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Monstro, Monstrare – Reclaiming the “Monstrous” Female Body

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Monstro, Monstrare – Reclaiming the “Monstrous” Female Body

by

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So they feasted
And took their fill of wine, and all were happy,
And Perseus asked them questions about the region,
People and customs and the native spirit.
They told him and they asked in turn: “Now tell us,
Heroic Perseus, how you slew the Gorgon.”
He told them how there lay, beneath cold Atlas,
A place protected by the bulk of the mountain

Where dwelt twin sisters, daughters, both, of Phorcys.
They had one eye between them, and they shared it,
Passing it from one sister to the other,
And he contrived to steal it, being so handed,
And slipped away, going by trackless country,
Rough woods and jagged rocks, to the Gorgons’ home
On all sides, through the fields, along the highways,
He saw the forms of men and beasts, made stone
By one look at Medusa’s face. He also
Had seen that face, but only in reflection
From the bronze shield his left hand bore; he struck
While snakes and Gorgon both lay sunk in slumber,
Severed the head, and from that mother’s bleeding
Were born the swift-winged Pegasus and his brother.

And he went on to tell them of his journeys,
His perils over land and sea, the stars
He had brushed on flying pinions. And they wanted
Still more, and someone asked him why Medusa,
Alone of all the sisters, was snaky-haired.
Their guest replied: “That, too, is a tale worth telling.
She was very lovely once, the hope of many
An envious suitor, and of all her beauties
Her hair most beautiful—at least I heard so
From one who claimed he had seen her. One day Neptune
Found her and raped her, in Minerva’s temple,
And the goddess turned away, and hid her eyes
Behind her shield, and, punishing the outrage
As it deserved, she changed her hair to serpents,
And even now, to frighten evil doers,
She carries on her breastplate metal vipers
To serve as awful warning of her vengeance.”

Ovid: metamorphoses
lines 766–803

Introduction

A conversation about Medusa is what sparked my initial enthusiasm for and preoccupation with the monstrous woman. Specifically, a conversation between two women, a conversation between two female scholars who had studied mythology in post-secondary institutions, separately, over two different continents. From the podcast series hosted/created by Liv Albert, 'Let's Talk About Myths, Baby! Greek and Roman Mythology Retold – A Conversation on Medusa and Fragility, with Anwen Kya Hayward' (Spotify: episode - 5 Jan. 21). Their conversation explored the story of Medusa from Hesiod to Homer but mainly focused on the version by the Roman poet Ovid, from his *Metamorphosis* (8 CE). These two women were both interested in reinterpreting the story of Medusa, through a female lens, to give a voice to Medusa. One that she had not been granted in her original narrative, as hers was a story that had been both originally authored and progressively rewritten by men. The story of Medusa ending with her head (separated from her body of course) in the hands of (as the story goes) the renowned hero, Perseus. 'Here, the World Entire' by Anwen Kya Hayward, was my first introduction to a modern retelling of the story of Medusa by a female author. Anwen retold the Medusa story from her own perspective, now a monster but once a woman, and one who was profoundly affected by her power to turn people to stone and chose to live in isolation deep inside the darkness of caves (Hayward, 2016).

I am fascinated by Medusa, first because her roots are ancient, yet her story maintains currency in contemporary circles as the expanse of her legacy draws in new audiences that find intrigue in both her origin stories and visual presentation in Greek, Roman and renaissance art. Medusa has been both monster and human, and it is the human version of her story that I find most captivating. Her story is ironically narrated by a man, the man who also happened to be her killer, who is also considered a hero for slaying her (though aided by the gods) while recounting his triumphs over monsters to an audience hungry for stories of victor and adventure. In this version told by Perseus, Medusa is originally known for her considerable beauty, her hair being her most coveted feature. Then she is raped by a god in the temple

of a goddess, then punished by said goddess and transformed into a snake-haired monster who is then killed while asleep by a human man and her face embedded into a breastplate to forever turn those who look at her image to stone (Reed, 2018). I am only now more familiar with the many stories of female monsters (either forcibly transformed into as punishment or born into the role and both beyond their control) from ancient Mediterranean mythological origin through my MFA research creation. I quickly too became more familiar with female authors who were interested in retelling and revoicing the stories of women in mythology, including Madeline Miller, Natalie Haynes, and Jess Zimmerman. It struck me, as I continued to discover other examples of female scholars who were keen to reinterpret Medusa's story through a female lens, that there was a collective interest in reinterpreting her story for more than one purpose. Not only to give her a voice, but to also to recontextualize her monstrosity (the one forced upon her keep in mind) and the qualities or characteristics associated with it (specific to her being a woman) as a positive, better yet a powerful and empowering aspect of her womanhood. These powerful qualities normally *always* being associated with or attributed to the male hero, in the case of Medusa, there is no empathy for her plight only accolades for the man who cut off her head. In the pantheon of mythological stories about female monsters, she is never the hero, she is hunted, kills herself, or cursed to live out a miserable life in her monstrous form. As a young girl I believed only heroes could be men, because men were strong, loud and brave and not afraid of anything, and the opposite of women.

