive Therapies* (2005). Malchiodi cites the main benefits of creative expression to be "self-understanding, behavioral change, and emotional reparation."²³ Catharsis, self-discovery, clarity and communication are also key therapeutic facets of art therapy.²³ Because creative expression begins in childhood, and for many, is most prominent in our early years, the calming and reassuring effect of art making that we felt during our childhood is triggered. Essentially, it can bring us back to a safer time before the traumas of life had a hold on our psyche.²⁴

Another source, even more tailored to the specificities of the art therapy that my thesis project deals with is Susan Hogan's book *Revisiting Feminist Approaches to Art Therapy* (2012). It not only focuses on how art therapy is beneficial for women particularly, but features a chapter on art therapy for women who have experienced abusive relationships. Hogan's book is relevant to my strain of research and up-to-date in terms of psychological studies. In a world where women are continuously subjected to the male gaze, they should at least reap the benefits of *this* type of clinical gaze on women, and how this tailoring can be a positive part of healing.

"Traum"

In the roots of language we see the strong connection between suffering, psychological health, and expression, whether unconscious or not. "Traum" is a Greek word that means "wound."²⁵ "Träumen" is the German verb "to dream."²⁶ It is clear that humans have always understood the connection between trauma and the effect on the subconscious, and even further, the route that adversity takes in expression through dreams. It is our natural, involuntary instinct and coping mechanism to be able to sort through our issues in a physically safe manner, which is one of the main benefits of dreams.²⁷ Taking this one step further is where art therapy enters into

the realm of psychotherapy, bringing the esoteric into the physical realm, helping our unconscious formulate visual ways to express the issues it is construing.

Art therapy has been practiced for thousands of years by civilizations like the Greeks and the Egyptians, who found the theatrical qualities of music and drama to be curative in the way people were able to act out, or express, their suffering in a more fulfilling, a more satiating manner, than simply speaking about it.²⁸ Interestingly, the Greek god Apollo was the god of medicine *and* music, drawing the cultural connection to the healing power of musical expression. From relaxation to excitement, the Greeks cite many benefits of music, both in creating and listening.²⁹ In terms of the visual arts, the Egyptians would “prescribe” art therapy for the mentally ill, using their expression as a way to diagnose, understand and seek a cure for their ailments.³⁰ The European Renaissance found useful the role of “imagination in both psychological illness and health,” according to Robert Burto’s 1621 book *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.²⁹ In more modern times, it wasn’t until the beginning of the 20th century that art therapy began to take its place in therapeutic practices in the United States. Starting with patients with severe mental illness, art therapy eventually found its way into more common practices for people with all ranges of psychological issues.²⁹

Research done in the fields of neurosciences proves the efficacy of expressive therapies. Studies have “drawn attention to the potential of expressive therapies in regard to mind-body intervention, particularly in the areas of mood disorders, stress disorders, and physical illness.”³⁰ These investigations have shown hope in the improvement of symptoms resulting from posttraumatic stress disorder. I have experienced these sort of results in my own life, as I have often found it to be an extreme relief to have the ability to convey a troubling thought, memory, or emotion through art in a way that I could not do as effectively with verbal language. That is

not to say that writing cannot serve as an effective cathartic activity, as I have often found my daily writings to be healing, but for many, specifically those with artistic tendencies, the visual language can be the most voluble. These personal experiences are more telling than any study can prove.

In order to understand more about the integration of art therapy into the field of psychiatric therapy, I needed to learn what types of patients receive therapy involving creative expression and more specifically what methods their therapists are employing. Sarah Slayton's "Outcome Studies on the Efficacy of Art Therapy: A Review of Findings" provided me with an informative chart (figure 8) displaying various art therapy methods used with groups and individuals of different ages.³¹ Slayton provides information on appropriate therapy for a range of patients, from mothers with toddlers all the way to adults with Alzheimer's disease. Prior to reading this essay, I had assumed that art therapy was practiced mostly with children, which also seems to be the general consensus among those whom I have consulted in my research, thus learning about the equally positive results that middle-age and geriatric patients experience with art therapy was encouraging.

In my growing interest in art therapy, and in my experiences as an artist, I began to wonder if those who had a natural tendency towards artistic expression would benefit more from art therapy than those who do not. Just as specific teaching styles can be directed to students with certain learning styles, I wondered if therapy would be more effective if it catered to people's varied learning styles. Since most artists tend to lean towards a kinesthetic or visual learning style, why should their counseling or therapy styles not also take a kinesthetic or visual approach? The "Therapeutic Thematic Arts Therapy Method" (henceforth "TTAP Method"), developed by Linda Levine-Madori in her essay for the *American Journal for Recreation*

Therapy, outlines nine steps for expressive group therapy (figure 9), along with the specific areas of the brain that are stimulated during each activity. The TTAP Method used specifically for older adults, “aims to elicit, during the group art/recreation therapy sessions, a process of life review which is a naturally occurring process structured within the method in which the individual looks back on his or her life, reflecting on the past, and revisits positive events and unresolved difficulties.”³² This method proves art therapy to be effective much later in life as well. The value of the TTAP Method to this thesis project is its inclusion of nine different types of creative expression and the part of the brain that is stimulated by each activity.³² This allows the art therapist to assign which regions of the brain may need to be stimulated, such as spatial, visual, kinesthetic or interpersonal areas, to better address a patient’s individual needs. The goal of this therapy method is to have patients readdress troubled times in their past and be able to look at them through a new positive lens. Using art therapy with geriatric patients seems to be a non-traditional approach, but has proven to be very successful. This finding was helpful to my interest in art therapy as a universally effective form of therapy, but as I am concerned with college aged women, I needed to focus on how art therapy could be integrated into the lives of my peers.

I proposed the idea of an art based women’s therapy group to my counselor, who was more than happy to help me in the process of finding members and scheduling meeting times. As I have no experience or qualifications to lead a support group, Kim MacCrea, LMHC, was assigned as the groups counselor. As S.L. Jones claims, in Susan Hogan’s book *Revisiting Feminist Approaches to Art Therapy*,

A therapist’s sensitivity, psychosocial knowledge and recognition of the asymmetry of power are, therefore, crucial to facilitating change. An art therapist who has critically

analyzed ‘the social constriction of gender difference and the role that [art and media] representations play... and the effect that this has on women’ will be better informed in the therapeutic process.³³

MacCrea was interested in leading the support group because she mainly counsels students who have experienced sexual assault, which is, unfortunately, a problem mostly affecting women. We agreed that the group should be exclusively women. MacCrea suggested this from a comfort standpoint, speaking from her experience that women tend to be more open when speaking to female-only versus mixed sex groups. I felt that the group should be limited to women because I believe that women experience different types of traumas than men do, due to the nature of our patriarchal institutions, whether educational, social, religious or economic. In terms of men understanding the pressures and intimidation women face in our patriarchal world, S.L. Jones claims “non-violent men usually do not see it.”³⁴ I felt that coming together as a group of women sharing common troubles would not only be healing, but could create a sense of community.

