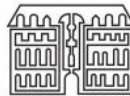


Amending the Abject

tales of a forgotten, fragmented & feminine self

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements of the final year BaFA degree at University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town South Africa.

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INDEX

SECTION ONE The Child as Adult / Too Soon

Too Soon	08
Hiding, Holding Waiting	10
Sweet Nothings	12
Untitled (Best Laid Plans)	13
Split	14
The Sting, and the Salve	20

SECTION TWO The Adult, not Quite / Expectations

A Self Watching Self as Watched by Others	23
Untitled (Hypervigilant)	24
Untitled (Finding One's Feet)	25
Untitled (Decisions, Decisions)	26
Companion Piece (of Meat)	28
Aequitas	30
There's a Reason Why They Call it a Fallacy	31
Substrate	33

SECTION THREE Finding Oneself

The Reverie Series	34
--------------------	----

SECTION FOUR Afterglow

Untitled (Self Held, Safe)	40
Tasteful Nudes II (Ready for my Close Up)	41
Rest	42
Untitled (Span)	43

SECTION FIVE Post

Referencing	46
-------------	----

06

22

36

41

46

Introduction

Gender inequality is the oldest form of socially accepted discrimination. Even after the many iterations of feminism, basic human rights are still denied to women across the globe for tenuous reasons. The patriarchy however, is ultimately a system that fails us all.

The work was partly inspired by a famous quotation in Virginia Woolf's 1928 book *A Room of One's Own*, in which she states, 'throughout most of history, Anonymous was a woman.' In this phrase, Woolf questions the ways in which women's authorship has been judged as inferior to that of men - and because of this, has systematically - for centuries - been made invisible. By considering this phrase, I was able to I meditate upon the immeasurable contributions that women have made to culture and society, and the losses sustained by the erasure or even complete exclusion of many of these gifts from our collective history.

The works I have made this year attempt to grapple with this matter. Alongside it however, looms large my own complicated ideologies and experiences around being female, and the immensely difficult relationship I had with my mother whilst growing up. Gender based violence is undoubtedly understood

as men toward women, however women are not entirely exempt from being the violent ones - towards their children, partners and even themselves. This comes as no surprise though, when one considers the overwhelming level of violence acted upon them and the entrenched expectation to be submissive - *to just put up with it*.

Violence inevitably begets violence.

Weaving through all of this is the underlying concept of *the abject* - that which is considered repulsive enough by an individual or a group, that it is deemed entirely 'other' and discarded. I chose to work with this as a metaphor for both the unresolved and traumatic memories of my childhood, as well as the persistent expectation thrust upon women to appear and act a specific way in order to be considered feminine, nice, accepted, attractive.

By doing so, I am able to create a holding space for these fragile, and half formed parts of my self - *a re-membling of self* in order to recover and recreate a more authentic and whole representation of my female self.

SECTION ONE

The child as adult / Too Soon

"People often make the mistake of treating children like tiny adults, but they're not. They are growing and developing their bodies and personalities, and are constantly changing. Adults simply grow old,"

Associate Professor Heloise Buys
Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital



Untitled (Too Soon)

Sugar, leg stockings, latex, bandages.
85 x 65 x 12 cm



Hiding, Holding, Waiting

Paper, acrylic
18 x 15 x 51 cm





"Recovering from trauma is hard no matter when it happens. However, if adversity happens during childhood, it can be especially hard to overcome. Unlike adults, children have very little control over their environment. If a child is living in an abusive or neglectful home, their ability to remove themselves from that environment is extremely limited, whereas an adult will usually have more emotional and financial resources with which to escape.

Meanwhile, children are still learning what healthy relationships look like, as well as how to cope with difficult situations. If a child is growing up in a household where abusive behavior is the norm, this can skew their understanding of what is and is not acceptable within a relationship. Even when the trauma is unavoidable, such as a death in the family or a major illness of a family member, children are still developing their coping skills, which makes it that much harder for them to process what has happened.

So how can adults who experienced adversity in childhood process and deal with that trauma now that they're grown?"

Rachel Fairbank, 2021

Sweet Nothings

Sugar, leg stockings, panel pins

28 x 22 x 8 cm





Untitled (Best Laid Plans)

Concrete, porcelain, stone,
plaster
Size variable



Split

Stockings, child's shoes, sugar,
latex, bandages
Size variable

Process, Forms & Materials

With previous projects, I had worked with many wide ranging topics - all exterior to my own life, none involving my own personal history. This wasn't a deliberate decision and I hadn't really noticed this until I began to consider what I wanted to work on this year. I felt drawn to examining my own life story, however once I began, the process quickly unravelled many complicated and difficult childhood memories - incidents I had long forgotten about, or because they had not made sense to me at the time, I had chosen to forget them.

I noticed how most of the physical materials I was attracted to this year were uncomfortable in and of themselves and created a level of aversion in others. Choosing what medium to employ, depended entirely on the particular emotion, memory, or incident that surfaced at the time and varied quite substantially between the different artworks. Working in this manner allowed me to expand my thinking around what could be utilized. Some of the materials I incorporated included:

DEAD BEES / BEESWAX / SPENT BULLET
CARTRIDGES / BATH PLUG HAIR / MY OWN
BLOOD / LATEX / COTTON THREAD / COTTON
FABRIC / MAGGOTS / ANIMAL BONES &
ORGANS / PAPER MACHÉ / CONCRETE /
STEEL RODS & REBAR / DISCARDED
FURNITURE - PARTICULAR HEAVILY USED
TABLE TOPS & WORK SURFACES / TOY
DOLL PARTS / DISCARDED MIRRORS /
CHILDREN'S TOYS / SUGAR / SWEETS /
PANEL PINS / SHOES - PARTICULARLY HIGH
HEELS / PLASTER / BANDAGES / MY OWN
HEAD AND BODY HAIR.

