The background of the image is a textured, abstract composition. It features a dense network of fine, dark lines that resemble veins or blood vessels. Overlaid on this are several larger, irregular shapes in shades of red, white, and light pink. Some of these larger shapes have a mottled, marbled appearance, while others are more solid and rounded. The overall effect is organic and somewhat somber.

# To Become a Woman

Ashleigh Cooper

# Dedications

Gina, Carina, Cat, Pavi, Rachel, Nicky, Grace and Mars – thank you all for making art school bearable, for showing me what love looks and feels like.

Fabian, Fritha, and Madelize, for being patient with me and for always supporting me.

Joanne and Rowan, for constantly letting me know that you're proud. You're the best siblings I could ask for.

Dad, despite our disagreements, I thank you for challenging me, for making me who I am, and for continuing to live despite all the misfortunes that befell our family.

Mom, I wish you were here to see your youngest become a woman and all the achievements I've received in your honour. There is not a day that goes by where I don't think of you.

Everyone I have ever touched, loved, or shared an intimate moment with — without you, I wouldn't have become who I am today.

# contents

## **Artist Statement**

8 - 9

## **Shame and the Making of the Abject**

11 - 13

## **The Body as Medium of Shame**

14 - 43

## **From Theory to Flesh: Shame in Practice**

44 - 28

## **References**

51

## To Become a Woman

Growing up, intimacy and comfort were rarely offered to me. I pushed them away whenever I felt vulnerable and sought them instead in fleeting sexual encounters with men. These experiences, simultaneously intimate and damaging, became the foundation for my practice, which investigates the entanglement of shame, desire, and the body.

‘To Become a Woman’ is an attempt to grasp the reality of sexual shame and the process of becoming through it. The work explores the home as a site where intimacy first forms and where one’s sense of self is constructed. At birth, the baby latches onto the breast of its mother until it becomes conscious and aware of its own individuality. It is in this moment of awareness, when the self recognises its sexuality, that shame begins to take root. To become a woman is to become sexualised, and thus to become ashamed of that sexuality. My work interrogates this moment: the emergence of sexual shame, the self-directed harm it produces, and the tension between intimacy and estrangement.

My practice draws from theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sara Ahmed, and Julia Kristeva, whose writings on shame, affect, and abjection underpin my thinking. Sedgwick’s notion of shame as both exposure and concealment resonates throughout my work; shame drives the desire to hide, yet in hiding, it exposes itself. Ahmed’s concept of affect as “sticky” shapes how I approach materials like hair, blood, and breath; substances that cling, stain, and circulate between bodies. Kristeva’s writing on abjection informs my understanding of disgust and the porous boundaries between self and other, clean and unclean, sacred and profane.

Across these ideas, the figure of the witch appears as a symbolic thread. Historically, witches were ordinary women, healers, midwives, or those living beyond patriarchal expectation, whose bodily knowledge and agency were demonised. Their persecution marked an early attempt to regulate female sexuality and autonomy, transforming women’s bodies into sites of moral panic. By invoking the witch,

I connect my own work to this lineage of women whose intimacy with their bodies and knowledge was reframed as dangerous.

Each work transforms shame from an invisible emotion into a material form. In my practice, shame is not hidden; it is embodied, performed, and made tangible. The body becomes both subject and medium, leaking, consuming, and exposing itself. Hair becomes a wearable skin, blood becomes paint, breath becomes fog. These gestures are not about purification or confession but about holding space for contradiction: the beauty and horror of exposure, the intimacy of disgust, and the tenderness of self-harm.

Ultimately, my work investigates the thresholds between self-love and unlove, agency and vulnerability, intimacy and shame. By materialising and performing these experiences, I aim to reclaim agency over narratives of femininity and desire, turning what was once a wound into a method of seeing and feeling. To Become a Woman becomes not just an act of representation, but a reclamation; a space where shame is not

hidden, but allowed to exist, to breathe, and to transform.



