



Rebecca Blue Moolman

2021



*Common foxglove. *Digitalis purpurea**

At the beginning of my fourth year, feeling uninspired by the paintings I had been working on, I began stitching a small tapestry of the common foxglove, a flower native to the Lowveld where I grew up. When I first started it, I had no reason to be ‘painting’ this flower other than it being a sentimental favourite of mine. It was only upon critique that my supervisor mentioned to me that the foxglove was in fact an extremely poisonous plant, containing a cardiac glycoside, called digitalis. As is the case with many poisonous plants, the digitalis chemical found in the common foxglove also offers an invaluable medicinal purpose in patients who have experienced heart failure as well as in cases of fluid build-up in the body. However, going even just a milligram over the recommended dosage can have fatal results.

Thus, started my fascination with deadly flowers. I became intrigued by the delicacy of the poisons found in flowers and how consuming the smallest piece could have devastating consequences. This led to hours of research which often surprised me as I learnt that many common flowers that I was familiar with were in fact poisonous. I loved this uncovering of information on plants I knew just as being beautiful or sentimental but actually had this hidden power I had never experienced or known of.







Morning Glory. Ipomoea tricolor

In the arts flowers have long been used as symbols representative of the female form, as potent associators of sexuality, fertility and beauty. I believe poisonous flowers to be a powerful subversion of these outdated romantic signifiers as their beauty is undeniable, however, beneath the surface lies a formidable ability to inflict harm.

My original smaller single flower portraits serve as icons of the power of these seemingly unassuming plants. I attempt to memorialise the flowers I have chosen to work with as a means of speaking to feminine rebellion. I have attempted to challenge the symbol of the flower which has historically been associated with feminine mystique and sensuality to one that relishes in the sinister, in the poison that will be inflicted onto anyone that comes too close or takes too much.

I began each of these smaller portraits by stretching small pieces of an old bed sheet onto an embroidery wheel, I would then roughly draw the outline of my chosen flower, taking reference from botanical illustrations. Once this was completed, I would go through my slowly-accumulating pile of donated underwear, matching colours as much as I could without manipulating the fabric. I would inevitably have to do light acrylic washes over a surplus of beiges and whites to get the desired (and rarely worn) yellows and greens for leafy sections and stems. By abstracting the integrity of the underwear through cutting them into smaller sections, I chose to keep intact those parts of the underwear and bras that were quick visual communicators of their materiality. Such as the clasps, little holes, stretched elastic and, of course, that all too familiar sight of an over-bleached period-stained gusset.



Wolfsbane. Aconitum napellus



Iris germanica

I decided to stuff the small individual portraits, giving them dimensionality communicated through softness, which is then subverted by the element of caution or danger from the deliberately placed pins. The pins act both as functional and because of their allusion to the making process as well as their immediate visual link to sewing and needlework. I began attaching batting, most commonly used as innards in winter jackets, onto the backs of these portraits, stitching the sheet around it so that all that is visible on the front is the picture outlined by its frame. Although the cushions seem spongy, and nice to play with, the presence of the pins quickly make the viewer retract their hands.





French Marigold. Tagetes patula

The language of flowers and their possible 'meanings' have been pondered upon for centuries across the continents. In Britain during the Victorian era, coded meanings were given to flowers so as to not sound improper expressing curiosity in a potential love interest because of the extremely rigid social views around etiquette at the time. Based entirely on the flowers and their arrangement a suitor could be as subtle as to say they were 'thinking of you' with the yellow pansy or a more forthright 'my heart aches for you' symbolised by the red carnation. This created a language that required no words, which has informed much of what we associate flowers with today.

The materiality of underwear, particularly those no longer being used by their owners, became a rich resource to me as they so privately hold the evidence of the bodies that have used them. Once it is no longer serving its purpose, our underwear is one of the only items of our clothing we are unlikely to want to repurpose such as donating or upcycling them. I found out pretty quickly that most of my friends had a few old panties lying around in their underwear drawers at home that were no longer being used due to being either too small, stretched beyond repair, ripped or stained. I began collecting underwear from anyone that was willing to donate to my project. I have been surprised at the willingness/eagerness of the women in my life to trust me with their most intimate pieces of clothing.



Deadly Nightshade. Atropa belladonna







Merium cleander



*Naked Lady Lily. *Amaryllis belladonna**





French Hydrangea. Hydrangea macrophylla

In psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror* (1980), abjection is defined as being the crossing of a boundary which separates the subject or object from its surroundings. It is this transgression that often leads to visceral reactions of repulsion. Kristeva speaks of how when the limits of our bodies is put into question, when those parts of us that exist within us (excrement, blood etc) are expelled, we are made aware of the delicate nature of our bodies and this consequently makes us fearful or repulsed by its contents (1980:53). An example of this can be seen in the social handling of our menstrual cycles.

We are taught from a young age that menstruation is something to be dealt with in extreme privacy, which often manifests itself in a deep shame associated with our periods. By incorporating these abject bodily traces within my work (the stains found in underwear) I give them new purpose in their function as an ornate tapestry. The utilisation of these materials and their stains reference the person who made use of them, thus creating an element of abjection that readjusts our relationship to the materials which are now working together to create an image independent of their original function as an undergarment.