Once I felt pulled towards a specific material, I would spend a fair amount of time researching its historic and general use and historic meaning. It was an intense process of staying open and receptive - engaging, then discarding until I felt sure of what was needed, and even then I would allow more room for the materials to offer up new ways of working. I utilized techniques that would co-opt the material's original meaning into the work, helping to create a powerful narrative that is raw and confrontational. The objects are alive - 'speaking' louder than if I had spent hours corralling them into a form as is sometimes the case with traditional art mediums.

The work heavily references the Dada movement of the early 20th century - a period that readily incorporated the concept of the abject and used it to explore the taboo elements of the body and bodily functions. Dada came about during a difficult

period in European history - during World War I, which led to the art of the time reflecting the immense conflict and uncertainty that people were experiencing. The human form in its entirety was rarely depicted in Dada work - when it was, it was often mutilated or made to look manufactured or mechanical. I co-opted this approach by using many disjointed materials in order to speak to the disorganized nature of what I could recall from my childhood. This led to a bizarre expressiveness in how the different works are read next to one another - at times highly emotive, while in others, a disturbing sense of irreverence - offering little comfort to the viewer.



ABOVE
A naturally formed, wild
beehive

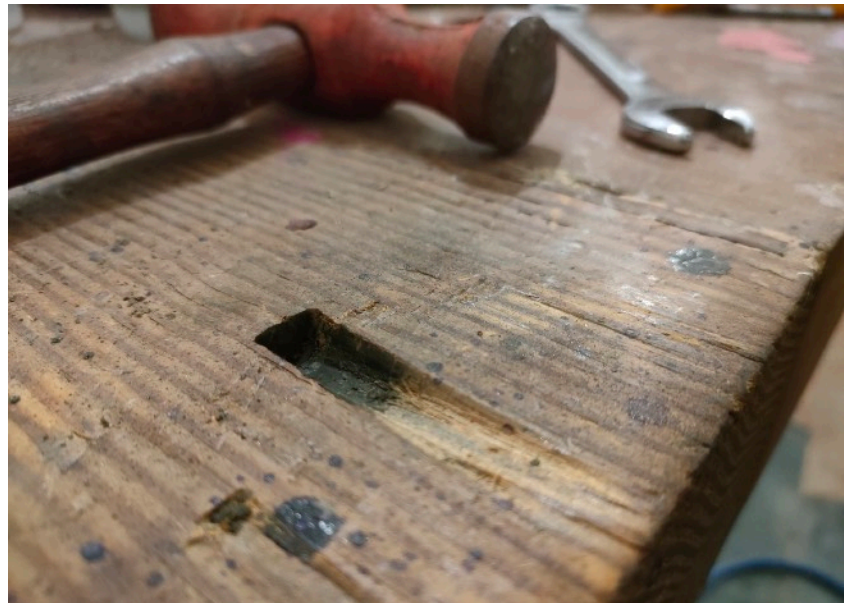


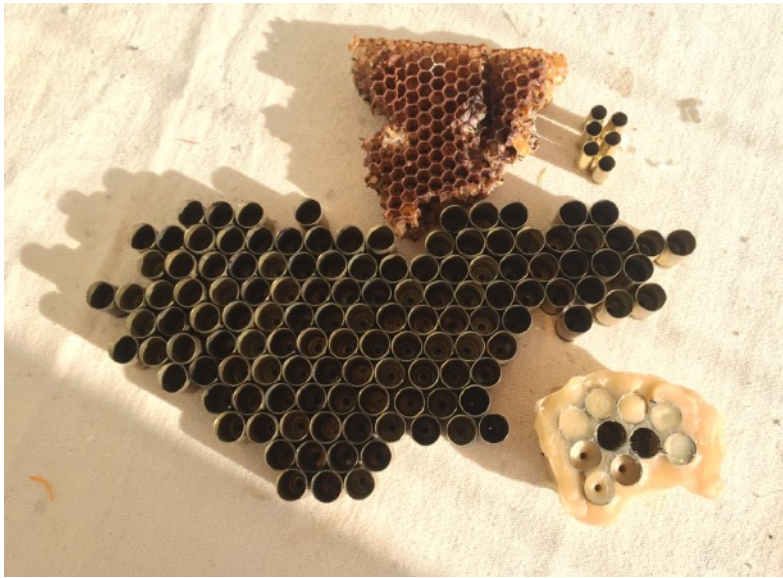
RIGHT
A close up of honeycomb



Deborah, or Debbie
- from the Hebrew
name *Devorah*
meaning "**the bee.**"

In the Old
Testament Book of
Judges, Deborah is
a heroine and
prophetess who
leads the Israelites
to their freedom.





The Sting (and the Salve)

Bullet Cartridges, Beeswax
17 x 12 x 3 cm

[In Process]

My mother was not okay.

She tried her best however to hide it, but like all things repressed for too long, what forms their construct cannot bear the load indefinitely. Stress fractures set in, and when left unattended for too long, a landslide ensues with the fallout burying all who were closest.

She was lively, but highly erratic. Her boundless pointed energy could suddenly change at a moment's notice - friendly and engaging the one moment - then distant, apathetic, and even highly aggressive the next; her own unresolved and internalized traumatic childhood rearing up - continuously impinging upon our ability to bond. Over a period of many years, her behaviour became more and more inexplicable and later on, highly self-destructive, intensified by endless weeks of heavy drinking - if there ever was a cry for help, this was it.