The first novel I encountered in my research creation to challenge the status quo of men being perceived as hero was 'Women and Other Monsters' by author Jess Zimmerman. She explores the narratives of eleven infamous female monsters of mythology, beginning with Medusa while reexamining our own relationship (as women) to the traditional hero narrative as it is embedded in these stories. The monstrous female narrative, constructed and continuously filtered through a patriarchal and misogynistic lens has and is intended to sustain a vision/version of her that is inhuman and inhumane (the whole turning men to stone thing). A collection of narratives that reinterpret the original stories of these female

monsters, through a personal lens that question why women have been and are still seen as less than men. Zimmerman shares examples from her own lived experience as a woman in which she became all too familiar with feeling voiceless, as well as the sharp and acidic sting of shame and humiliation at the hands of men over her lifetime. She calls into question the various feminine qualities assigned to or associated with womanhood that are not on the same level as when they are attributed with men or masculinity, 'the qualities we hail as heroic in Western culture—courage and fortitude, selflessness and nobility, steadiness of mind and will—are not unique to men' (Zimmerman, 4). I specifically, as a woman I have in my experiential storage unit (metaphorically speaking of course) collected at least a half dozen large black plastic garbage bags full of silenced moments. Of having felt like a girl, then a woman whose voice *did not* matter or was drowned out by the louder and more authoritative male voices in the room. Zimmerman also illuminated (for me) the origins of the visual presentation of Medusa in ancient artifacts through her visit to the *Dangerous Beauty* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art curated by Kiki Karaglou. Medusa and her monstrous sisters (at least visually) were once upon a time, portrayed as ugly and abhorrent creatures, more animal than human, then gradually transformed into beautiful women, as described (in-part) by Kiki in the exhibition text (Zimmerman, 2021):

"the later monsters don't just look more beautiful and more feminine; they look more human, underscoring the idea that monstrousness is somehow the human woman's natural condition. As monsters became more pleasing to the eye, they were defanged—beauty being equated, in classical Greece, with moral goodness—and, paradoxically, made more dangerous." (Zimmerman, 2-3).

Here began my interest in wanting to reclaim the female monster from both its past and its present. The idea that women had (and still have) been thought of as being the same as monsters, naturally in their human form after having been (metaphorically) stripped of all physical characteristics that work to separate human beings from monsters. Zimmerman finally dealt the final blow with an alarming and shocking (to me) statement, which is that we as women are *all* capable of being monsters,

'perhaps every woman was' (Zimmerman, 3). What had started off as an interest in giving a present voice to the made-up mythological narratives of women from the past (made up by men), very quickly took up a larger, more ominous, and present space. That I, based on the simple (to start) biological fact of being born as and identifying with being a woman then relegates me to monster? And there it was, what began as curiosity had been upgraded to a voracious desire to unpack this idea of the monstrous woman through my research creation and to add voice, be it my voice, to the mix of scholarly women and scholarly women artists who have worked to revision the narrative of the monstrous women back into the hands of women. For the reader I want to clarity that I am a cis white heteronormative white woman. So, when I say back into the hands of women, I mean all women, but I am speaking from and referencing a singular perspective, my personal perspective, and acknowledge that it is one that has benefited from the privilege extended to white people, in particular white women.

I am familiar with what a monster is, at least in terms of the monster made familiar through mythology, folklore, and horror movies. I also understand what the visual library of the monster can consist of in terms of the monstrous body i.e. animal-like body, snakes for hair, covered in hair, scales, fangs for teeth, claws, lizard-like skin, or giant bat-like wings, etc. What I was *not* familiar with was why monsters were imagined in the first place, what was their place and role in culture throughout history, and what does the monster represent conceptually? If my intention was to reclaim the female monster, first I had to understand the monster as a concept and how a human woman without the ability to turn a man to stone with her eyes could be considered just as repulsive, just as seductive, and just as dangerous. And so began a deep dive into the world of monster theory beginning with the work of author and university professor Jeffrey Jerome Cohen whose work unpacks the culture in which monsters were born to understand what they mean (Cohen, 3). *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, is a collection of thirteen papers that examine the monster through fictional monsters, supernatural beings, and an old-fashioned and outdated practice of believing people born with cognitive and physical disabilities were monstrous

(prior to a modern scientific understanding of how and why), (Cohen, 1996). This novel laid the groundwork for understanding the monster outside of and beyond the narrative and traditional visual presentation, 'the Monster's Body is a Cultural Body', (Cohen, 4), the title of the first of his seven theses in Chapter One. Cohen goes on to further explain,

"The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: *monstrum* is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant." (Cohen, 4).

Research creation is many things, it is literal, literary, physical, metaphysical, magical as well as an embodied experience. My most meaningful work is rooted in personal connection and understanding the monster conceptually, was to unpack and reflect on my own intimate relationship to the monstrous. Medusa is a monster, but Medusa is also a woman, I am a woman, am I also a monster? I know that my memories are littered with moments of feeling like a monster. I can't connect to why or how exactly I knew I was a monster or in any way monstrous, but I just knew it. Like a tainted seed that grows in the subconscious, or an infection that spreads until it reaches every inch of your being, in those moments, I felt that sting of shame, the all-consuming shadow of ugliness that strips the humanity right off your bones and hangs it out to dry in front of you and just out of reach. I felt it, I felt (what I considered to be) less than a human, sometimes I was too much, other times not enough, but worst of all are the moments when I was nothing at all, and all of them different versions of the same monster. Reclaiming the monster too became personal. And a beautiful and critical component of my research creation that spawned from this personal journey was taking a deeper look into my own tattoo practice as it related both visually to my material explorations in clay, as well as conceptually to my interest in reclaiming the female monster.