*Rubbed Raw*  
Detail

## Shame and the Making of the Abject

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* (2003) provides the central framework for my practice, particularly her conceptualisation of shame as a relational and performative affect entangled with desire. Sedgwick presents shame not simply as a negative experience but as a complex opening, an affective site where relationality, power, and desire intersect (2003: 93 – 123). Her insights resonate strongly with my work, which explores intimacy, sexual shame, and the body as both a site of concealment and exposure. Shame, for Sedgwick, is inseparable from the social and relational contexts in which it emerges, it is felt in relation to others; it circulates through gestures, glances, and expectations (2003: 38 – 39). This relational framing allows me to approach my materials and processes not merely as symbolic, but as embedded within affective dynamics between the self, the body, and the gaze of others.

Sedgwick's understanding of shame aligns with Sara Ahmed's conceptualisation of affect as "sticky" (2004: 89 – 92). Ahmed describes shame as a surface affect; it adheres to bodies, objects, and spaces, controlling how individuals move and relate socially

(2004: 103). Shame is performative because it depends on a returned gaze, it requires a witness, an "ideal" other whose judgment structures self-perception and behaviour (Ahmed, 2004: 105). Both Sedgwick and Ahmed emphasise the ambivalence of shame, it simultaneously repels and attracts, exposing what the subject wishes to conceal while creating openings for desire, care, and relational possibilities (Ahmed, 2004: 105; Sedgwick, 2003: 93–123).

To extend these theoretical understandings of shame, I invoke the figure of the witch. The witch functions as a critical lens for understanding how women's bodies and desires have historically been marked by shame. Witches were often ordinary women, healers, midwives, or those living outside patriarchal norms, whose bodily and sexual knowledge was deemed deviant or dangerous (Federici, 2004: 85–91, 163–172). Their persecution represents an early form of regulating female sexuality, turning bodily autonomy into a site of moral panic and control. This historical process mirrors the ways in which girls' awareness of their own sexuality becomes entangled

with shame and self-surveillance. By invoking the witch, this project highlights a lineage of women whose bodily knowledge and agency have been demonised, showing that the shame surrounding female sexuality is not innate but socially and historically constructed.

Building on this historical and theoretical understanding, my practice operationalises shame through material and embodied strategies, which I outline through three key ideas.

First, shame as exposure as opposed to concealment. Shame drives the impulse to hide and withdraw, yet these acts of concealment paradoxically reveal what is being hidden (Ahmed, 2004: 113). Through coverings, consumable structures, and layered surfaces, my practice negotiates the tensions between hiding and showing, concealment and exposure.

Second, shame as bodily and intimate. Shame is lived through the body, blushing, recoiling, turning away, leaking, and emerges both from self-evaluation and from the gaze of others

(Ahmed, 2004: 112–113). My work turns private affect into shared, sensory experiences, making vulnerability tangible and exposing the body's entanglement with relational shame.

Third, shame in relation to gender, sexuality, and social norms. Women's sexual shame is historically structured by Eurocentric, Christian humanist ideals that prescribe passivity, relationality, and objectification, while men are afforded agency, power, and self-determination (Ahmed, 2004; Broucek, 1991; Brown, 2006; Kaufman, 1992). Sedgwick (2003: 36) highlights how shame is entwined with desire, and my work interrogates this within the context of the heterosexual male gaze and the family unit.

Together, Sedgwick and Ahmed provide a lens through which to understand how shame circulates relationally, materialises in the body, and interacts with desire and social norms. This framework allows me to think critically about my materials and gestures, situating my work within both embodied and socio-cultural contexts, while also recognising shame's

generative potential as a site for creativity, affective engagement, and relational exploration.

## The Body as Medium of Shame

Building from Sedgwick's and Ahmed's theories of shame as relational, performative, and bodily, this section translates those affective dynamics into material form through my practice. It provides a brief history of my experience at Michaelis alongside descriptions of my artwork. A recurring theme in my work is shame, or rather, the concealment and hiding of aspects of the self. Across these processes, central themes emerge; personal experience, care, memory, and the traces left behind.