The female role model from whom I was meant to learn from - to understand how to be a woman in the world, was either physically absent or emotionally too overwhelming - leaving me to be raised predominantly by my father. I grew up too quickly, and subsequently lost a substantial part of myself. I did not realize it at the time but missing the positive influence of a female figure in my formative years meant modeling my behaviour on a fraught combination of media depictions and on my father. Because of this I tended towards male friends, often feeling too nervous and guarded to engage with other women.

I was never able to form any real, sensitive and loving attachment to her. I often wish I could have known her as an adult, to gain clarity and understanding as to why she was so careless with herself and with those who tried to care for her. I was never able to however - she died violently in the early hours of a Tuesday morning when I was just 17, shot in our driveway after an attempted house break-in.

SECTION TWO

The Adult, Not Quite / Expectations

To be born a woman is to be born, within the allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men... But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.

Men *act* and women *appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. The surveyor of a woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. 1946



*Self-Portrait of a Self
watching Self (as Watched by
Others)*

Colour print
42 x 59cm



Untitled (Hypervigilant)

Jelly Tots, panel pins
2 x 24 x 3.5 cm



Untitled (Finding One's Feet)

Latex, bandages, cast stone, sugar, concrete
Size variable

[In Process]

Untitled (Decisions, Decisions)

Assorted women's shoes

Size variable



The Abject & Art

Theorized by the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), the abject signifies a power relationship in which the abject is recognized as 'other' and is cast out in order to preserve the ordered state of the established system or being state (Wen, 2021:10). The classic example given of this is the sudden, deeply visceral sensation of shock that one feels internally upon seeing a corpse. The abject in this experience touches on the fragility of our physical boundaries, both spatially and temporally.

To be clear, it is not a lack of cleanliness that results in the feeling state of abjection, but rather what disturbs one's sense of identity and order - the in-between. Since the abject is situated outside the realms of the mind's understanding, being forced to reckon with it is an inherently disarming experience - much the same when experiencing something that is highly unfamiliar, or uncomfortable to engage with, and feeling a deep aversion to it.

In the arts, the abject has been employed frequently as a means to explore the taboo elements of the body and bodily functions. While there is no surprise that painters have historically worked with actual blood, and other body fluids to colour their work, it was not until the western art movement of Dada in the 1920's that the fascination with transgression and taboo led to abject art existing as an independent concept (Trachtman, 2006). Dada came about during a highly distressing time in European history, which was reflected in the art of that time.

Dada artists rarely depicted the human form in its entirety in their work - when they did, it was often mutilated or made to look manufactured or mechanical. This continued into the Surrealist movement, and then again much later on in the 20th century with pop art critiquing consumerism and then much later with a strong feminist context - often to describe the feminine identity in society - a poignant and crucial assertion, as it brings us face to face with the neglected feminine half of our shared history (Wen, 2021:15).



Companion Piece (of Meat)

Lamb's ribs, surgical clamps, wire
74 x 19 x 3 cm

Symbolising Eve - the Christian fable of the supposed first woman to bear all of humankind. Fashioned from one of Adam's ribs, she was expected to be subservient, his loyal companion. This of course occurred after the story of Lilith - the rightful first woman of Creation who had left Adam and the Garden of Eden, on the grounds that she would not bend to his every whim, only continuing to be his partner if he recognized her as his equal.

Lamb's ribs are used in this work, referring to the phrase - *to take a lamb to slaughter*, or to lead an innocent and naïve individual into a particularly damning situation without alerting them to the circumstances beforehand.

It also plays on the phrase - *to throw someone a bone*, meaning to bestow only a small favor to a situation that requires much more attention and care - like when one throws a bone to a howling dog, the idea is simply to quieten the dog, not to give it a healthy, substantial and nourishing meal. By using this phrase, I speak to the still half-hearted way that women's liberation and equality is treated by most men - with women still expected to be subordinate to their needs.

What if one of the most famous works of art, *Fountain* (1917), was not in fact a work by Marcel Duchamp, but instead by an entirely different artist - a woman?

Duchamp did submit the urinal to the 1917 Society of Independents exhibition in New York City under the name R. Mutt, that's for sure. But, according to historian Amelia Jones in her book *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*, he may have done so as a curator, not an artist, suggesting that the name 'R. Mutt' doesn't correspond to Duchamp himself, but to the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a German poet, artist, and artist's model.

Actually, Duchamp suggested it himself. In a letter to his sister Suzanne in 1917, Duchamp wrote that "one of my women friends, using a masculine pseudonym, Richard Mutt, submitted a porcelain urinal [to the Society of Independents show] as a sculpture."