My research on the use and effectiveness of art therapy for women’s support groups encouraged my choice, as studies in the past two decades have shown just how beneficial it can be for women of all ages. In 2006, Rosalind Penfold wrote the graphic novel *Dragon Slippers: This Is What an Abusive Relationship Looks Like*. Jones uses this anecdotal novel as a principal example of a woman seeking and discovering a way to heal through visual language. Quoting directly from Penfold’s graphic novel, Jones relays Penfold’s reaction to the efficacy of art therapy as Penfold explains, “drawing was faster- a kind of visual shorthand. It also came straight from my emotion – I didn’t need to filter it through a verbal language. In any case, how do you find words to describe some of these things? You just can’t.”³⁵ Both Jones and Penfold focus on the phenomenon of fragmentation and loss of memory in relation to abusive incidents,

and cite drawing as a witness and record of these events, so as to prevent women from forgetting or convincing themselves they didn't happen.³⁵

It wasn't until I came across Penfold's account that I realized how much this described my own experience. I would ask myself if certain things were really said and done to me, that maybe I was just being dramatic. Fortunately, I am able to refer back to what I had written during those times and confirm that they did in fact occur. My drawings and paintings became a reaction to and a record of these events, as if to further solidify the physical reality of the situation.

Jones further cites Penfold as using visual language as a way to "transcend the deep sense of shame" that accompanied her experience as a victim of an abusive relationship.³⁶ Penfold was able to see her drawings as separate from herself and walk away from them, physically and metaphysically distancing herself from the depicted traumas, the damage they had done to her, and the hold they had on her psyche. Drawing was also a way for Penfold to "reauthor" her experience.³⁶ Taking this one step further by literally becoming the author of her story (in *Dragon Slippers: This Is What an Abusive Relationship Looks Like*), Penfold has completely materialized her story, and it now not only benefits her readers, but brings her comfort to know it is helping others avoid similar abusive situations.

For female artists who are trying to define themselves in a world in which they are underappreciated and unrecognized, Jones questions, "what does this mean for women who are transforming pain to healing and describing the indescribable through visual language?"³⁷ There is so much power in the ability to be self-curative, but how do women harness this power in a

society, and an art-world, that saps female artists of value? These questions sparked the main exploration of what the Women's Arts Therapy Group addressed.

The Women's Arts Therapy Group

An email was sent out to students interested in the group, providing an overview and setting some standards and expectations:

Good afternoon!

We are contacting you based on your expressed interest in our Arts Therapy Group. The first session will begin Monday, February 23rd from 7:00 pm to 8:00 pm. We will meet at The Counseling Center. For the first group we would like you to bring (if you can transport it) or email a photo/video of a piece of artwork you have done that describes you. If you need to take a photo or video of this work, please email maccreek@alfred.edu. Kim will then project this on the wall when it is your turn. You can describe yourself in any way you would like so "be free!" You will have about five minutes for your introduction. This is a confidential, respectful and *safe* place to explore the emotion that goes into the creative process to instill personal growth and reflection. The group will be 5-8 women and last 6-8 sessions. If you have any questions please email Kim MacCrea, LMHC at maccreek@alfred.edu Please confirm or deny this request before February 23rd at noon.

The first meeting was attended by seven female art students, the Counseling Center graduate student intern and counselor Kim MacCrea. I kept a meeting log (see Appendix) for each session in order to track progress of the group, in hopes that by the end of eight weeks I would be able to see a large improvement in the ability of each member to share their troubles, express them through their artwork, and realize the inherent curative power each of them have.

We began by establishing group "norms" so that everyone felt safe and comfortable. MacCrea made sure everyone agreed to total group confidentiality, that nothing said in the group would be shared outside of the meetings. I explained my thesis project to the group and they agreed that it would be okay if I wrote about our discussions, but kept the comments completely

anonymous. We also established that these meetings are not intended to be critiques of our work, but to explore how we have healed and how we continue to heal through the art making process. We agreed that members should feel free to bring examples of their artwork every week if they choose. Everyone in the group introduced herself and shared a piece of their artwork that somehow described them and their creative process. This was an efficient way to get to know each other and the general nature of our artwork. We went into a discussion about the therapeutic benefits of making art that we had felt in our experience. Several members talked about feeling higher self-esteem as they started to like their artwork more. Along those lines, others discussed feeling like an outsider and being misunderstood, but being able to connect with certain people who speak a similar language through art. Many of us expressed feeling more successful defining ourselves through this language of creative expression than in other ways.

In a more therapeutic sense, we all agreed that art can be a meditative process that can help quell anxiety, but can also quickly become a stressful activity in itself. In this meditative state creative expression becomes a “safe place,” somewhere to make thoughts tangible and use specific materials to express and understand those thoughts. In my experience, art making has always been a way to acknowledge an issue and keep it somewhere outside of my body where I can physically walk away from it. This process of release seemed to be a commonality throughout the group. In our next meeting, one member presented a painting where she personified her anxiety. She described how being able to take this feeling and create a character for it not only diminished the fear it had over her but helped her see how transient the “character” actually was. She talked about how she benefits from art therapy by giving her psyche relief from housing her inner demons and relocating them to the physical realm, where she can close her sketchbook and leave them for the day.

We decided after the first meeting that the meetings needed to be extended from one hour to an hour and a half. As more and more students joined the group we had to divide into two groups, which became equally populated. Each week MacCrea suggested a topic for the next week's discussion. She would email out psychology-based readings that members could choose to read and discuss with the group. The artwork that we made and presented often reflected the topic of the week. Ranging from familial and romantic relationships to body image, we covered many facets of feminist issues that we as women had encountered.

Many members discussed using their art to process childhood traumas, deal with issues of self-esteem and other social insecurities. Whether representationally or abstractly, their artwork visually externalized their issues successfully. One group member voiced how she felt that the effectiveness of art therapy lies in the symbolic associations created in art, which allows us to communicate something that may be too painful, embarrassing or confusing to speak about verbally.

In the following week, the topic of different forms of language was examined. We talked about communication through symbols, and how we as artists communicate with symbolic materials, colors, shapes and forms. The discussion included the intimate languages between humans, and how much of our communication is non-verbal and includes eye contact, body language, silence, and creative expression. The group considered how when one is talking with familiar people, a shared knowledge of unspoken meaning often forms. We felt that this had formed within our group, and that it became a very safe and open place to talk and receive strong support, empathy and helpful feedback. In terms of group etiquette, we discussed the possible limitations of therapy and how there are a lot of "in-between words" that stand in the way of the core of an issue, or what is really being said. It was a general goal to try to acknowledge the

substance of a discussion in order to be more concise. MacCrea also advised us to “own what we say,” in order to avoid making general statements or assuming others have had similar experiences.

Over the next few meetings the group discussed how much personal weight we unload and reveal in our work. When we make work that references deep trauma often the question of how much personal meaning we divulge plagues the making process. If the piece is intended to have an audience, how much do we want the audience to understand about our inner struggles? We frequently discussed if it is enough for only us to understand the true depth of our work, or if to be fully satisfied we need an audience to empathize with us. The group members felt that often it is rewarding enough for our artwork to exist in our own private realm, but we have found the empathy and feedback that we crave by sharing within our private group.