Both professor and researcher Vitoria L. Pitts and clinical psychologist Alessandra Lemma examine the practice of body art including tattooing, piercing, and body modification and its role and connection to (in part) an attempt at reclaiming the body. They have each collected a series of interviews with folks who have experienced trauma to varying degrees including youth, LGTBQIA+ folks, and cis men and women. I had *not* prior to reading *In the Flesh, The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* or *Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic Study of Body Modification,* reflected on my personal body art practice that began in my mid 30's (not counting the ill thought-out lower back tattoo that I rushed out to get on my 18th birthday) to a desire or need to reclaim my body from the laid layers of living history that had cemented a metaphorical separation and emotional distance between me and my body.

It is important for me to recognize that my research creation journey has evolved quite dramatically over the course of the MFA program, from fish out of water status to transitioning or blossoming into an authentically connected and deeply personal/intuitive focused approach. This was a game changing transition for me, as previously I had been stumbling through a series of attempts to engage with research creation, but none were resonating on a personal level. What changed everything was the moment I stripped away everything and put myself first and forefront and questioned how did '*I want'* to engage with research creation, and what exactly did that look like. I had been approaching the readings, building of the conceptual core, and how I talked about my research creation examining the monstrous woman from a place and space outside of me. I was directed to the article, *Heuristic Inquiry: The Internal Search to Know,* by Bruce G. Douglass and Clark Moustakas, which helped me to recognize that 'I' was what was missing. I tend to sit with words, readings, images and ideas for some time before I can make sense of things, and I had been almost desperately trying to find a personal connection within the greater context of research creation. Through connecting my own experiences, 'it is the focus on the human person in the experience and that person's reflective search, awareness, and discovery that constitutes the essential core of heuristic investigation' (Douglas, 42). To align with research creation on

an intimate and personal plane meant I could reflect on how intricately connected I felt to the concept of the monstrous woman and continually draw from that deep well in the process of making. How many times have I been made to feel like the monster in the room or had I internalized the idea that I was monstrous because of who I am or how I acted or had behaved as a woman. I had not been honest with myself that I had been struggling throughout the MFA experience to find my own voice, that for a period I was not even able to recognize the person that I was looking at in the mirror. I could finally see that while I had been focused on looking to give a voice to Medusa, to the monstrous woman, what was happening in parallel (internally and externally) was me trying to re-discover was my own authentic voice and confidence as an artist.

I had been unpacking the role of men as the authors of the stories of monstrous women as well as the male artists responsible for creating the images of the monstrous woman. I had been focused on men being part of the patriarchy and contemplating the psychological, metaphorical, emotional, and physical impact of the monstrous woman narrative on women in real life. However, I knew something was missing, I was speaking about patriarchy too generally, I felt, but I had not been able to figure out what the gap was. Be it fate or universal intervention, I randomly chose to read one of the 'what's happening' emails sent out to the student body (I had not read one before that day). There was an upcoming lecture at the central library by renowned philosopher, Dr. Kate Manne entitled 'Demoralizing Fatness' and I decided to go. I took a lot home from that lecture, based on the presentation given and her research and synthesis on the 'morally problematic' current medical and social positioning on people who identify as fat. Manne also happens to be the author of two critically acclaimed books, 'Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny' and 'Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women.' I immediately ordered 'Down Girl' which seemed like the obvious missing piece, and it turned out that I was correct. Manne writes 'that misogyny ought to be understood as the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women's subordination and to uphold male dominance' (Manne, 33). These monstrous women were not

considered monsters simply because of their monstrous characteristics, i.e., in Medusa's case having snakes for hair or a deathly stare. No women were monstrous because men *said they were, said they are.* Because women have the potential to be dangerous, to be a threat, they needed to be reminded of their place and these monsters were symbolic representations of where woman should be, voiceless and hiding in caves in the dark. My research creation was going to build a contemporary mythology of the monstrous woman that aimed to reclaim that space for woman, give voice to the voiceless and take the monster out of the shadows.

(Journal entry) – in a nod to Medusa, a hand reaching out to the past, a woman forever changed through her transformation to snake haired icon. A nod and recognition of the other infamous women of mythological origin and their own stories of transformation. I want to honour my own story of transformation; I want to be inspired by its many layers (even just considering the last two years of this program). I want to translate and represent moments in colour, represent resilience, isolation, misunderstanding, reflection. Too loud, too quiet, all of the too much or too little experiences – a patchwork quilt of past and present, a personal and contemporary mythology.

This thesis is peppered with a series of entries from my 605-journal written over the spring/summer of 2022. As they were written in an automatic writing style, the hope is that their authentic tone shines some light on my thinking process. I find structured writing difficult, and my own perceived insecurities often strip authenticity from my penned voice. I am on a path of discovery to find my own unique literary voice in writing about my work and I find journaling to be a space free from any outside or inside influences that may alter my voice.