I approach the home as the first site of intimacy. The baby's first encounter of intimacy is that of being born, of coming out from its mother and into her arms, where it will eventually latch onto her breast, and feed. The baby is attached to the mother until consciousness develops, until it becomes sexualised. I am interested in when shame enters that process, when the child becomes a 'woman,' and when she becomes aware of her sexuality and, in turn, becomes shameful of said sexuality. This essay investigates women's sexual shame and the ways in which women enact self-punishment to control it.

Sharon Lamb, in *The Secret Lives of Girls* (2001), discusses how young girls are socialised into shame around their sexuality. In a culture that idealises childhood innocence, girls are taught sex is 'dirty' or wrong, and they are not permitted to acknowledge or express sexual feelings (Lamb, 2001: 17, 57 – 58). This denial produces sexual shame at an early age. Stupart (2008: 37) similarly argues that adolescent self-mutilation is fostered by the pressures of becoming a woman. This transition is fraught; to "become a woman" is to become sexualised, even as girls are repeatedly told that engaging with their sexuality is dangerous or immoral. Faced with this contradiction, girls may turn to self-punishment through acts of harm (Stupart, 2008: 37). When women look in the mirror, they reproduce the male gaze imposed on their bodies, denied the possibility of selfhood outside patriarchal definitions of femininity (Irigaray, 1985). In this sense, the search to "become woman," a search bound up with sexuality, can transform sex itself into a form of self-mutilation. The girl simultaneously casts herself as an object of sexual

desire and bears the shame that inevitably accompanies her sexual behaviour.

I experienced disgust at my body from an early age, seeing the scale at eleven, noticing hair growth, and feeling compelled to conform to societal standards.

My body became a site of conflict and punishment.

As a teenager, I slept with men I often could not remember, using these encounters to harm myself and to reinforce feelings of unworthiness; if they did not love me, I concluded, I must not love myself.

My work investigates these complex feelings of disgust, self-directed harm, and the paradoxical attempt to achieve intimacy and self-love through acts of unlove.

In *Skin Reserved for Him* I build a dollhouse from latex, cardboard, and men's hair collected from a barber shop. The house, modelled on my family home, becomes a body, its skin a pink, fleshy latex, its insides filled with hair. It recalls my youth, where I shaved myself bare before sexual encounters, ashamed of my own body hair, hiding the "secret" within my skin to appear clean, whole, and worthy of love.



***Skin Reserved for Him***  
Detail  
2025  
Cardboard, Fabric, Human Hair and glue



***Skin Reserved for Him***  
Detail



***Skin Reserved for Him***  
Detail



***Skin Reserved for Him***  
Detail



***Skin Reserved for Him***  
Detail

*Mothering* continues this dialogue by consuming the same family house, this time built in gingerbread. I consume the house to ingest the shame it holds, destroying intimacy, self-hatred, and memory within its walls. The act recalls Hansel and Gretel and the cannibalistic witch, who is killed by the children she tries to consume. Here, I become both witch and victim, swallowing my own body, bloated and pregnant with shame. To eat the house is to kill the witch inside me, the internalised enemy. In destroying the home, I dismantle the patriarchal structures it represents. Creed's description of the witch as an abject enemy of the symbolic order resonates here, I embody that abjection, consuming myself in an act of revolt (1993: 76).



*Mothering*  
Video Still  
2025

Gingerbread, milk, jellytots, icing, vomit





***Mothering***  
Video Still



***Mothering***  
Video Still

*Rubbed Raw* stages sex, violence, and shame. Wearing a penis-shaped ice mould filled with animal blood and paint, I grind against white bedsheets, staining them as the ice melts. The penis, hard and erect, becomes leaky, soft, and staining. It embodies my sexual encounters with men, where intimacy left me marked, dirty, and ashamed. The bedsheets, intimate objects that cradle me, bear witness to violence. They absorb blood, shame, and memory, becoming both canvas and wound. By enacting the staining, I reclaim agency, I become both penetrator and penetrated, collapsing the roles of oppressor and oppressed . I am particularly interested in using pig's blood as the animal blood of choice, as Creed (1993: 80) further links pigs and women in myth, noting that the female genitals were once referred to as "pig". The animals' blood becomes menstrual blood, women's blood, the abject excess that patriarchy deems unclean (Creed, 1993: 80).