Within the group, and in our outside experiences, we all agreed that art can form a connection between people. One group member in particular opened up about a very sensitive and personal issue that she has been dealing with most of her life. She was able to explain it through a self-portrait that she had drawn about her family life. The other group members were able to relate, discuss and offer helpful and healing words, which she found very comforting. We talked about how these discussions would not have been possible without the aid of her drawing, and she said she would not have been able to reveal her issue in such personal detail without using her artwork to explain it. This situation called to mind Cathy A. Malchiodi’s thoughts on the subject, specifically when she writes that, “images may reveal aspects of the person who created them, an important part of the process of art therapy includes facilitating the individual’s discovery of personal meaning for art expression,” which is what this group member seemed to discover in her own art practice.²³

In each subsequent session it became easier to get into discussions and open up about our individual struggles. Aided by our art we were able to discuss each other's troubles without having to break down the barriers that simply speaking alone presents. Each week members were able to unpack more and more of the baggage that covered the true root and emotion of the troubles they were experiencing or they had dealt with in the past. One woman relayed how she found a way to bond with her father through the activity of photography. Not only was it a way for them to spend much needed time together, but he was able to learn things about her life through her photographs that he may not have understood in their daily interactions. In applying art to the nature of familial relationships, the group decided that just as an artist shouldn't get too attached to a photograph that might not develop as they imagined, one should be aware of the same temporality of human relationships, and how people also change as they develop.

As the weeks went on group members began sharing creative writing, such as poetry, that they had done in times of struggle. One member read a poem that dealt with an issue with self-harm that she had when she was younger, making evident the strength of emotion that reading the poem aloud brought to her, and how deeply seated the trauma from past years was. She admitted that while it was hard for her to relive those memories, she also felt empowered realizing that they didn't have as strong of a hold on her as they once did. She discussed how when she would make drawings depicting her feelings about self-harm and show them to friends who experienced similar troubles, they would be able to relate to the emotions that came through in her drawings. This gave her a sense that she was not alone and provided her the strength to fight the issue with the support of her friends. Perhaps the most rewarding part of the Women's Arts Therapy Group was being able to witness the healing process of my fellow group members. Being able to empathize with each other and understand how powerfully curative art making can

be created a strong bond between the members of the group, who eight weeks ago were mostly strangers.

In our final meeting, we discussed whether art and life exist separately or inseparably. Most of the group agreed that they are inseparable, sparking a debate on whether “art is life” or “life is art.” This generated contemplation of where each member draws their personal line between their life and their art. It seemed an appropriate conversation for the group, especially in our last meeting. For women who find such power and encouragement in their art practice, there is little wonder that we feel that art and life are symbiotic.

MacCrea suggested that each member give feedback and provide any sort of reactions to their experience in the group. The common denominator between all responses seemed to highlight the main benefit of the group as a safe, comfortable, non-judgmental place where we felt confident sharing our struggles and grievances with other women artists. With the like-mindedness we shared, it became easy for us to relate to each other, to listen to others open up, and to realize that all of us have issues that we deal with everyday, very often through our artwork. Several group members shared how much they valued having a place to cry in front of others each week, to be completely vulnerable, knowing they would never feel embarrassed or ashamed of any of their feelings. One member felt that she could not open up to some of her friends in the same way, and valued the presence of concerned and empathetic listeners that the group provided. For some members, the group was a source of joy as well as catharsis. In talking about her excitement to come to the group session each week, one of the younger members related it to the experience of “running to the ice cream store.” The group also seemed to form a special kind of support for the Freshman students who were still getting assimilated into the college lifestyle and finding their way in the trials of making art. Another group member shared

that she always looked forward to Mondays because attending the group always made it a better day for her.

Perhaps the most rewarding response to the group experience I received from a member was in regards to the day she shared a specific painting. She confessed that it was a pivotal moment for her, and completely changed the way she began approaching her artwork. The feedback she received that day on her piece and the background issue it related to opened a new chapter in her life and in her understanding of herself. It was revelatory to hear what an impact the group has had on certain students. To have this group member thank me and thank the group for this experience made everything I had struggled with in the past year worth it. To understand how some of these other women suffer, and to be able to provide them the opportunity to experience some relief is something I will always carry with me and reflect on in times of struggle. Watching others heal has only reinforced the faith I have in my own ability to heal.

As the meetings drew to a close, I proposed the idea of having a group show, displaying the artwork we have done while part of the group. We discussed possible places for the show, and MacCrea suggested installing in The Wellness Center to help spread awareness of the Women's Arts Therapy Group and make it more accessible to those who may feel hesitant or embarrassed to join. Being able to see their peer's artwork will hopefully be the encouragement some need to join the group, as the Counseling Center plans to continue the Women's Arts Therapy Group in future years. One of the group members suggested we could also display work in the gallery project she began, called "Gallery Plywood." The "gallery" consists of a long piece of plywood supported by the artists. The work is displayed on the plywood and the artists carry the gallery to whatever location they desire to show their work. The mobility of the gallery was an important character to our show, as one of our intentions was to create awareness of the

existence of the Women's Arts Therapy Group and to help students realize that their own peers and classmates participate in the group. Hopefully the display of the initiative we have taken in our own lives and our own artwork for the purpose of healing will encourage others to do the same.

The display of artwork done by members of the group in The Wellness Center not only advertised the availability of the Women's Arts Therapy Group, but provided the group members from this past semester with a comforting sense of closure. As many of the younger members had never had their work displayed in a show, it was a great opportunity for them to receive feedback on their artwork. Having these personal pieces exhibited to the public, many of whom are our fellow students, encouraged us to shine a spotlight on the issues we have kept hidden for so long.

Our experience with Gallery Plywood was both exciting and unique. None of us had ever participated in a mobile display of our work, so it was a valuable event for us all. To be able to take our work anywhere and choose the audience that would view our show was very thought provoking and created some interesting conversations between group members and our audiences. The originality of the idea to have a mobile gallery coincided well with the philosophies of the group and was an important opportunity for this student's gallery project to receive feedback and exposure from both students and the public. In a sense this was the final step in our therapy. Up until the shows, many of the group members had only shared the artwork they made about their private struggles with other group members. To make this work public, and push the comfort zone even farther, represented the externalization of internal issues. As a final catharsis, the display of the artwork not only showcased the many talents of the group

members, but exhibited the courage each member had developed to open up about the problems they face.

Personal Practice

My Senior Thesis Show on May 9th, 2015 represents the culminating facet of my Honors Thesis project. Everything I have studied and experienced informs the artwork that I have made for the show. My personal philosophies on art and the concepts that drive my work have all been influenced by the other elements in this Thesis paper. From the abusive relationship that was my wakeup call to my place in the world of patriarchy and feminism, to the healing I shared with others in the Women's Arts Therapy Group, my work has become a direct visual record of these events.