Chapter 1 – Materials and Process

Introduction

I began my MFA research creation in my comfort zone which involved time spent working in the studio and starting to explore ideas through hand building the figure in clay. I learn through working with my hands and my relationship to both material and process is integral to developing figurative sculpture from idea or sketch to its final form. My initial explorations focused on building multiples of the bust form; a female figure sculpted with one or more subtle references to the snake which included an elongated neck, snake eyes or hair meant to resemble a nest of writhing snakes. I wanted to reference Medusa through a connection to the form and movement of the snake without being too obvious. I was thinking about the emotional and metaphorical weight of transformation from woman to monster. Reflecting on the story of Medusa from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* in which she was originally a woman, 'she was very lovely once, the hope of many an envious suitor, and of all her beauties' (Reed, 105-6). Inspired by Jess Zimmerman's, 'Women and Other Monsters,' I was thinking about the duality, perhaps more poignantly the multiplicities (metamorphically and symbolic) within that transformation, of the potential pain, power, numbness, hopelessness, misery and/or rage connected to being stripped of your humanity and turned into something different, and more dangerous. A sentiment that sadly too many women are all too familiar with. The most valuable learning from my early experiments was rooted in failure, a failure to express my ideas in ways that were effectively communicating my vision of the monstrous woman in addition to failing to connect with my peers through the pieces I had made. They were seeing a literal monster. I had hand built three busts, in varying stages of monstrous transformation,

painted two with underglazes and the third with a brown-black gloss glaze (this piece will not be referenced moving forward as it is still a work in progress). This failure initiated a desire to reflect on the role of material and process in my current research practice and an aim to expand how I was working with clay to also consider using other materials to find new and more visually compelling ways to build a body of work centered on the monstrous woman.

This period led to the discovery of nerikomi, which is a process of working with colour in clay and originated in Japan. It involves layering either natural clay bodies of varying colours together or pigmented clay (using oxides or stains worked into a raw clay body) to produce patterns that can be either organized, abstract, or painterly in nature, or a combination of the three. In ceramic practices, nerikomi is most used to create functional pieces by wheel throwing or slab construction (Yabe, 37). I knew immediately that I was onto something, I was fascinated by the various patterns on the functional examples I found online. I could see a connection to how I was interested in expressing a contemporary feminine monstrosity (in my head), though at the time I was only on the precipice of that understanding. Nerikomi, to me, felt like a form of visual symbolism, expressed through the arrangement of colour in the form of pattern. Since I was interested in reclaiming the narrative of the female monster, and of re-envisioning monstrosity, I could see there was potential in the patterned clay without initially a full understanding of what I was wanting or hoping to express visually. What was clear was that in my monstrous world I was wanting to separate or deviate from what is traditionally understood as monstrous when we think of the various creatures and beasts of mythology, folklore, or horror movies. If the monster, according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, is reflective of the times in which it was created, I had to consider my desire to reclaim feminine monstrosity, who was I reclaiming the monster from and why, and why was this important to me. I was interested in representing a monstrosity that aligned with transformation, that could represent a multiplicity of planes of experience that resonated on both the sides of beautiful and ugly, of strength and weakness, of loud and soft, etc. The nerikomi expressed on the

surface of the figure, as the skin of figure could present like a decorative or decorated surface laying claim or ownership to that space like my tattoos which I will speak to throughout this paper (Lessa, 2010). 'The skin could be seen as a kind of 'billboard' where permanent messages are recorded, displayed and communicated to others' (Lessa, 148). With these questions in mind, I began my nerikomi journey by making a series of small clay tile experiments to establish an understanding of the potential in pattern, starting with the muscle memory in my hands and eventually expanding into a more formal understanding through building a figurative bust and two forearms with hands. There was an additional layer of challenge connected to this new venture as it did not appear to be used to build complicated sculptural pieces (at least I could not find any examples), and this certainly contributed to my interest as I felt like I would be breaking new artistic ground.

While I was exploring nerikomi I was also considering the two unsuccessful (in their current state) busts and how I would approach finishing them to bring them into my monstrous world visually that would also align with my conceptual interests. In a recent residency application for the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, I wrote, 'I am constantly learning from clay, and what I appreciate most about this humble and generous material is that through its challenges come the greatest opportunities for discovery.' As I was focused on reclaiming the monstrous female body and reflecting on the potential of nerikomi to in part express an ownership of territory or staking claim on the body. At the time I had to consider other materials that could potentially express or represent the same idea visually as these two pieces had been painted using underglazes and were technically finished. This time instead of stepping forward to embrace new processes, I took a step backwards to embrace two old approaches to finishing clay pieces. One I developed during my undergraduate degree involved using silicone as a 'glaze,' the other is finishing a traditionally glazed (painted with underglazes or glazes) ceramic figure with wig hair. The flesh-like shiny rubbery finish (silicone 'glaze') looks and feels like doll skin, it is poured over a piece and completely envelops it in a silicone skin. Finishing a figure using wig hair had been an attempt