Loney Abrahams, Artnet. 2019

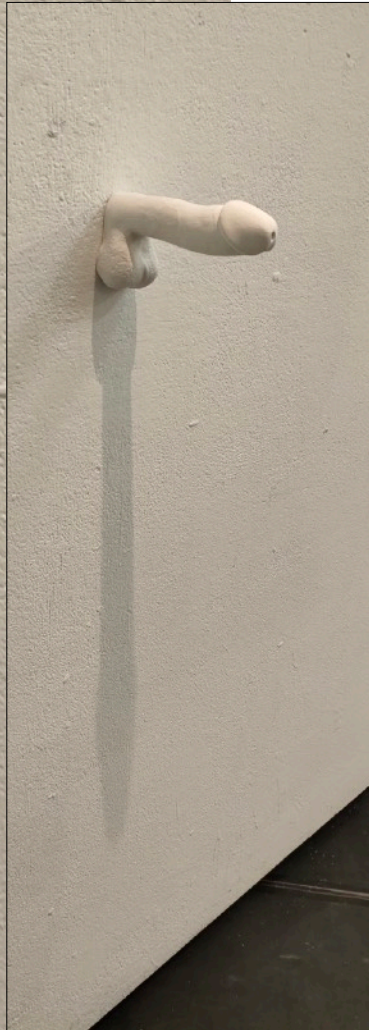
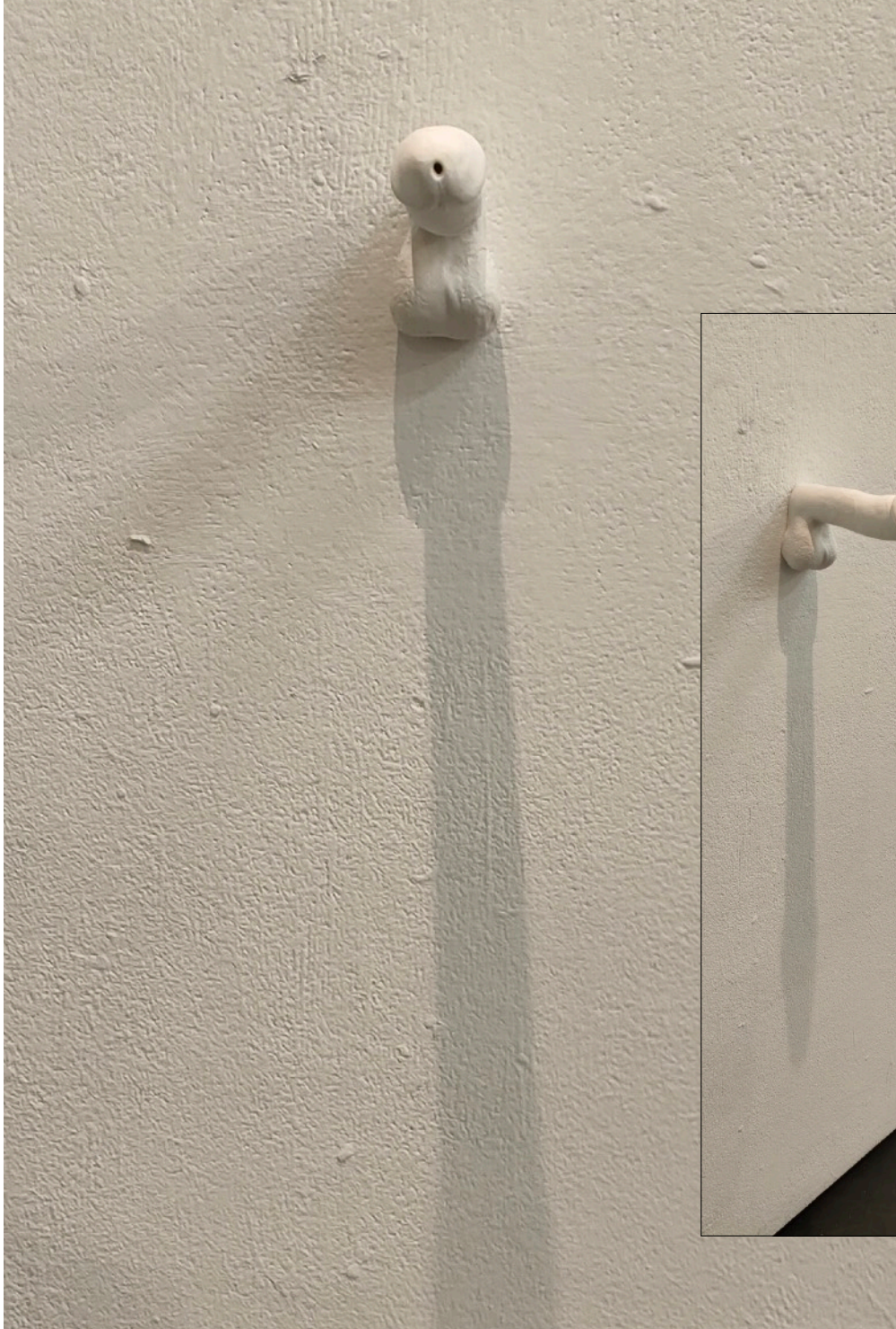
Baroness Elsa von Freytag-
Loringhoven





Aequitas

Mixed Media
165 x 100 x 45 cm



"...besides, it isn't the penis, but the phallus whose symbolic usage is possible because it can be seen, because it is erected. There can be no possible symbolic use for what is not seen, for what is hidden...Strictly speaking, there is no symbolization of the woman's sexual organ as such...The feminine sexual organ has the character of absence, a void, a hole..." - Jacques Laçan

(Willette, 2013)

*There's a Reason Why They
Call it a Fallacy*

Porcelain
app. 8 x 5 x 17cm

The Abject & Maternal

Kristeva worked extensively with the theories of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (Wen, 2021:10), who developed the theory of 'the Real' - a primordial, semiotic, presupposition of human development - before words, before symbols and objects take on meaning in the world. For Kristeva, it is the maternal state that a child in utero and a newborn infant experiences - where the mother holds, rocks, nurses, and hums gentle sounds to soothe him. The infant is bathed in a world of pure, abstract, sensory stimulus. Nothing is easily defined, bodies feel as one, nourishment is received through the body of another. At this pre-capacity for words and developed thinking, all actions and responses meld into one another (Covino, 2004:18)

Following this, through the development of language, and the capacity to understand and engage with the Symbolic order - the paternal actual world, a sense of separateness becomes apparent. This is a sudden acknowledgement of boundaries - the differentiation between objects and their respective values. The child begins to realize the self is separate to mother, the breast - her body, and the difference between something being contained and not. This is incredibly important and necessary for a child to develop the adequate symbolic vocabulary— words and their related

meaning, containers of their own— in order to engage effectively with this vast external world (Covino 2004:19).