Having always dealt with the human figure, most often the female figure, my work has continuously grown from a core of female identity. Because of the visual nature of art, my paintings, photographs and collages often reference the male gaze and the objectification and sexualization of the female body. I find myself walking a fine line between objectifying women's bodies in my work, and trying to use this as a strategy to point out the asymmetry of power in all gender interactions. I frequently ask myself how I can portray images of naked women to bring up controversial issues of sex, domestic abuse, objectification and gender power discrepancies without contributing to those problems. Similar to how some women claim to become pornstars as a liberatory expression of their bodies and sexuality, I do not want to fall into the trap of the culturally encouraged misogynistic gaze while trying to fight it.³⁸

I began narrowing down the facets of feminism that would inform my work through photography. Using photographs as a way to suggest identity, but never reveal it, instantly spoke

about the anonymity of women in society. Many of the representations of the female gender we see in the media present identity in a different way: as segregated body parts that emphasize male sexual desire. In my photographs I have highlighted these sexualized parts of the female body with a black web-like texture that I paint on the models. Acting simultaneously as both armor and the layer below the skin, the black paint represents the resilience *and* vulnerability women encounter within themselves. In *Peel 1* (figure 10), the chest is both exposed and protected with this coating, suggesting invitation and distance. Women are taught to be objects of desire to men, to use their bodies as sexual tools. Contrasted with the resistance to object-hood, women often feel the pressure to hide themselves and be ashamed of their bodies. The duality in my photographs hint at this spectrum that all women inhabit. *Spread* (figure 11) suggests more of a protective, resistant attitude towards the gaze in this photograph. The model tightly hides her most vulnerable area while exposing her bulbous stomach, insinuating that she may be hiding more than just *her* body. With our gaze on these faceless, segmented bodies and their harsh, almost metallic skin, the question seems to be “what,” instead of “who,” are we seeing.

Whether in pornography, the job market, educational institutions, or any area of the arts, women are stamped with an ingrained namelessness that is very difficult to overcome, and will never be changed in the eyes of many men. It is specifically this lack of personal identity that makes pornography so enticing for millions, that makes prostitution possible, that makes beauty ideals so strongly rooted. In a way my photographs do objectify my models (and myself, as I often photograph my own body), and this brings to the table the question of the artist’s identity. What do my photographs suggest that would change had a male artist taken them? How necessary is it that my audience knows that I am a women? How much do I as an artist want to rely on my gender to be the voice of my artwork? How crucial is it that the audience be aware of

the personal experiences that fuel my artwork? Sitting with these questions as I navigate through the connotations and implications that arise in my artwork helps me to sort out my intentions for each piece and consider the existence of my artwork outside of my studio space. I feel it is important to keep an awareness of how one's art interacts with past and present discourse, especially when dealing with social and political concepts, as my work often does.

Photography is a new medium for me, and I began experimenting with the camera in the fall semester of 2014 mostly due to fate. After stumbling across a new technique for creating the black web-like texture that is painted on the skin of my models, I felt the urge to document it, and these documentations gradually progressed into pieces on their own. As primarily a painter, I wanted to take the photographs beyond what they were alone. I was not satisfied enough to have them hang on the wall in their unmodified state, so I began incorporating them into my paintings.

Eye Trouble (figure 12), was one of my first photograph and paint collages. Combining my photograph, sheet music, acrylic paint and an iconic photograph, I have attempted to create a sense of timelessness in the oppression of women. The sheet music, titled "My Girl Has Eye Trouble. I Want This! I Want That," points to the male view of women as self-centered and needy. I placed the sheet music under the transparent photograph of her backside, directing the audience's eye to the location where it frequently falls on a woman. By bringing in a sense of humor with the title of the sheet music, I have attempted to lighten the tone of the very serious concepts that my work deals with in order to make it a bit more accessible and also to highlight the ridiculous nature of the treatment of women in our culture.

Integrating painting and photographs also brought to the surface my history with collage. Many of the collage elements in my work come from women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan*,

Woman's Day, *Oprah Magazine*, *Vogue*, *Allure* and many others (figure 13). These magazines feature a range of advertisements from the emaciated fashion models that are the current standard of beauty, to the cutting edge weight loss pills that force women's bodies into this mold. I also select advertisements from magazines in past decades, as early as the 1940's, which aim to conform women to different, often more rigid, categories of what it means to be "feminine." Comparing these older standards to the ones I find in contemporary magazines, I do not see much progress in terms of reducing the pressure of beauty ideals on women. If anything, patriarchal beauty industries have become subtler and smarter about their tactics, enforcing with more strength the norms of what it means to be an attractive woman, and therefore a successful woman.

With piles of these magazine clippings around my studio, I began to gather blurbs from interviews and comments made by men about women. I collaged all of these pieces into *Quilt* (figure 14), which contains a mixture of poems by William Butler Yeats and James L. Dickey, and clips from *Esquire* and other men's magazines. In each patch of this quilt, men are featured talking about how they get the women they have sex with to do their laundry for them, how there should be a higher voting age for women, and discussing in which situations to call a woman's vagina "pussy" versus "cunt" during sex. This collection of derogatory male views of women comes together with an advertisement of phone numbers for dominatrixes and a suggestive "milk moustache" magazine image. The addition of *Leda and the Swan* (1924), the Yeats poem about a woman raped by a swan, adds a somber tone to an otherwise laughably absurd piece.

In trying to maintain a sense of humor within the serious and troubling tone of my work, I focus on adding elements that provide a bit of comic relief. In *Twister* (figure 15), I have taken one of my acetate photographs and placed an image of a tornado over the pubic area of the nude

woman. The picture lines up to appear as if the woman's pubic hair is becoming a tornado. The addition of small cutout airplanes circling her massive body furthers the idea of the female form as a landscape. The text behind the woman's breast, seen through transparent acetate photograph, reads "Much Tilled Soil." Similar to the reference of the female torso as land in *Reap* (figure 1), "soil" refers to the treatment of women's bodies, being overly used for the benefit of men. In a more literal sense, women are the soil in which the species is grown. The body of the woman is inherently related to the earth, designed to reproduce and carry offspring as land is tilled to grow life-sustaining food. To be "much tilled soil" implies the over sexualization of the female body beyond its reproductive abilities. This diction suggests the exhaustive experience of being a woman in society, both physically and psychologically. However, the added element of comic relief provides perspective on the double bind women are in. Women carry the weight of the domineering and often misogynistic society that most of us exist in, yet find solidarity in the critique and rebellion of these patterns. The function of humor in my work serves as a rebellion, encouraging the viewer to join in the mockery of the views imposed on women that are so often looked past, despite the replete existence of sexism in society.

The process of making artwork for exhibition in my Senior Thesis Show has caused me to consider the value of aesthetics versus concepts in my work. With such an emphasis on issues of feminism and representation of women, I constantly find myself debating whether to compromise certain formal elements of my work in order to include certain conceptual components. By the end of the semester I can see that I value both facets of my work equally. While certain pieces are more heavily saturated with critiques and opinions about the society I exist in, other pieces have a subtler voice to highlight the resolutely considered visual aspects. While I place emphasis on each piece to speak for itself and be able to exist successfully alone, I

cannot help viewing my artwork in a similar way to how I view the evolution of the Women's Arts Therapy Group. Comparing the situation of each group member from the first to the final meeting displays great progress and development in the way that each student spoke about her own artwork, understood it in relation to an issue she may have been experiencing, and appreciated the cathartic and healing process that she was able to provide for herself. My work acts in a similar way. I can look at the timeline of the pieces I have created in my senior year and read them as a timeline of revelation and alleviation.