to move the figurative ceramic sculpture closer to ‘figure’ and farther from ‘sculpture.’ This forced me to expand on my thinking of what it meant to reclaim the monstrous women, the nerikomi was one thing but how did the silicone work as a reclamation material? Reflecting again on ‘Woman and Other Monsters, that ‘the stories about monstrous women, about creatures who are too gross, too devious, too grasping, too smart for their own good are stories told by men” (Zimmerman, 3). The author considers the idea that the monstrous woman is reflected in her capacity to be too much, then there is *also* the potential to be the exact opposite monster, one that is too little or not enough. That the experience of being a women can often feel like being trapped in a swirling tornado of contradictions, and here I am facing all of those too much or too little monstrous narratives and recognizing that to truly empower a contemporary feminine monstrosity means to embrace and own all of it. To consider the ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ parallels placed onto women is to also consider how that extends into the world of beauty standards. Women can land anywhere on the ‘beauty ideal spectrum,’ being deemed either too pretty, too ugly, or simply too plain, with none escaping the potential to be labeled monstrous.

‘For women, the boundaries of acceptability are strict, and they are many. We must be seductive but pure, quiet but not aloof, fragile but industrious, and always, always small. We must not be too successful, too ambitious, too independent, too self-centred--and when we can’t manage all the contradictory restrictions, we are turned into grotesques’ (Zimmerman, 8).

I had an early interest in reflecting on our emotional relationship to social media, and the invisible/visible power of images and influencers to impose pressure in how femininity may be thought of as performed and how it is presented online. I think of conformity as a component of my monstrous world, it can be both the desire or pressure to fit in or the removal or erasure of individuality. The silicone acts in part as a glaze alternative, but it also represents a ‘protective shield’ (Lemma, 145), it is a permanent layer of separation between the figure and the viewer. Meaning no one can get in but then the figure is also in essence trapped underneath the skin-like coating. The silicone also masks the figure,

concealing the facial features, and blanketing the figure in a uniform of distinctly doll-like plastic coating. The silicone is representative of skin, the material I use specifically has a connection to both the movie and prosthetic industries for its skin-like likeness and flexibility. Skin also has context, and both an interior and exterior relationship to us as humans according to Alessandra Lemma.

'The skin – the largest organ – is many things. It is the 'scrim' on which we project our phantasies and fears. It is the first point of contact meeting the other's touch. It is also a container: it keeps the inside intact. Skin thus acts as a boundary, lending a sense of being an interiority in relation to an exteriority' (Lemma, 148).

I recognize that I was personally experiencing the feeling of being completely overwhelmed over the course of my research creation. As I was both struggling with feeling monstrous and to understand the monstrous woman in a contemporary sense, overwhelm became another component of my monstrous world. Like silicone, the use of wig hair also works to both shield and protect the face of the figure from both the viewer and its sister figure though they are also connected by it. Both materials attempt to reference the duality of something that can potentially harm and keep safe simultaneously. Medusa's story through Ovid's narrative has her originally human with a memorable and most beautiful head of hair. Part of her punishment is being stripped of her beautiful hair which is transformed instead into a head of snakes. I was interested in metaphorically referencing the significance of hair in Medusa's story as well as speaking to her monstrous punishment being delivered by a goddess in response to her (Medusa) being first raped by a god. I was reflecting on Kate Mann's powerful 'Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny' and not only our relationship to misogyny but also to internalized misogyny and how that has shaped and manipulated how we see ourselves, other women as well as our relationships with other women. In *Spiral of Solidarity* (see Fig 4.), the hair of each figure appears to be reaching out to her sister in front of her, their hair tied together and in essence completing a never-ending cycle. The two figures are facing each other, not directly across from one another but askew slightly and connected by their hair

as if reaching out to one another. I was thinking about three lines from a short poem entitled, 'Real Women,' that I had found on Instagram, 'I remember that men are so lazy they make women do the work of patriarchy for them.' Written by Alok, a gender fluid, non-binary comedian, speaker, and author. The sheer magnitude of the power of the patriarchy and misogyny to extend beyond its male perpetrators to have been over time internalized by women, mimicked by us, and reflected onto other women through our own learned behaviours. The hair tied together completes a never-ending exchange between the two figures, though a spattering of hair manages to escape on the figure with the auburn hair.

(Journal entry) As a sculptor I have always been influenced by both materials and processes. I find learning in those quiet moments, alone in the studio, where I can reflect on the nature of a certain material or process and bridge a connection to the work's content or themes. Beyond that there are moments when either may also inform the work in ways I could not anticipate or expect. I refer to those moments as magical. I am fascinated with clay for many reasons, as a material it has a long history in the production of functional work across many cultures. As a building material for sculptural work, its malleability and potential to take and hold shape as dictated by the maker while also setting boundaries and limitations which forces me to pause and listen to the material with my hands. Clay has a memory, and it is nothing short of otherworldly to be able to tap into that memory while imprinting my own visual language onto and into the material. Learning through material connection is integral for me as an artist, to continually develop new techniques and processes which challenge what I know to further enrich and expand my visual language and expression in sculpture.