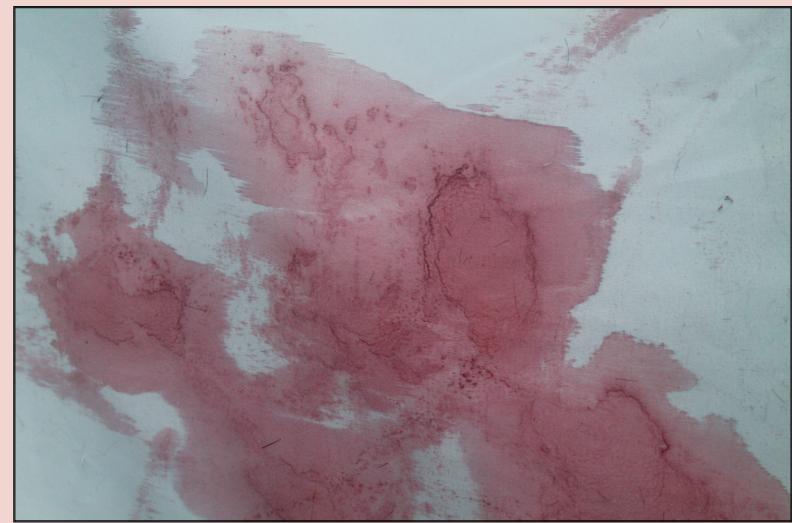


*Rubbed Raw*  
Details





**Rubbed Raw**  
2025  
Pigs blood, acrylic paint, linen

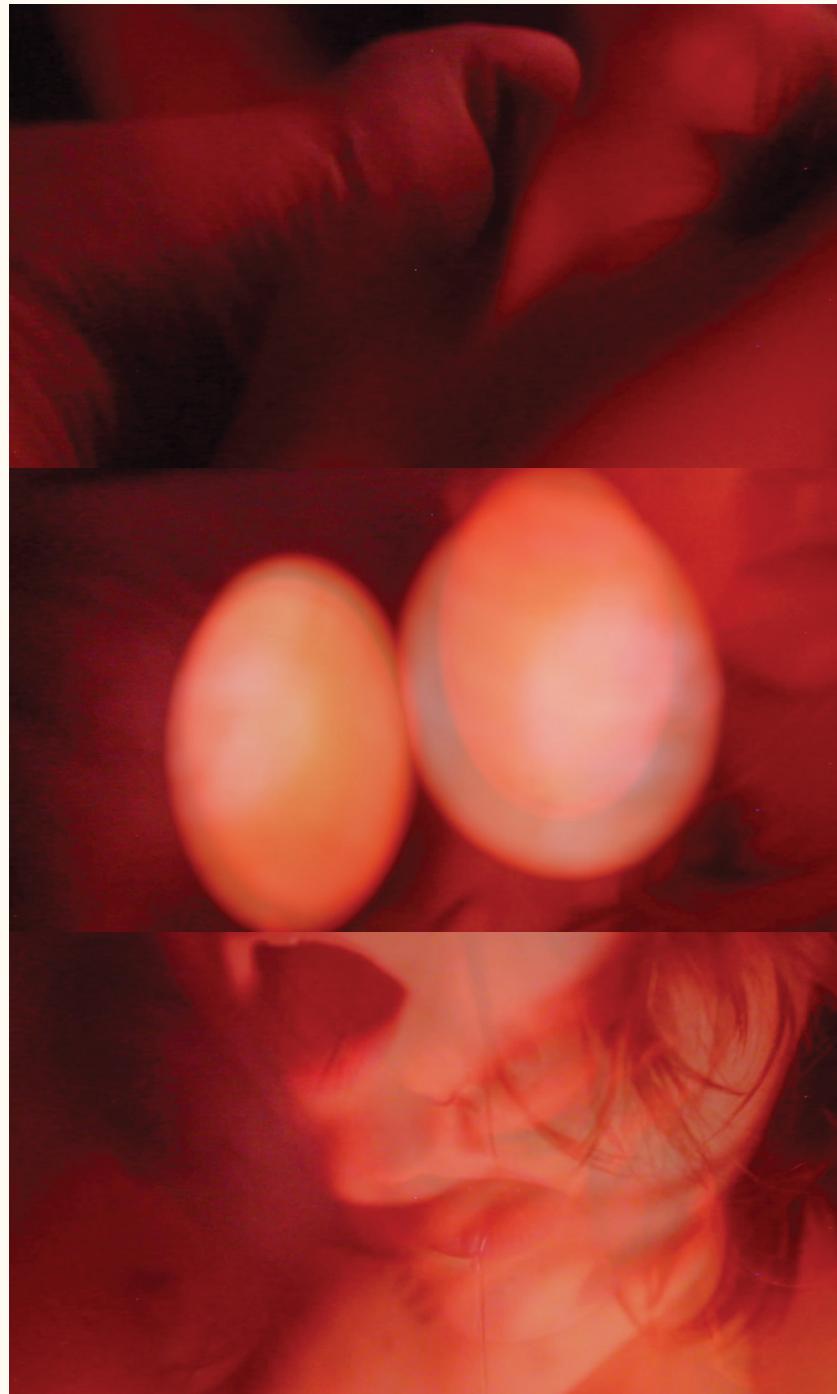


**Rubbed Raw**  
Details

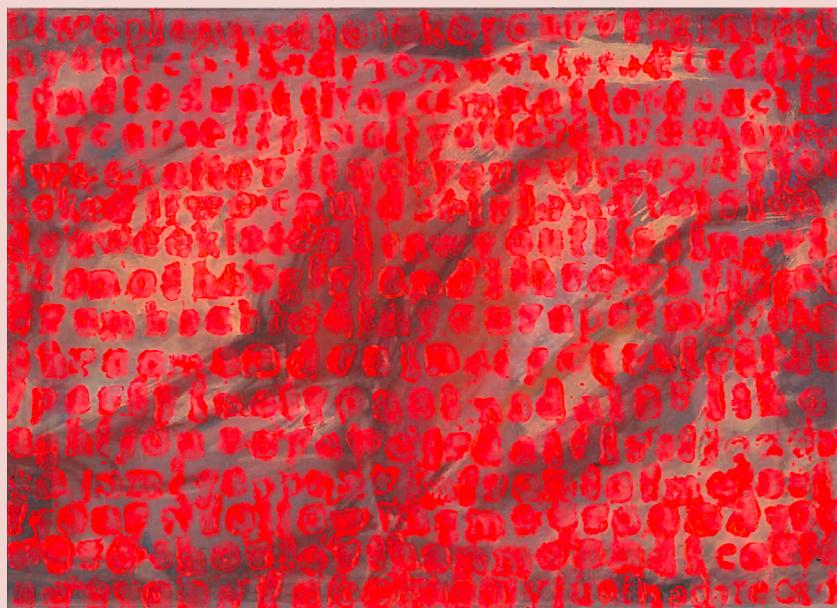
*Seven Minutes in Heaven* is a seven-minute video composed of overlapping close-up images of my body. It is the only video in the series that includes sound; recordings of entries from my sixteen-year-old diary layered with reflections written in my twenties. In these readings, I recount my innermost thoughts, desires, hatreds, and frustrations. Through the overexposure of images and the layering of voices, I create a dreamlike atmosphere; psychedelic, intimate, and uncomfortable.

By overexposing images of my body atop one another, I evoke the tension between exposure and concealment. The overlapping fragments of skin obscure one another, entangling body parts until they become inseparable, simultaneously hiding and revealing the areas I once despised or harmed. Faces, hands, and limbs merge and dissolve, invoking sensations of confusion, desire, and self-repulsion. The voices intertwine, those of my teenage self and my present one, creating a dissonant echo between past and present shame. The piece enacts a hallucinatory return to adolescence; to the moment of being sixteen, hating my body, living within it, and suffocating under its weight.