An Ending and a Beginning

I cannot help but feel that the culmination of this project represents my final stage of healing. Through the process of the Women's Arts Therapy Group, the shows we created together and my own art practice, I have not only helped myself but others as well. That the support group will continue on in future years contributes to my optimism in feeling that it is possible to heal oneself through art, and the large interest in the group assures me of the significant amount of students that will benefit from it. Watching the progress each week that the women in the support group experienced was more than enough proof of the effectiveness of art therapy, in addition to my personal experience using my own art in a therapeutic manner. I have faith that this support group at Alfred University will continue to help women through their college years and beyond. The methods of healing, understanding and catharsis that we have uncovered in our art practices are something that we can carry throughout our lives. The work that we have done together brings to mind the saying "give a person a fish and feed them for a day. Teach a person to fish and feed them for a lifetime." While talk therapy is a helpful and healing method for many while attending regular sessions, art therapy is something people can practice throughout their lives outside of the clinical setting.

In the final meeting of the Women's Arts Therapy Group, we reflected on questions that each of us has had at one time or another. How is it that we are able to continue the act of making art in times of hardship? How do we keep up with the task of creative expression when there is so much else to attend to within ourselves? When one has trouble finding a reason to smile, how is it that they still feel the desire to make art? After some reflection, the group concluded that for those who find healing in creative expression, whether it is women in art history, or the members of the Women's Arts Therapy Group, to make art is not a chore, it is an unconditional must.

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- ¹ Chicago, Judy and Miriam Schapiro, "Female Imagery," *Womanspace Journal* (1973): 56.
- ² Ibid 53.
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Appendix



Figure 2. Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940, oil on canvas, 15.75" x 11", MoMA Collection.

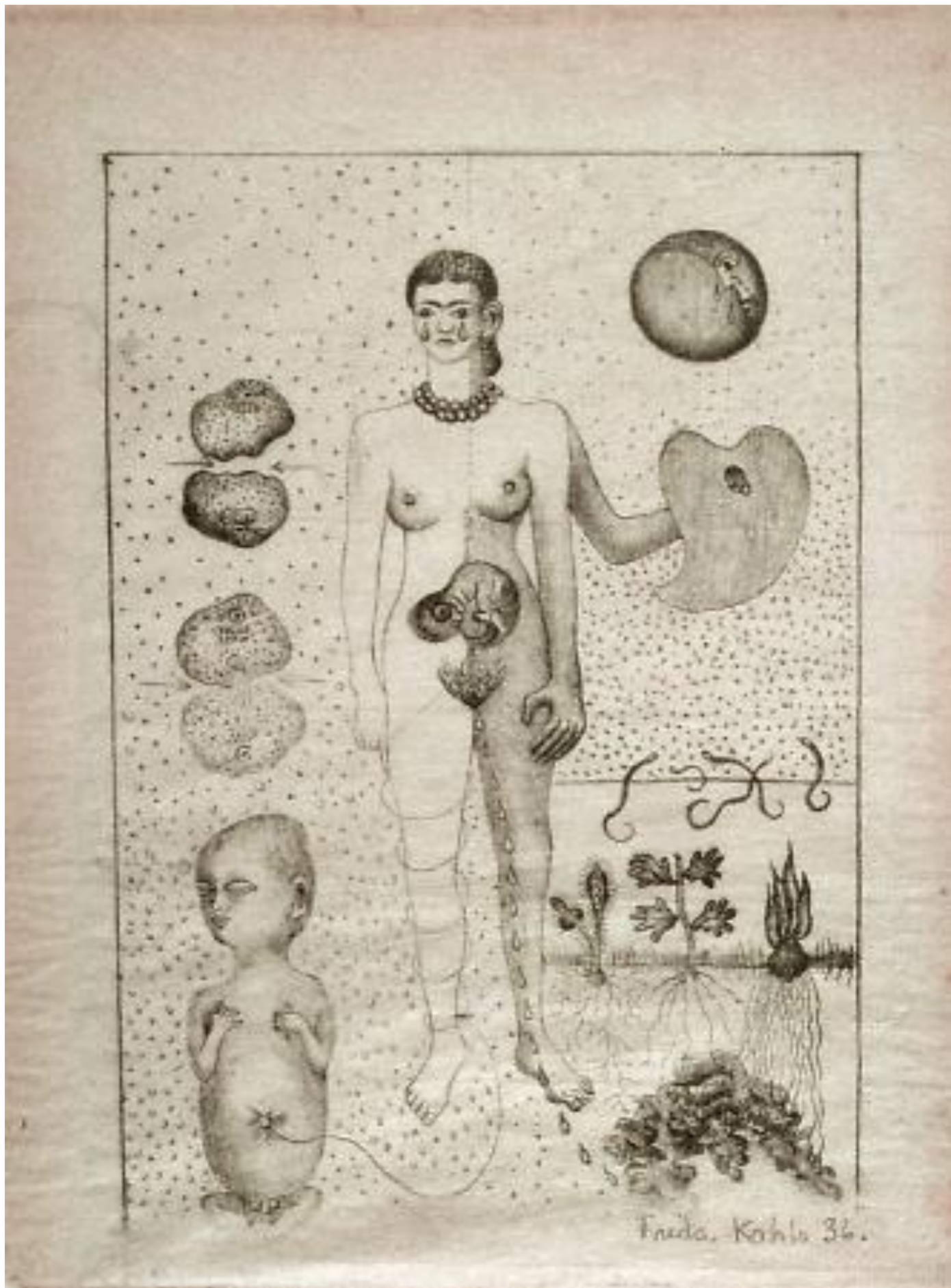


Figure 3. Frida Kahlo, *El Aborto*, 1932, lithograph, 94.5" x 124.8", Museo Dolores Olmedo.



Figure 4. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Tree of Life series)*, 1977, tree and mud, photographic documentation 20" x 13.5", Old Man's Creek, Iowa City.



Figure 5. Ana Mendieta, *Silueta Works in Mexico*, 1973-77, color photographs, 19.375" x 26.56", The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.



Figure 6. Lalla Essaydi. *Apparel #6*, 2003, chromogenic print, 33.5" x 40.5", Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.



Figure 7. Lalla Essaydi. *Silence in Thought #2*, 2003, chromogenic print, 41" x 51", Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

TABLE 1 Qualitative Studies

Author	Size (N)	Population	Intervention	Time	Tool(s)/Measures	Results
Ball (2002)	5	Emotionally disturbed young children with attachment disorder in a residential setting	Individual art therapy (drawing, painting, sewing)	One year (50 sessions)	Art therapist interviews, coded information	Both client and art therapist were able to identify positive change/growth
Ferszt, Hayes, DeFedele, & Horn (2004)	8	Incarcerated adult women who had experienced the death of a loved one during incarceration	Weekly art therapy group	8 weeks	Post-group client interviews	7 of 8 clients described having a positive experience and a safe place to explore grief or feelings deemed unacceptable in a prison setting
Gersch & Sao Joao Goncalves (2006)	5	10-year-old children with family issues, grief, and various stressors	School-based group art therapy (exact intervention not explained)	One year	Post-treatment focus group interviews with children	All children reported that art therapy specifically helped them to better cope with feelings
Hosea (2006)	12	Mothers and toddlers	Weekly painting group	8 weeks	Video taped sessions, interviews of mothers, qualitative analysis	Paint and color brought dyads closer; viewing the videos was seen by mothers as important
Nowicka-Sauer (2007)	38	Adult women with Lupus	Group art therapy; "draw the disease" directive	Not specified	Qualitative analyses of cases to reveal the psychological lives of the patients	Drawing was seen as an advantage over verbal interviewing alone
Seifert & Baker (2002)	7	Adults (ages 83–89) with Alzheimer's disease/dementia	Twice weekly activities group using drawing	3 years	Formal elements of artwork analyzed and recorded	Details in drawings decline but symmetry persists long into the disease; clients desire symmetry and benefit from symmetry
Smeijsters & Cleven (2006)	*	Adults in forensic institutions	Use of media (painting, stone work, and more) to create metaphors for frustration tolerance	Not specified	Detailed reports submitted by art therapists on 7 problem areas	All 7 problem areas were successfully addressed by art therapy; decrease in cognitive distortions
* Unspecified; data collected from 8 art therapists						

Figure 8. Slayton, Sarah C., Jeanne D'Archer and Francis Kaplan, "Outcome Studies on the Efficacy of Art Therapy: A Review of Findings," *Art Therapy: Journal of American Art Therapy Association* 27 (3), (2010): 108-118.