Clay

I chose to continue to work with clay in my MFA research creation to A) continue to develop my relationship to the material B) to continue to expand on my ability to express figurative sculpture in clay

through the immersive two-year program at the University C) because of its malleability and ability to be transformed by the maker (me) into practically anything and finally D) my intention was to reclaim the monstrous woman, as a woman I am shaping the material with my hands meaning I am in control of the narrative. The narrative of the monstrous woman has comfortably been centred in the hands of men and I am contributing an additional female voice amongst the countless other women who have worked to give voice back to the voiceless Medusa and other monstrous women of mythological origin.

Clay is consistently one of the most influential teachers in my research creation. Despite the years of experience in hand building with clay (6+) I still learn from this material every time my hands engage with it in the studio. My hands need to build muscle memory in the same way that my brain needs to reflect on the information it is taking in. I am a tactile person by nature, I need to touch and feel things to understand. I am a sculptor because it is a verb – it is action, and I am engaged by the physical nature of hand building with clay. Even the simple fact of having to pick up a box of clay gives me energy. I experienced a few important transitions to my clay practice over the course of the MFA, nerikomi being the most significant (which will be covered in detail in the following chapter), followed by the introduction of two new clay bodies including Tucker's Bright White and Max's Paper Clay. I also developed a new process for hand building sculptural pieces based off the process used to build the laminated figurative wood pieces, which involves building a sculptural form with cut pieces of clay. I mention this process specifically because it is something that I can take with me moving forward, that carries with it distinct potential, though it did not play a significant role in my MFA research creation.

Nerikomi

The introduction of nerikomi into my process library marked an integral shift in my research creation that will endure as a distinctive feature in my visual expression of the figure in clay moving

forward. Nerikomi introduced me to not only an extraordinary way of engaging with colour but more significantly how I think about colour in terms of its meaning both in relation to the figurative body and to my interest in defining, describing, presenting, and symbolizing my contemporary female monster. Nerikomi also embodies transformation through how it is made. As a process, nerikomi is highly physical, it is an action, it is visceral, it renders me sweaty and completely exhausted. It requires great strength to first work raw powdered pigment into clay, then through a notably complex and time-consuming process of building of pattern through layering, deconstruction, and reconstruction of clay. Clay as a material is soft and pliable and called to action by the hands of the maker, and I have often thought of working with clay as a quite meditation with material. Nerikomi, however, is loud and aggressive. The action of making patterns includes force, forcing various colours together as the formed block of clay is cut apart repeatedly, slammed onto the working surface and slapped repeatedly with wood paddles. I cut apart the clay block apart with abandon, hacking at it, exposing its insides and reworking the pattern repeatedly until I am satisfied that it is complete. Often going back to rework the block again the following day because yesterday's satisfaction is now unwarranted. I feel a personal connection to the process of nerikomi, a countless series of violent and ugly transformations the left me feeling raw and exposed, while others ended in feeling whole and beautiful after being torn apart and put back together. Every time, however, I become something new, ‘the monster’s body is both corporal and corporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift’ (Cohen, 5). The beauty of nerikomi is that the action takes place on the inside or underneath the surface. I am not able to see the pattern as it develops and evolves though I get tiny glimpses along the way as I cut up and rework the clay block. The pattern is only made visible when I cut up the block to build the figure, exposing the insides on the surface like a symbolic 2D topography of the body turned inside out. If the monster is something that both attracts and terrifies, ‘this simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster’s composition accounts greatly for its

continued cultural popularity' (Cohen, 17), I think too is the duality of exposing what is under the surface, the invisible becoming visible.

I am a self-proclaimed process nerd so naturally I find myself compelled to share the details of nerikomi. Beyond that, I find myself wanting to refer to or reference the many layers involved in building nerikomi, in an attempt to understand the poetic nature and symbolic potential in pattern. I am working towards a deeper understanding of the visual potency in and of pattern as it relates to my interest in expressing a contemporary female monster so that I can continue to build a more intimate connection to the process. I am also excited to better speak to, write about, and most importantly work with nerikomi in the present and in the future as I think ahead to new research creation. The viewer is not able to comprehend in a finished piece (unless familiar with the process) the transformative nature of nerikomi through time or through the construction of the patterns. Each colour starts off as raw clay pigmented with a powdered mason stain that was mixed in by hand. Then that freshly pigmented clay must rest for twenty-four hours before I can work with it to build a pattern. After the waiting period is over, I organize a selection of colours by neatly cutting off pieces or tearing them with my hands depending on what I want the pattern to express visually. Then the colours are arranged together, and the group of them either kneaded or thrown (I throw the chunk of clay down on the working surface repeatedly) back together to form a block or slab, then cut apart and this second process repeated multiple times until I am satisfied that it is done. Then this slab must rest for twenty-four hours before it can be used to hand build a figurative piece. Nerikomi renders the slabs more difficult to work with than their raw clay counterparts, the number of times the clay is pulled apart then forced back together makes it more vulnerable and prone to cracking during both the drying and firing processes. Then even the process of building nerikomi references the experience of the monstrous female body, being pulled apart and put back together again, never again the same as the version before. I am only at the very beginning of understanding the potential of nerikomi, both visually and conceptually. I am only at the foreground of experimentation of the process

of hand building nerikomi, both in terms of general explorations of marbling, patterning, as well as developing a visual language of a contemporary mythology through the nerikomi as it is expressed on the figurative sculptural body. I have also been considering the potential for nerikomi to represent multiple narratives running simultaneously. As I unpack the original female monstrous narratives of mythological origin, the continual influence of both patriarchal and misogynistic control over the behaviours and bodies of women, and how I see myself through the lens of internalized misogyny.