The poet's daffodil. Narcissus poeticus



Moraea polystachya



Jimsonweed, Datura stramonium

In my large embroidery tapestry, which I started in the second semester, I took inspiration from 17th century Dutch still life paintings, particularly those involving elaborate floral arrangements. I set out to construct my own version of the Dutch classic using only poisonous flowers, occurring all over the world, to create a deadly collection of florae in a single bouquet. I began this piece by making a rough water colour still life plan that had the roundabout measurements of each plant, which I then projected onto an old flat bed sheet and drew the outlines of. After this, began the slow and deliberate process of carefully (and painfully) pinning the panty and bra pieces onto the sheet and then eventually sewing them down by hand. In the large tapestry, the presence of carefully machine-embroidered words can be seen dangling from and caressing the flowers, making the viewer aware of their danger in the form of text that describes their possible inflicted symptoms. The presence of the words associated with the symptoms of some of these flowers such as *diarrhea*, *convulsions* and *vomiting* add to the subversive nature of the tapestry because of our visceral associations to these words. I then used inks to stain the back using a sponge and then the front splashing with a brush.



Cotton kingsize bed sheet,
ink, underwear, pins and
thread














A new development in my practice has been the production of jewellery pieces that incorporate the same poisonous flowers from existing work which have become decorative but dangerous adornments for the body. By wearing the discarded materials from our undergarments which are usually hidden by our clothing, the abject becomes fashionable. A new acceptance for our bodies and its traces are expressed when we make use of our most private item of clothing as a means of adorning the body. However, they do not serve the body as purely decorative, but as a secret weapon which can be used at the wearers own discretion.





Because of the practice of needlework being intrinsically linked to women's work, with a sense of community between women at its core, I was able to receive some much needed assistance from my godmother, Maré. She spent just over a week in studio with me helping me in practical ways such as stitching areas onto the sheet that I had only pinned down. As well as offering me invaluable support and advice my whole life, with this project being no exception.





I intend for my work to speak to notions of resistance being referenced through care. By making use of items of clothing that are associated with privacy and the unmentionable, I intend to communicate the unforgiving truth of these otherwise attractive flowers as being powerful enactors of consequence. I have made use of multiple visual indicators within my work, including the juxtaposition of the familiarity of these flowers paired with their poisonous content being subtly made evident to the viewer through the private knowledge we associate with the materials. This language, in turn, becomes perhaps more intimately understood by women who make use of similar undergarments on a daily basis. Those of us that have a relationship with underwear that mimic those in my work, of the panty-specific elasticised lace edging, the stretch cottons, the hooks and clasps, and the decorative bows and frills will be able to quickly recognise the subtle cues that allow us to understand their materiality. In using the materials that I have, a contrast of the deadly and the decorative have been explored. I intend for notions surrounding a dangerous femininity to be suggested within my final body of work, one that is vengeful in her reclamation of her own narrative to be one that is determined only by herself.

References:
Kristeva, J., 1980. *Powers of Horror*.
New York City: Columbia University
Press.

A really special thanks to Virginia
MacKenny, Gretchen van Der Byl, Maré
van Noordwyk, Cara van Niekerk and
my parents Jurie and Pippa

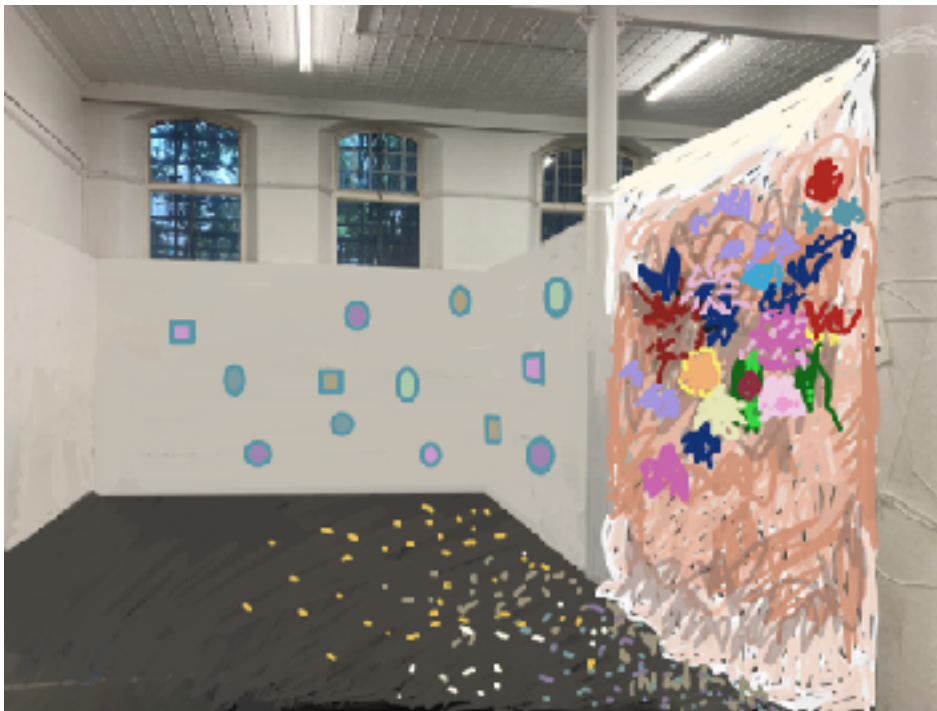
Notes for PDF submission

Each of the smaller individual flower portraits range between 25cm - 35cm in length

Additional work completed after catalog print:



Asian bleeding-heart flower, *Lamprocapnos
spectabilis*



Basic layout of exam space, with three plinths with jewellery on top on the lefthand side of the room.

Example of jewellery display, placed on satin cushions on top of a plinth



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Artist statement 2021

I began embroidering portraits of poisonous flowers using old underwear, initially starting with my own but eventually acquiring many more through donations made by women in my life. I intend for my work to speak to notions of resistance being referenced through care. By making use of items of clothing that are associated with privacy and the unmentionable, I intend to communicate the truth of these otherwise attractive flowers as being powerful enactors of consequence.

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