Table 1. TTAP Method© nine steps outlined*

Step	Process	Stimulation	Brain region
1	Individual thought to group ideas	Linguistic	Broca's area
2	Group ideas to music/guided imagery	Musical/visual	Visual/auditory cortex
3	Music/guided imagery to 2D image	Visual	Temporal lobe
4	Image into 3D image/sculpture	Spatial	Parietal/occipital lobe
5	Sculpture into movement	Kinesthetic	Motor cortex
6	Movement into words/poetry/stories	Linguistic	Frontal lobe
7	Words into food for thought	Spatial	Sensory cortex
8	Food for thought into photography	Intrapersonal	Reticular formation
9	Photography to themed event	Interpersonal	Broca/Wernicke's area

*Multiple regions of the brain are stimulated at any given time throughout multimodal interventions. However, the brain region listed is the focus of the corresponding step.¹¹

Figure 9. Levine-Madori, Linda, "Uses of therapeutic thematic arts therapy, TTAP Method, for enhanced cognitive and psychosocial functioning in the geriatric population," *American Journal for Recreation Therapy* Vol. 8 No. 1, (2009): 25-31.



Figure 10. Lillian Rodriguez, *Peel 1*, 2014, digital photograph, 24" x 48".



Figure 11. Lillian Rodriguez, *Spread*, 2014, digital photograph, 18" x 48".

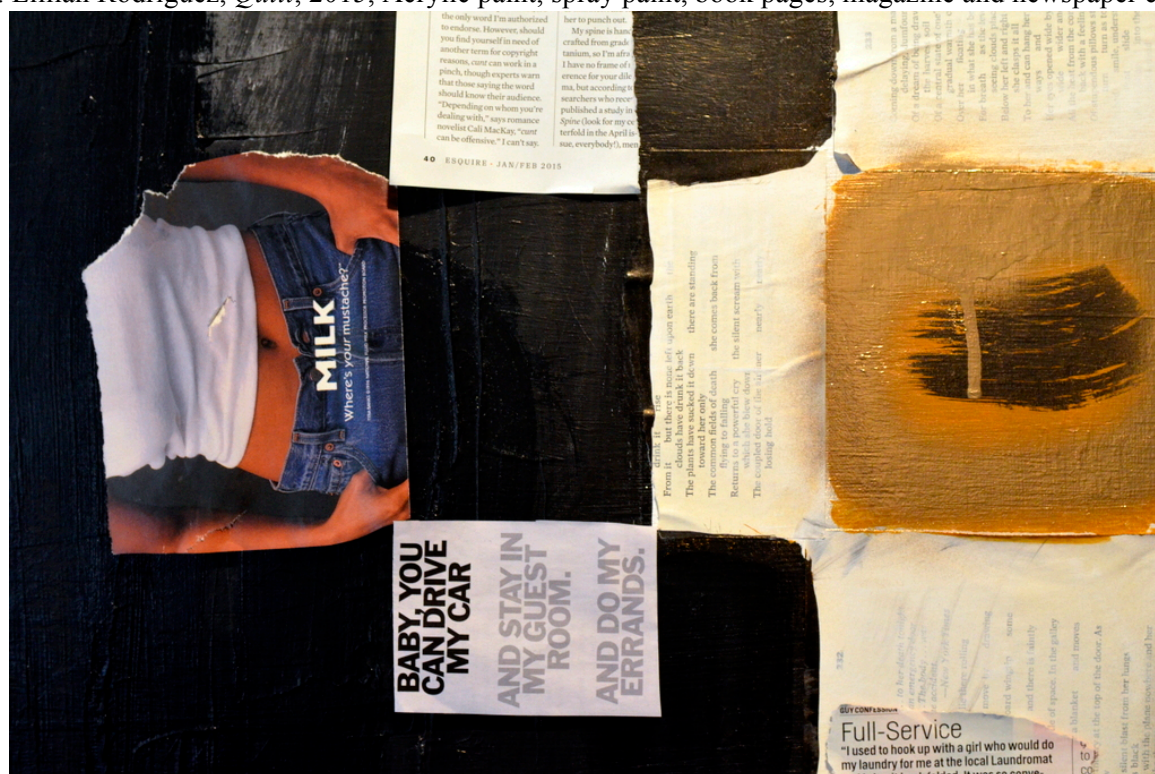




Figure 13. *COSMOPOLITAN* Magazine, February 2012, Hearst Publications.



Figure 14. Lillian Rodriguez, *Quilt*, 2015, Acrylic paint, spray paint, book pages, magazine and newspaper clippings, 36" x 24".



Detail *Quilt*.



Figure 15. Lillian Rodriguez. *Twister*. 2015. Acetate photograph, magazine images and text, 24" x 48". XV

Meeting Log for Women's Arts Therapy Support Group

At the Alfred University Wellness Center,
19 Park Street, Alfred NY, 14802
Monday February 23rd – Monday April 20th, 2015

(My personal notes taken at each of the group meetings.)

MEETING 1 (Monday, February 23rd, 2015, 7:00-8:00pm)

- 7 members, all students of the School of Art and Design, counselor Kim MacCrea and intern present.
- First we established group “norms” so that everyone felt safe and comfortable. The Counselor made sure everyone agreed to total group confidentiality, that nothing said in the group was talked about outside of the meetings. We also established that these meetings are not intended to be critiques of our work, but to explore how we have healed and how we continue to heal through the art making process.
- Everyone in the group introduced herself and shared a piece of their artwork that somehow described them and their creating process.
- During our discussion the following topics were discussed on the therapeutic benefits of making art:
 - Feeling higher self esteem as they started to like their artwork more.
 - How their art making process is meditative, can help control anxiety.
 - Feeling misunderstood and like an outsider but being able to connect with certain people who speak a similar language through art.
 - Being able to make their thoughts tangible, using materials to understand thoughts, process childhood/recent traumas, and deal with body images issues and insecurities.
 - Having the creative process as a “safe place.”
 - Acknowledging issues and “putting” them somewhere.
 - How much personal weight is revealed in the art piece?
 - Making art is a way of externalizing what you are dealing with internally, without actually telling anyone specific. It can be just as satisfying to bring an issue into the physical world, as it is to explain it to someone.
 - Emphasizing with others issues.
 - Trying to define oneself, trying to be perceived in a certain way.
- After deciding that we need to extend our meeting time for future meetings to allow for more in-depth discussion, Kim asked the group to decide on a topic we would like to discuss and said she would provide a related reading through email. The group chose the topic of “relationships.”
- It was also established that group members should feel free to bring any artwork or images of artwork to any group meetings.