In recent reflections on my experiments with nerikomi, I found myself finding connections with the nature and impact of control as expressed through not only the phenomenon of misogyny (thank you Kate Manne), but also personally and in my research creation. I suppose meditating on it personally was the easiest to tackle as I dedicate an unnecessary amount of time to thinking about my life in terms of either being in control or more often out of control. Control also relates to how I function in the studio as it expressed through a natural attraction to and affinity for labour and time intensive process-based ways of fabricating sculpture, to my material choices like clay, and the control I exact over the material through hand building and now nerikomi. I have been thinking about (if not over-thinking) my own problematic relationship as a woman (both past and current) with control. Feeling out of control/having no control over my body and my attempts (which were often unhealthy or dangerous) at regaining control or at least a semblance of it which eventually manifested in a desire to reclaim my body through tattooing beginning in my late thirties. My tattoos and nerikomi share both a visual and a conceptual connection despite my unwillingness to see it in the beginning.

'....the central issue of ownership of the body – whose body is it? This is indeed a recurring theme in my work with patients who modify their bodies. Through these patients we can observe how the modification of the body – from the more everyday modification through the clothes we wear right through to piercings and scarifications – is an expression, at least in part, of an attempt to mark the body as 'belonging to me,' (Lemma, 45).

In addition to ruminating on the impact that living in a patriarchally dominant and misogynistic society has had and will continue to have on my experience as a woman. Of course, extending that thought into my interest in the monstrous woman and working to reclaim that space through figurative sculptural body. I had also considered my desire for personal and bodily autonomy and the potential threat to that freedom that we collectively witnessed sadly unfold last year in America and the disastrous tidal wave of impact post that to birth control access and LGBTQIA+ rights.

So again, in the spirit of trying to build an understanding I will briefly delve into the relationship nerikomi shares with control and how it guides the process of building pattern. It begins with me choosing the particular colours (powdered mason stain pigments) that I will work with and what percentage I will mix them into the raw clay body. When starting a pattern, I choose which colours I will work with, how big or small the pieces will be and then finally how I will arrange and rearrange them to build a slab. I have done extensive experiments in making patterns, some with higher degrees of control due to consciously choosing to meticulously layer and arrange a series of hand-built shapes (inspired by the patterns on moth and butterfly wings), compared to more organic or freeform approaches via tearing off small chunks from the larger block of colour, thrown down on the working surface and letting intuition guide the process. My intention for my 605 spring/summer course was to focus on new experiments with nerikomi, specifically to develop more of an understanding of the visual potential in pattern. In the end I preferred the more organic or less controlled approaches to building patterns. Not only were they more visually interesting but I felt more empowered during the building process when I relinquished control and let freedom take the wheel. I cannot help but consider this to be symbolic of my interest in reclaiming the monstrous woman. If both the patriarchy and its ‘law enforcement branch, misogyny’ (Manne, 63) in part both work to police women by attempting to control what power we have access to (socially, societally, and in relationship to our own bodies) then by resisting control through embracing freedom feels like a small, but powerful gesture of resistance (Manne, 2018). ‘One of the

striking features of the narratives of those that have their skin is their emphasis on the importance of 'taking control,' which is typically viewed as taking positive action' (Lemma, 154).

To conclude this section, I will end with a few additional recent thoughts on nerikomi as it strikes me that I am entering a new phase of understanding of nerikomi through my most recent experiments. This includes the building of two new figurative wall pieces using a new process I developed of layering two clay bodies together (one piece being successful see Figure 2. and the other not). The base form is built using a heavier sculptural clay body with the nerikomi inlayed onto the surface in thin layers in a lighter, porcelain-like clay body (the same clay used to build all previous nerikomi pieces). I wanted to build contemporary aegis (minus the shield part) inspired by the many examples of Medusa in ancient art. She is appropriately titled, 'The Watcher,' acting as protector of her sisters in the gallery and watcher of all who enter the gallery space. She is an embodiment of the empowered monstrous women, her skin and hair decorated with nerikomi, and her hair reflecting the shape and movement of the body of the snake. A nod to my original failed attempts at sculpting the hair in clay to represent the movement of a nest of writhing snakes. In addition to the figurative pieces, I built a series of nerikomi tiles (see Figure 3.) in June of this year inspired by the work of English artist Barbara Gittings (originally from South Africa), who I discovered while scrolling through nerikomi tutorials on YouTube. Her process of building nerikomi involves stacking multiple thin slabs of pigmented clay on top of one another. She then begins meticulously slicing the layered slab up in numerous ways, at different angles, and rearranges the pieces together to create a new slab. Each new arrangement shifts the internal pattern, and she works until she intuitively *feels* it is done. I found over the course of creating these tiles that this new process produced the most interesting visual results as well as patterns that I intuitively *felt* to be more narrative in nature and therefor more in line with my visual conception of a contemporary monstrosity as expressed through nerikomi. Kate Manne uses the term 'naive conception' (Manne, 80) to describe the way that she, an analytic philosopher, builds her argument through layers of comprehension, beginning with a 'naïve