**Seven Minutes in Heaven**  
2025  
Video Still



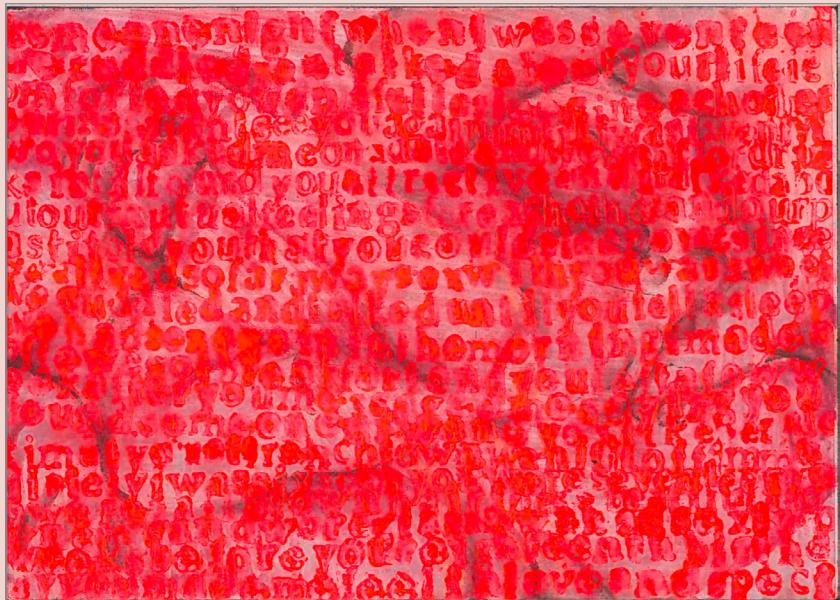
*Old Testament of Love* consists of sixteen A5 drawings depicting explicit scenes, overlaid with stories of the people I have had sex with. Each story is individually stamped, letter by letter. Through this process, I offer care, attention, and time to memories I often recall with hurt, shame, and disgust. Every person I write about once held significance in my life. They taught me what it means to be unloved; to be left hurt, betrayed, used, and discarded. By giving each story the time and care that I was denied, I seek a form of healing.



*Old Testament of Love I*  
2025  
Acrylic Paint, Pastel, Plastic  
148 x 210 mm

The stamped text, rendered in bright red paint, is difficult to read. While I expose the people I have been with, I simultaneously obscure them. The words blur, overlap, and resist legibility; like fragmented memories, they are difficult to grasp. I attempt to make sense of these experiences, to contain them within language, yet they remain unstable and unclear.

The narratives move across the boards without punctuation, flowing into one another as if part of a single, continuous confession. This visual and textual collapse mirrors how trauma lingers; without clear beginnings or endings.



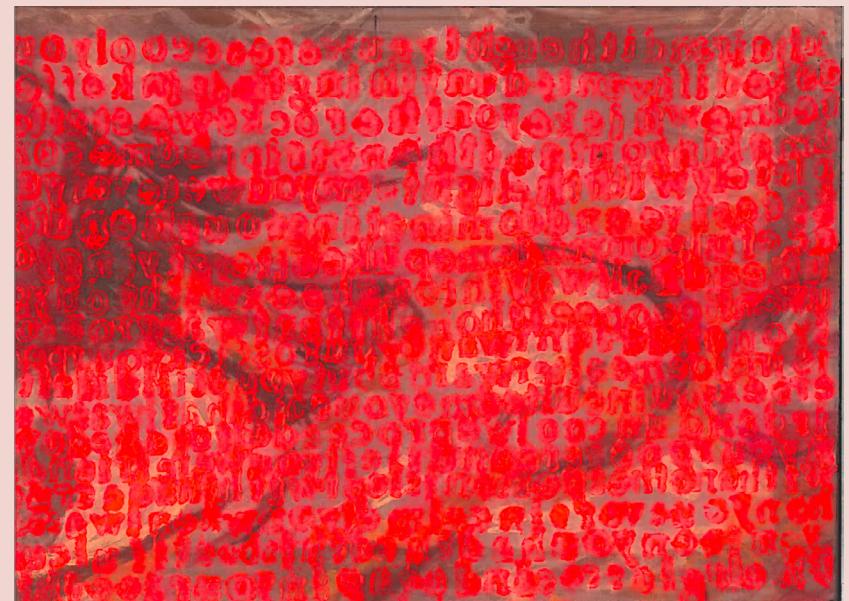
**Old Testament of Love II**  
2025  
Acyril Paint, Pastel, Plastic  
148 x 210 mm