MEETING 2 (Monday, March 2nd, 2015, 6:30-8:00pm)

- Group time has extended from 6:30-8:00pm due to group member and counselor request, to allow for more discussion time. Also, student interest has increased so another “women’s art therapy group” has formed that meets at a different time, and is structured in the same way as our group.
- 6 members were present today, and Kim mentioned that we might be adding 2 members to our group.
- We began by discussing the reading that Kim emailed us. Not everyone had read the piece, but those who did had a discussion. The author of the piece talks about her familial dialogue, and how they communicate in a non-traditional way, which she explains through strange punctuation. We talked about communication through symbols, and like the family in the reading, we as artists communicate with symbolic materials, colors, shapes and forms.
- We agreed that for artists, and for humans in general, much of our communication is non-verbal and includes eye contact, body language, silence, and creative expression.
- The group discussed how when you are talking with familiar people, a shared knowledge of unspoken meaning often forms. We felt that this was starting to form within our group, and that it is becoming a very safe and open place to talk and receive good support, empathy and helpful feedback.
- We discussed the possible limitations of therapy and how there are a lot of “in-between words” that stand in the way of the core of an issue, or what is really being said. It’s a general goal to try to acknowledge those in order to be more concise.
- Similar to last week’s meeting, the following topics were discussed on the therapeutic benefits of making art:
 - Admittance of an issue to oneself and to the outside world/audience. Admitting something to yourself is often a difficult, yet crucial step in therapy and healing.
 - The topic of “self-censorship”, and how it is important to let oneself make what they want.
 - Humans form symbolic associations. This allows us to communicate something that may be too difficult/painful/embarrassing/confusing to speak about verbally.
 - Who is your work for? If we are making personal work that comes from a place of struggle or pain, who is the work for? Just ourselves? How do we deal with the audience and their reactions?
 - Group members talked about art making as a necessity for coping with daily life/
 - Within the group, and in our outside experiences, we all agreed that art can form a connection between people. One group member in particular opened up about a very sensitive and personal issue that she has been dealing with most of her life. She was able to explain it through a self-portrait about her life that she had drawn. The other group members were able to relate, discuss and offer helpful and healing words, which she found very comforting. We talked about how this would not have been possible to talk about without the aid of her drawing, and she said she would not have been able to talk in such detail about her issue without using art to explain it.

MEETING 3 (Monday, March 15th, 2015, 6:30-8:00pm)

- The main discussion topic for the meeting was familial relationships. Many of the group members have experienced issues such as divorcing parents, parents with their own psychological struggles, and having trouble coexisting with various family members.
 - o It is hard to talk about one's family in a negative manner, but to realize that most, if not all of us, have experienced some sort of familial difficulty or tension made it a lot easier to open up and be honest about our issues.
- We talked about age (and its irrelevance) and the different set of standards that culture sets for every age group (specific to women). One group member felt that the media had taught her that the age she is now is the "prime of her beauty" and that women's appearances start to decline in early adulthood.
 - o The group discussed these superficial, close-minded standards on what beauty is and how we can redefine it through art, which is partly about deciding what one finds beautiful and exposing it to others.
- As all the group members are college students, we talked about the cultural pressures to be an adult.
- Another issue that we discussed are the cultural pressures to "be" a certain way, with an emphasis on "beauty ideals." As all of us grew up in middle class America and have been exposed to movies, magazines, music videos and advertisements berating us with images of what we should look like to be "beautiful." Most of the members admitted to having succumbed to these pressures throughout their lives and expressed feeling lower self-esteem as a result.
 - o We discussed how it is difficult to ignore those things and just be how we want to be. One member, who draws a lot of self-portraits, explained that a lot of the time she makes drawings of herself to try to discover her own personal beauty, and uncover the layers of influence that society has put on her self-image. It is her way of defining the beauty she sees in herself, and also getting back to the root of how she wants to present herself, instead of how society has taught her too.
 - o Similar to this, a few members discussed the pressures they feel from men (mostly their peers) to look a certain way due to the feeling of always being looked at in a sexual manner. We wondered how we should know how we truly desire to present our selves physically when there are so many influences telling us how we should look. Since these pressures began at such an early age, we talked about how we would have been different without them.

MEETING 4 (Monday, March 23rd, 2015, 6:30-8:00pm)

- 3 new members joined the group, now 10 members total
- We finished discussing the topic of “relationships” from Week 2
 - o Familial relationships were discussed. We talked about bonding through communal art making and creating memories with family members and savoring time together through the act of making art.
 - o The connection of attachment was brought up between photography and personal relationships. Just as an artist shouldn’t get too attached to a photograph that might not develop as they imagined it, one should be aware of the temporality of human relationships, and how people change as they develop.
- We addressed some group format issues, and Kim suggested we “own what we say,” instead of diffusing our issues as general experiences, or assuming others have experienced the similar things. It not only speaks for others but can diminish what you personally are saying.
- We discussed member participation and how some talk much more frequently than others. Talkative members talked about having a lot to say and not wanting awkward silences to make others feel uncomfortable. More quiet members talked about liking to listen more than speaking.
- We also talked about how hearing others issues gives us something else to focus on and puts our own issues in perspective.
- Our main discussion was on body image.
 - o We discussed our relationships with our bodies and how some of us physically feel affected by our emotions. One member showed some paintings she did of what her body feels like under anxiety, and how much it differs from what she actually looks like
 - o Personifying inner issues (“demons”) is an effective way to minimize a problem because removing something esoteric from yourself and bringing it into the physical world not only separates the issue from you but it often appears less threatening than it feels.
 - o One member shared a poem describing how her body feels, and how she feels like some parts of her body are alien to the rest. The group felt it was a powerful method of communication and that we could feel what she was talking about.
 - o We discussed the phenomenon that art making creates of funneling the imagination into a positive area and away from negative functions of worrying or dwelling on something upsetting.
 - o When one member shared her work, she was smiling even though it was difficult for her to talk about. We discussed that smiling can be a defense mechanism, but also showed how powerful and beneficial it was for her to share these issues and have them manifest in a separate, physical way.
 - o We talked about thinking of ourselves as an experience instead of a single, physical form. This allows change, growth, and healing.
 - o One member talked about a self-portrait she made where she had others define her in writing. The group discussed whether identity is in relation to others or completely individual and distinct.