Yet the constructive power inherent in human language suffers because at some point language becomes disconnected from the affective feeling that once made up a part of its character (Covino, 2004:25). Much of the symbolic language in which we engage has the effect of establishing and maintaining us in a relationship with the 'not-Mother', who is now othered (Covino, 2004:20).

The abject as Kristeva states, therefore references that which threatens, and yet concurrently reminds us of the state prior to the paternal order - the maternal fluidness - the substrate - before the individual is considered a clean, orderly, idealized and symbolic subject in the world (Covino, 2004:21). **It is abject precisely because it cannot be contained** - the leaking, soft, curvaceous and uncontained feminine body - of breast milk, discharge, menstrual blood, as well as the fragmented, uncontained mind and related emotions - these all break the boundedness of the ordered subject, and in so doing we intellectually and physiologically break with the mental bounds of the ordered Symbolic and *paternal* world.

Substrate

Colour print

135 x 180 x 4 cm



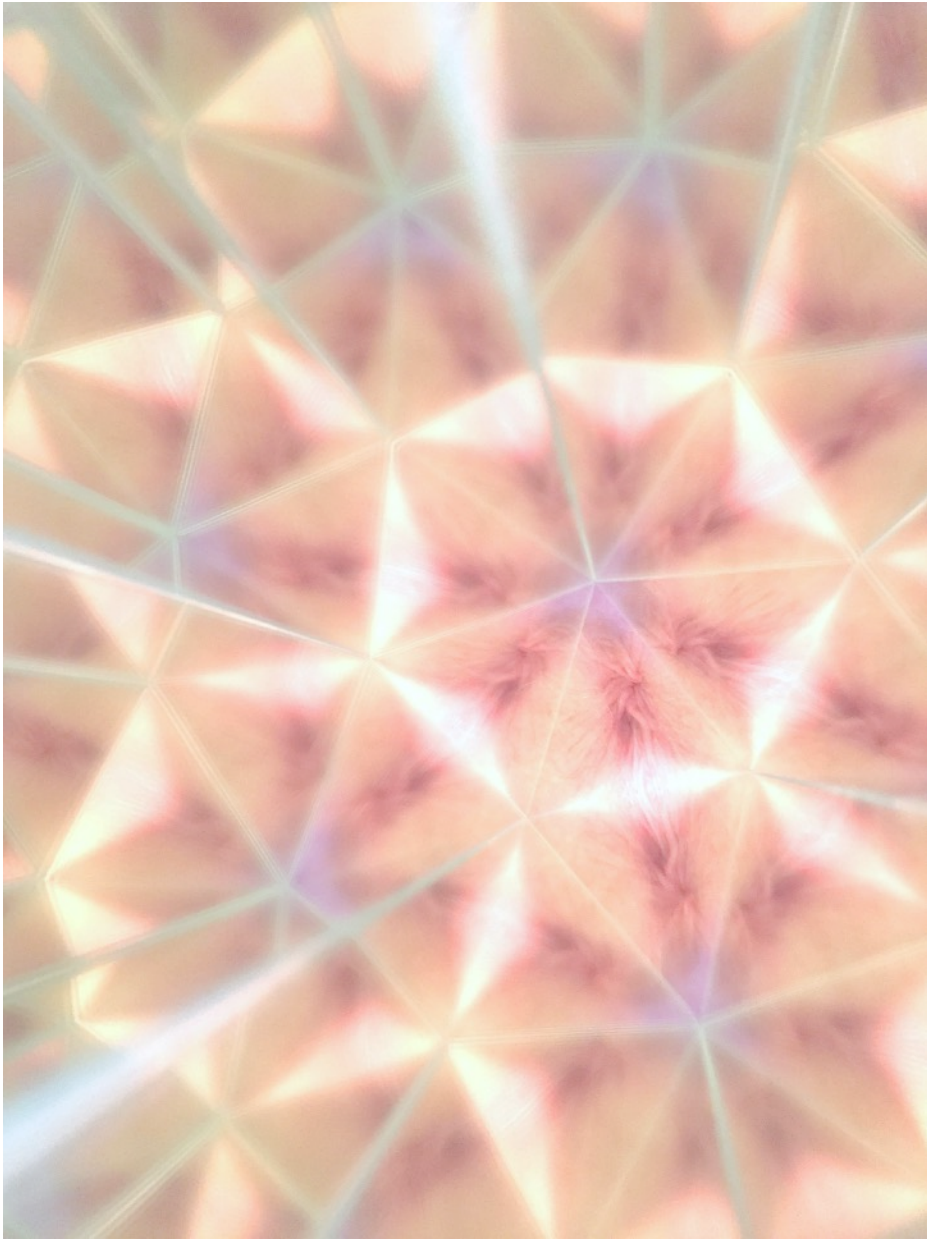
"Others made me a slave but I must squeeze the slave
out of myself, drop by drop."