**Old Testament of Love III**  
2025  
Acyril Paint, Pastel, Plastic  
148 x 210 mm



**Old Testament of Love V**  
2025  
Acyril Paint, Pastel, Plastic  
148 x 210 mm



**Old Testament of Love VI**  
2025  
Acyril Paint, Pastel, Plastic  
148 x 210 mm

In *Cooler Box*, I fill a small blue ice chest with phallic ice moulds. On the surface, it is ordinary, something to carry drinks, but inside, it becomes a nest of melting penises. The piece carries humour but also a cold reality, men reduced to disposable objects of pleasure, consumed and discarded like drinks. The phrase “grab a cold one with the boys” takes on literal weight here. Ice, shifting between water, solidity, and disappearance, marks time, desire, and detachment.

Finally, in *Breathwork*, a video piece, I isolate my mouth and breathe in varied rhythms until the camera lens fogs and clears. Breath oscillates between calm and panic, intimacy and pain. Here, the mouth becomes wound and threshold; ingesting, rejecting, spitting, speaking. I position the viewer in uncomfortable proximity, making them complicit in my exposure, their gaze becoming part of the performance of shame. Vulnerability leaks through fogged glass as breath becomes grief, panic, and shame. By revealing what feels too raw, I expose shame’s entanglement with the body, intimacy, and looking.



*Repentance for My Sins*  
Detail

## From Theory to Flesh: Shame in Practice

This section explores how my practice engages with and extends the writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), Sara Ahmed (2004), and Barbara Creed (1993). Each work becomes a site where shame, disgust, and intimacy are performed, materialised, and contested. Shame, as Sedgwick reminds us, is inseparable from exposure and relationality (2003: 37). Ahmed (2004: 103) shows how affect clings and sticks, circulating between bodies and objects. Creed (1993: 76) locates the abject female body as a threat to patriarchal order, drawing on Julia Kristeva's (1982) theories of abjection. Through these lenses, my practice frames shame not as a private burden but as a relational and political force.

Sedgwick (2003: 93–123) describes shame as both an exposure and a concealment. The blush exemplifies this paradox, in lowering the gaze, the subject conceals, but the very act of concealment exposes shame to others (Sedgwick, 2003: 37). *Skin Reserved for Him* stages this tension. The latex exterior exposes the “skin” of the house, while the hair hidden inside mirrors my attempts to cover and repress bodily

shame. Yet concealment fails, since the hair always leaks meaning, it clings to walls as it clings to flesh, becoming sticky with memory and history. The installation also performs shame for the viewer. Placed at knee level, it forces the audience to look downward, reproducing the bodily gesture of shame. Ahmed's (2004: 103) notion of affective “stickiness” extends this reading, the collected hair carries the traces of anonymous men, their DNA embedded in its strands, their discarded fragments clinging to my work as both material and metaphor. This is further elaborated by Ahmed, hair also becomes abject, clean while attached, and disgusting when separated (2004: 86). The title *Skin Reserved for Him* further echoes the patriarchal tradition that locates women's bodies as belonging to men (Bourdieu, 2001: 21). The work positions the house's body as a metaphor for shame's concealment and forced exposure.