MEETING 5 (Monday, March 30th, 2015, 6:30-8:00pm)

- We discussed group dynamics, including possible issues that may arise between group members. Kim asked us to speak up if we have had a problem with something anyone has said during our group meetings, and to be open about issues in the future. She and the intern gave examples of groups they had been in where there had been confrontation between members. They advised it is better to be open than to hold in feelings.
- Continuing the topic of beauty issues, I shared a piece I had made last semester dealing with the beauty industry and how it influences us subliminally and obviously through advertisements that we need makeup to feel beautiful. This struck up conversations about media's role in beauty standards.
- We discussed media influence on our appearance and idea of self.
- Many of the members feel (that they should feel) afraid to look different. Even if they want to experiment with their appearance they feel that they will be rejected and looked at differently.
- We discussed our relationships with our mothers and how their ideas of beauty and self-image projected onto us.
 - o Not only did we discuss learning beauty rituals from our mothers, but the way that they see themselves, and vocalize it, teaches us how to view ourselves.
 - o If we grow up to have similar bodies physically to our mothers, and we grew up hearing them constantly criticizing their own bodies, then we question whether we should do the same.
- The group briefly discussed how age plays into these topics. One member brought up the subject of dress codes for young girls teaching them that their bodies are objects that boys will look at and be distracted by. I felt that this creates an early sense of shame for our bodies and our sexuality that affects us deeply as grown women.
- Another group member shared a drawing that she made that addressed her struggle to lose weight. She talked about how when she got near the end of making the piece, it seemed to pose the question of whether she actually wanted to lose weight or if she just felt like she should.
- This brought up a discussion of gender spectrum, and eventually led to a conversation of identity in general. Another member shared a piece that she used to describe how she defines herself through others. She has trouble knowing how to define herself on her own, but with others she feels more at ease. She presented a self-portrait that showed her with her brother, further relating to her lack of an independent self.
- Several members spoke about random and unrelated aspects of life being blamed on their gender. (i.e. you shouldn't do X because you're a girl")
- Our final conversation was about acting true to yourself (whatever that entails). A few members agreed that they feel free to be themselves only when someone accepts them as such, and when people want them to be themselves.
- Families can provide unconditional love that allows us to be all forms of ourselves, but sometimes we feel the need to censor ourselves around our families.

MEETING 6 (Monday, April 6th, 2015, 6:30-8:00pm)

- This weeks topic that was decided by the group in our previous meeting was “self harm”.
- Upon a comment about self-love, Kim shared her wisdom saying, “when we are finally okay with ourselves its because we are okay with what we are not (good at).”
- The group discussed how to deal with stale perceptions of ourselves or outdated ideas of what others think of us. We talked about how the idea of self is always evolving and in flux.
- A lot of us feel the pressure or expectation to remain “1 person” for others, when really we feel like a different person everyday and want to exercise that.
- One member expressed how she feels that she is always “acting” and asked “what is a ‘self?’” and if one chooses that “self”. We then discussed what parts of ourselves are changeable and unchangeable.
- One member felt that if she was less aware of the workings of her mind she’d have much less anxiety, while others wished they had more insight into their psyche.
- One member shared a drawing she did upon recalling her period of physical self-harm. She expressed that when she thought back to the time when she was self-harming, it brought back negative feelings that she had for so long forgotten about. It was interesting for her to bring these back to light through her artwork, but also made her feel positively about how much she had overcome in those years.
- One member said that she used art as a away to quiet her mind and quell her anxiety, while someone else felt that it brought her anxiety to center stage but let her become more familiar with it and understand it better.
- One member shared a poem she had written during a time when she was self-harming and it was incredibly powerful for her and the rest of the group to hear how she expressed her pain and the release she found through self-harm. She expressed how horrible and uncomfortable it was to actually talk about, so visual art and poetry were a powerful alternative for her.
 - o Another member commented that she was turning her negative energy (self-harm) into a positive outlet (art).

MEETING 7 (Monday, April 13th, 2015, 6:30-8:00pm)

- This week was a bit more open ended than usual, as we had to start out by discussing logistics of our show. We decided to have work displayed in the Health & Wellness Center, and also in a mobile gallery, “Gallery Plywood”, started by a group member.
- After planning the shows, one member shared a video self-portrait that she had made:
 - o In the video, she portrayed herself with the multiple identities she feels she embodies.
 - o She felt it was a powerful way to get to be all the people she isn’t “allowed to be” or comfortable being in her daily life/in public. We discussed how art provides a safe place/allows the artist to be whomever they want without the usual criticism because of the lens of “art.”
 - o The group was supportive of this member feeling like she had multiple identities, as most of us felt that we do too, and that art is a helpful way to explore them.
 - o The artist of the video felt that she was able to comment on the “boxes” that women are forced to fit into by embodying some of those molds, and rebelling against it at the same time using a satirical tone. The dichotomy of virgin or slut that many of us feel we have to fit into is something that she explores in her work and tries to break the mold by creating a spectrum that is not so extreme.
- The group talked about bravery in making art, and how it is empowering to define oneself through their art to resist imposed definitions. We discussed art as a place to explore our true identity and to make art for ourselves and not to please others, which we all experience as difficult to do.
- One the topic of collaboration and appropriation, we talk about how the collective creativity of the world is so powerful, it is important to tap into it and feel a part of a larger community that is always there even if we feel lonely.
- We talked about how all art is essentially a self-portrait and it is difficult to make work that isn’t somehow self-referential or stemming from experience.
- The group also discussed how art can be used to create an outcome or experience we want to have. One member presented a book that she had made. It had a somber tone but she expressed the importance of the more positive ending. We talked about subtext and how people write says a lot about them. In creating art that mimics how we want the world or a situation to be, we can almost live a more positive life through art, even if the “real world” may not be the same.
- One member shared that when she feels undefined, non-concrete in her identity, she makes self-portraits. Almost as a way to solidify her reality, she uses them to search herself and try to find something solid that she can define herself with.

MEETING 8 (Monday, April 20th, 2015, 6:30-8:00pm)

- This was our last meeting so we brought our artwork to display for the show in the Counseling/Wellness Center, and planned to meet this Wednesday to gather our work for the mobile gallery, “Gallery Plywood”, for the show that will happen the following Wednesday.
- We began by discussing our varying opinions on whether art and life are separate. The group was evenly split on either sides of the argument. There was also the debate about whether “art is life” or “life is art”. This sparked many members to consider where they draw their personal line between their life and their art.
- Following that discussion, Kim suggested we go around and each give feedback and provide any sort of reactions to the group. Here are some of the responses:
 - It was helpful to see parallels in each of our lives, we all have relatable issues in some form or another, and to be able to open up and even cry in front of strangers is a powerful and rare opportunity. There should be more spaces like this.
 - The group was a refreshing part of the week, and the support found here compared to in friend groups is different. There is more respect and listening in the group than in the “real world.”
 - The weekly meetings provided perspective and realization that strangers have issues too, and that we all need to open up and receive feedback on them at some point.
 - Coming to the weekly group therapy meeting was like running to the ice cream store. It is comforting and fun. It is healthy to talk about our issues and brings things to light that we may have had trouble facing in the past.
 - It is nice to have a completely safe place to talk.
 - One member referenced a specific day when the group talked about her painting. She said it was pivotal in both her life and her artwork, and began a new chapter in her life. She was thankful for the opportunity the group provided for this experience.
 - It became such a safe place to talk, to cry, and to feel relief, and to never feel embarrassed to say anything. Another member spoke about the changes the experience in the group caused to her artwork. She now feels that “art” is more multifaceted than the product – that it encompasses all parts of life, internal and external, of the artist.
 - The group makes every Monday a good day.
 - It is a safe place to be sad, vulnerable, funny, etc. It is so powerful to get a group of women together for such a positive cause. “It will be a life-changing event in my memory.”
 - The group meetings bring light and understanding to emotions that have gone misunderstood or hidden for so long.
- We then concluded our discussion wondering how we are able to make art during times of struggle? How do we keep up with the task of creative expression when there is so much else to attend to emotionally, mentally, etc. within ourselves? We agreed that there usually is no question of creating or not creating, it is part of the healing process.