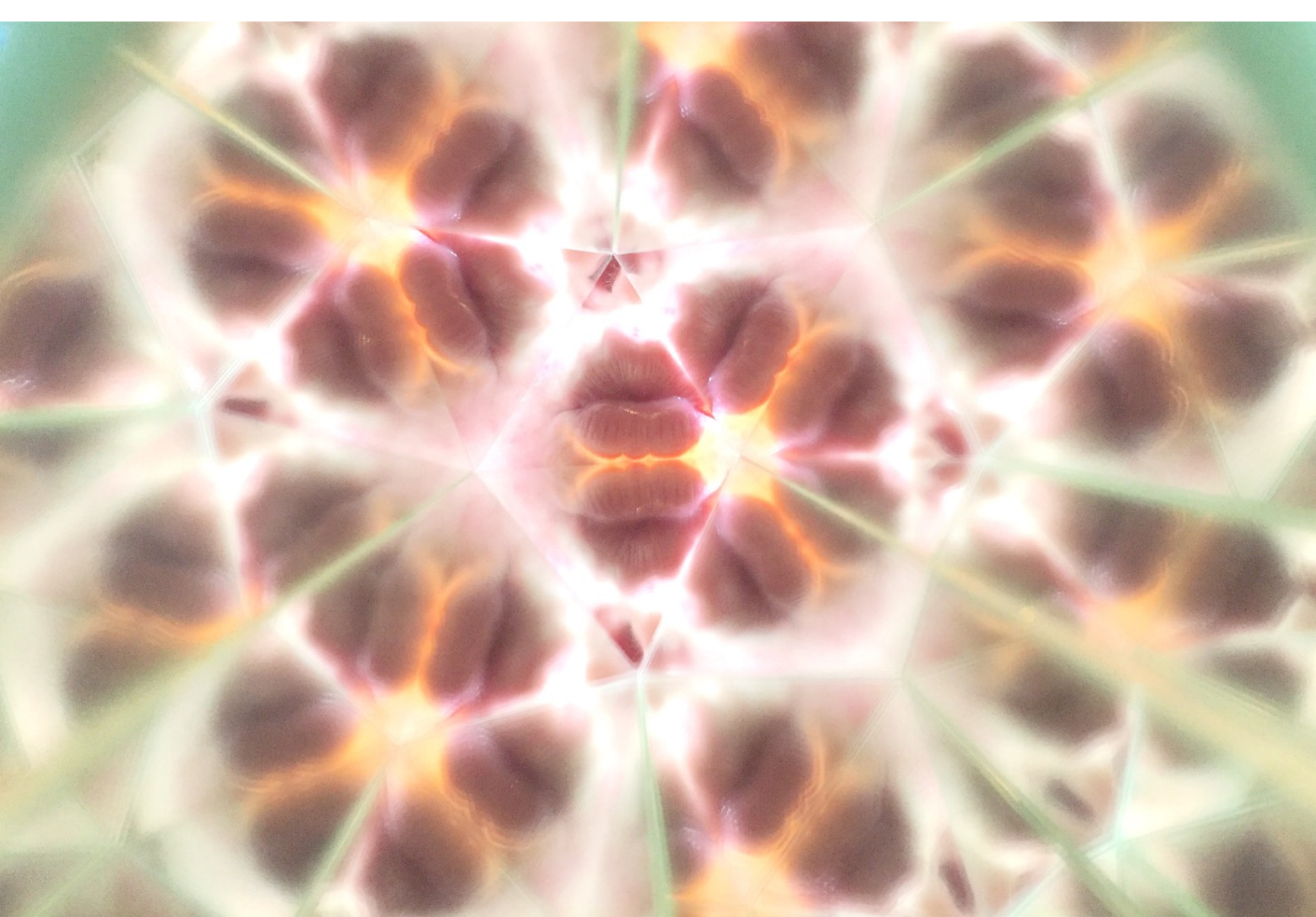
- Anton Chekhov

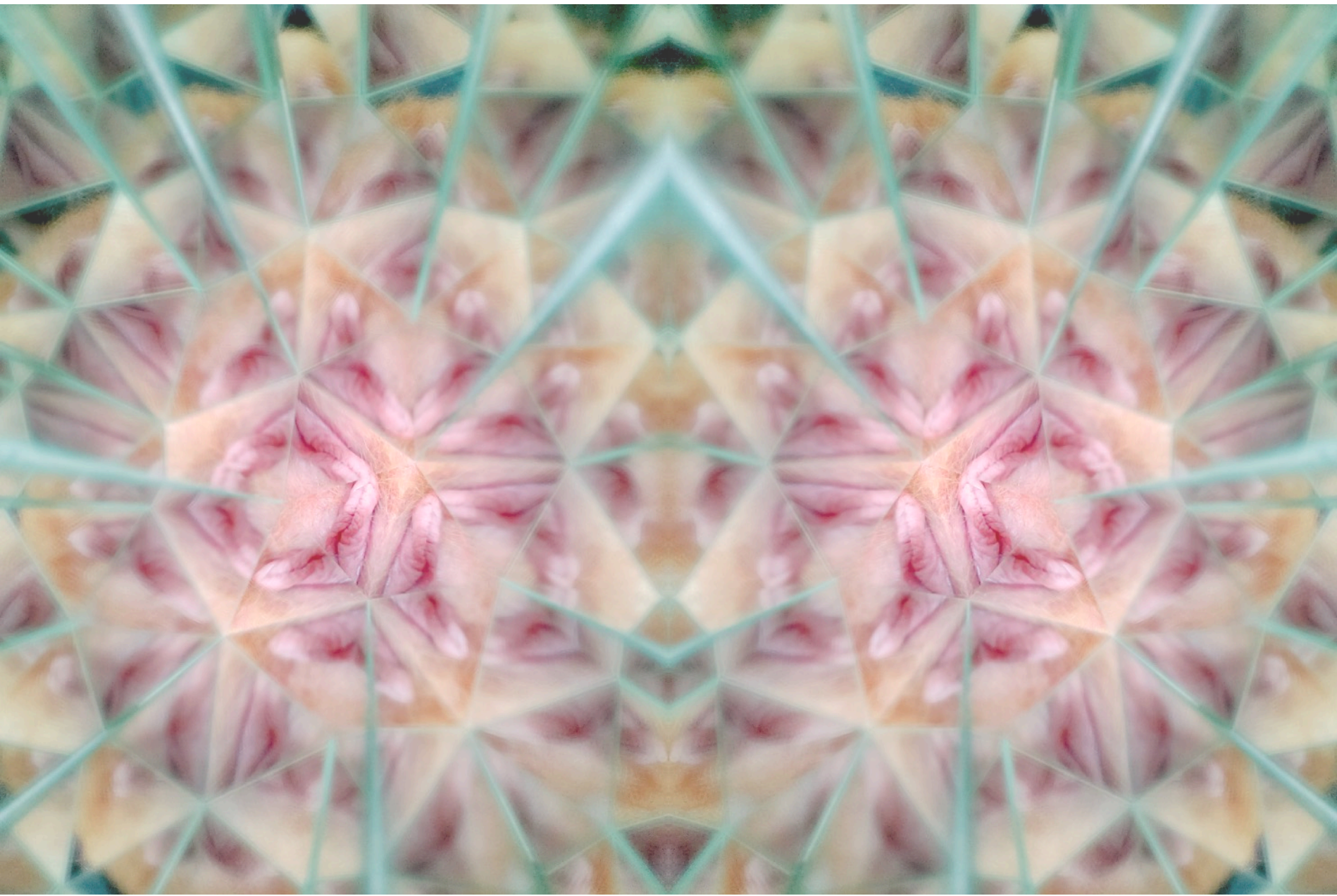
SECTION THREE

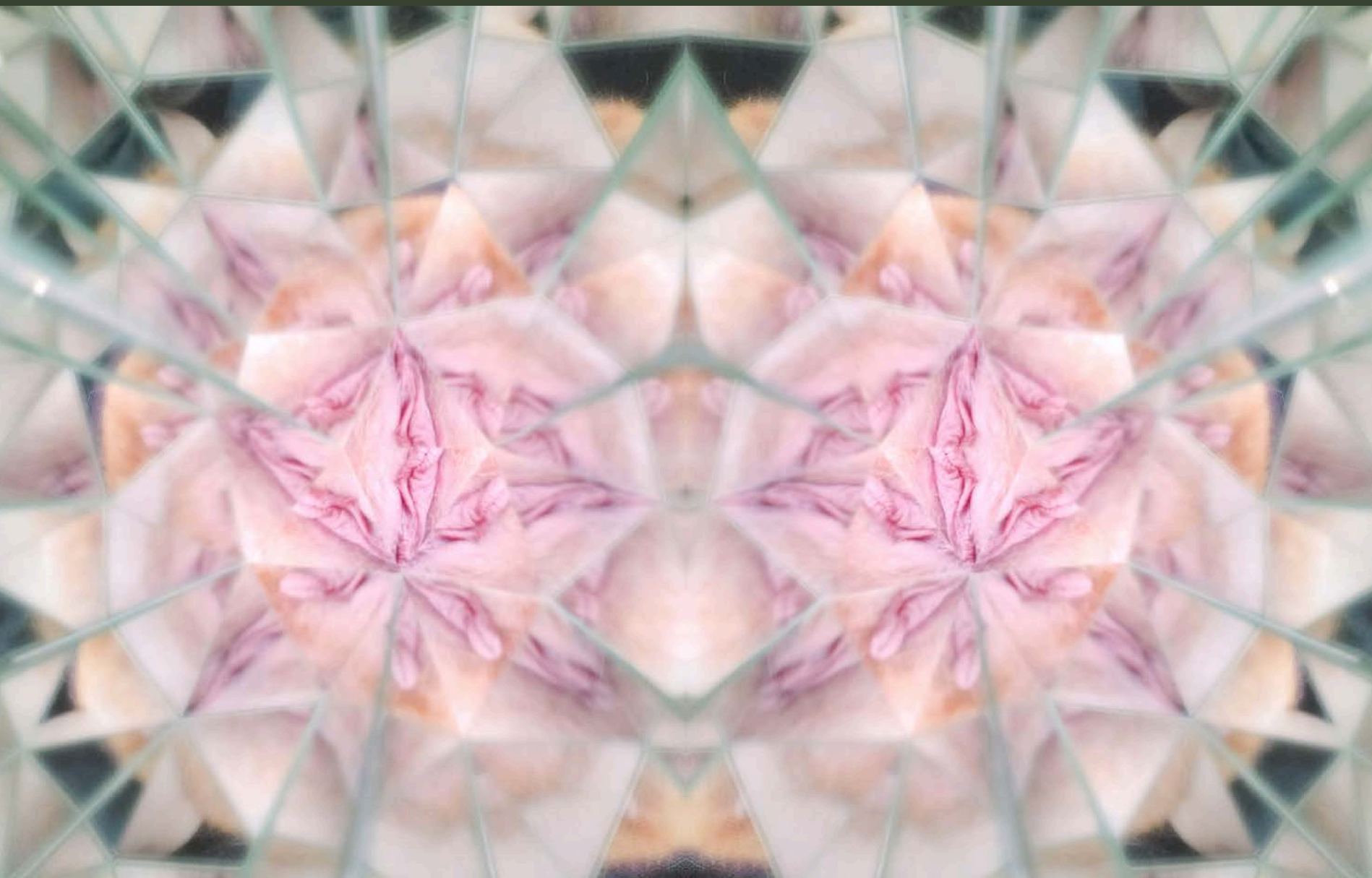
Finding Oneself

The Reverie Series









SECTION THREE

Afterglow

Suddenly, literature, politics, and analysis came together, and I began to think more inclusively about the emotional imprisonment of mind and spirit to which all human beings are heir. In the course of analytic time, it became apparent that—with or without the burden of social justice—the effort required to attain any semblance of inner freedom was extraordinary.