In *Mothering*, I extend Sedgwick's reading of shame as intimate and engulfing (2003: 37). By swallowing and destroying the gingerbread house, I attempt to ingest shame, making it



**Repentance for My Sins**  
2025  
Human Hair, Glue and Thread

part of me. Ahmed's (2004: 101 – 120) notion of cultural memory lingers here through the Hansel and Gretel narrative, where the gingerbread house sticks together through sugar and icing. Consumption here also produces abjection, the more I swallow, the more my body rejects, becoming sick. I play both roles, child and witch, innocent and cannibal, collapsing binaries of victim and oppressor.

*Repentance for My Sins* performs shame as exposure through covering. Like Catholic hair garments, mine enacts penance, disciplining my body for its sins. But shame's paradox emerges again, the shirt conceals my skin while exposing my "sins" to the viewer. The use of strangers' hair layers intimacy with disgust, turning discarded fragments into instruments of punishment. As Ahmed (2004: 104) argues, affect sticks, strangers cling to me physically and symbolically, their presence woven into my shame.

*Seven Minutes in Heaven* explores the intersection of memory, shame, and the formation of female subjectivity. The work draws on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's

(2003) understanding of shame as both an act of exposure and concealment, as well as Sara Ahmed's (2004) notion of affect as "sticky," adhering to bodies and shaping how they move through the world. The layering of images and voices materialises this stickiness; how memories of bodily shame and desire cling to the present self. The visual overexposure enacts the paradox Sedgwick describes; the attempt to hide the self only further reveals it. The entanglement of image and sound mirrors the process of internalisation, how adolescent shame seeps into adulthood and reforms the body as a site of both intimacy and disgust. By revoicing and restaging these memories, the work transforms confession into confrontation, reclaiming agency over a body once disciplined by self-surveillance and the gaze of others.

*Old Testament of Love* investigates how intimacy, shame, and memory intersect to shape the formation of female subjectivity. The work draws on Barbara Creed's (1993) framing of the abject female body as a site of cultural anxiety. By stamping each word of the sexual histories onto the page, the work

makes tangible the persistence of affect; past experiences of desire, betrayal, and hurt cling to the body and linger in memory. The deliberate illegibility of the texts enacts Sedgwick's paradox of shame; the attempt to reveal personal history while simultaneously concealing it. While Ahmed's stickiness emerges as these residual emotions adhere to both material and viewer, creating a relational field of intimacy and discomfort. Through this layering of image and narrative, the work transforms private trauma into a material, relational, and political force, demonstrating how past experiences of shame continue to shape the present self.

*Cooler Box* shifts this exploration into humour. Filling a casual drinks cooler with phallic ice moulds, I play with Ahmed's sticky affect through the cold detachment of frozen bodies that nevertheless melt and seep (2004: 103). The work also recalls myths of witches who steal penises, linking my practice to patriarchal fears of female agency and control (Creed, 1993: 80).

Finally, *Breathwork* crystallises Sedgwick's notion of shame as exposure and concealment (2003: 37). The close-up of my mouth isolates an orifice that both reveals and hides. Here, Ahmed's (2004: 63) intimacy of proximity is also at work; breath circulates, clings to surfaces, and implicates the viewer, who becomes uncomfortably close to an excess of intimacy.

Together, these works show how my practice does not merely illustrate theory but pushes it further. Shame is not only pathological but generative, it creates spaces for intimacy, abjection, and resistance. Through Sedgwick, Ahmed, and Creed, my work demonstrates shame as material, relational, and deeply political.

## references

Ahmed, S. (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Creed, B. (1993) *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. 1st edition. London; New York: Routledge.

Irigaray, L. (1985) *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by G. C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lamb, S. (2001) *The Secret Lives of Girls: What Good Girls Really Do—Sex Play, Aggression, and Their Guilt*. New York: Free Press.

Sedgwick, E.K. (2003) *Touching Feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Stupart, L. (2008) *I Love You to Death: The Voice of the Woman Artist: Sex, Violence, Sentimentality*. Master's thesis, University of Cape Town.