Great literature, I then realized, is a record not of the achievement, but of the effort.

- Viviane Gornick, *The Men In My Life*

Untitled (Self Held, Safe)

[In Process]

Cast Stone





Tasteful Nude I (Ready for My Close Up)

Ornate antique wood frame, hair, latex
25 x 12 x 3 cm

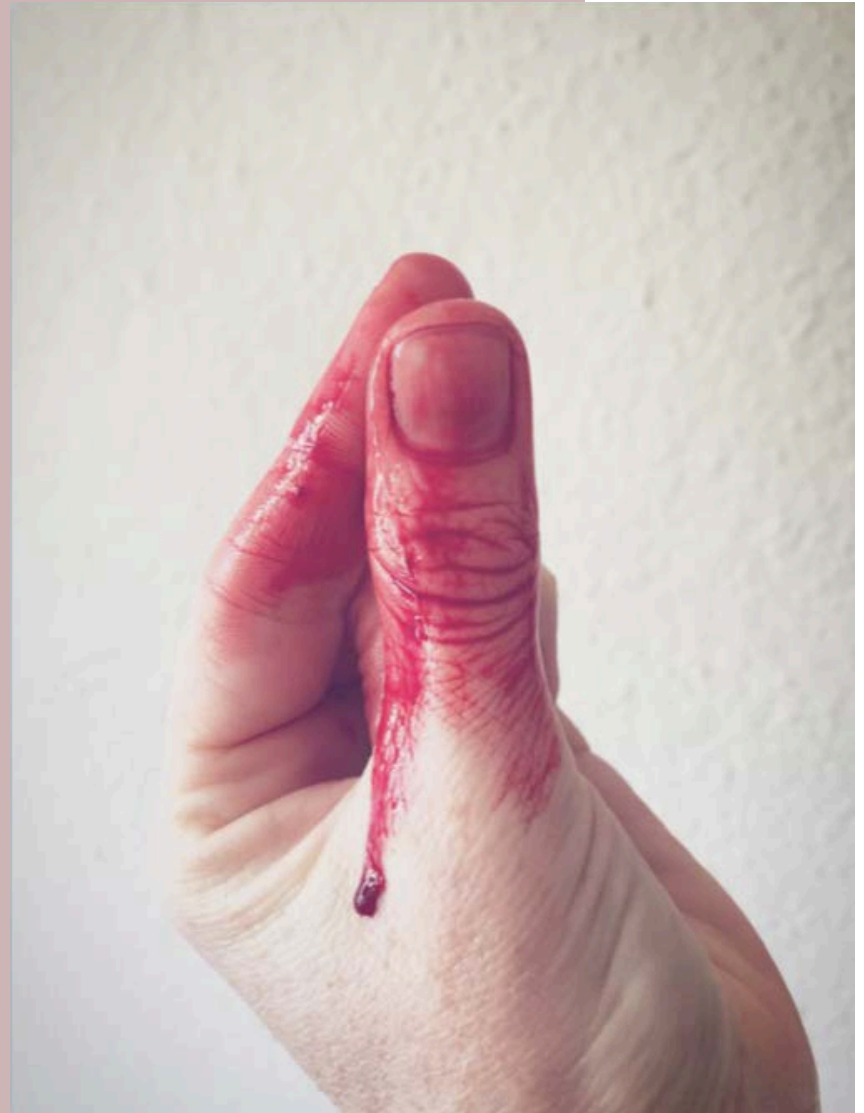
Rest

Photographic Print
16 x 7 x 4 cm

Menstruation is a highly visceral and often overwhelmingly painful experience. Very few physical experiences can take a person so completely out of their mind and directly into their body as this.

In *Rest*, a delicate gesturing of fingers clasped together, pointed up, shows a flow of bright red, fresh blood running down my hand. The gesture used to remove a menstrual cup or tampon, is curiously the same as the *Sign of the Cross* in Christian iconography, ordinarily used to indicate a state of holiness and reverence to the 3 higher (paternal) beings - the father, son and holy ghost. It also evokes the story of 'doubting Thomas' - the apostle who did not believe Christ was dead until he had seen his body with his own eyes, and reached into his wound feeling the blood on his fingers.. In this context however, it serves as a blessing, a sign of good health and a reminder of the extraordinary ability that my body holds to bear life.

Along with this I consider other holy iconography - the blood of Christ and the supposed virginal state of Mary, which acts as a subtle stab at the thousands of religious patriarchal texts that consider a woman 'unclean' during this time of the month, to be removed from society - abjected - until she is considered clean again. A single drop of blood runs down, a teardrop on a cheek, expressing the tender and vulnerable state I find myself in, my body reminding me to slow down - to rest.





Untitled (Span)

Cast Stone
23 x 20 x 8 cm

[In Process]





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IMAGES

P17 A large natural beehive. Photo courtesy of Ida Hansen, from the Elephants Rhino People (ERP) NGO.

P17 A close up of honeycomb. Courtesy of Wikipedia/Merdal

P29 Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, via [artsy.net](https://www.artsy.net)

All other images are the author's own.