conception'. This naïve conception feels appropriate for my current reflections on nerikomi which is also in line with a heuristic investigation, allowing for intuition to take the lead. I can say with confidence that I have made successful pieces with nerikomi, that my first pieces were conceived as a formal expression of pattern while my hands were developing a muscle memory for the process (see Figure 2.). What I am working towards is a conceptual/metaphorical/narrative muscle memory of nerikomi that is in line with my cognitive or conscious conception of monstrosity as I imagine or envision it to be expressed through pattern. I know I am headed in that direction based on the success of my last nerikomi focused wall pieces and test tiles.

Figure 1. - Yvonne Kustec, *The Watcher,* 2023. Fired ceramic, wig hair.

Figure 2. - Yvonne Kustec, first nerikomi tiles, February 2022. Fired ceramic pigmented with mason stains

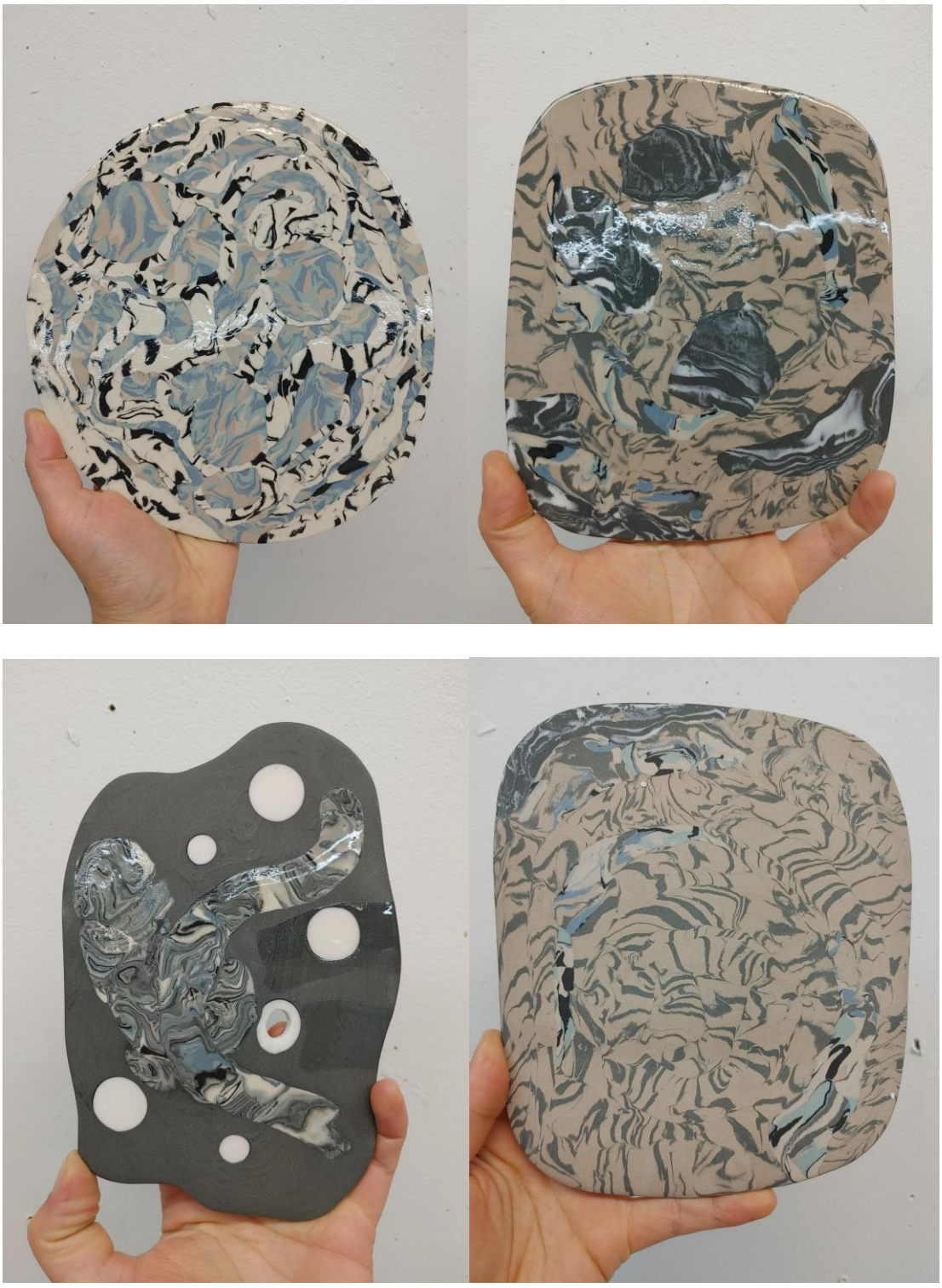

Figure 3. - Yvonne Kustec, Nerikomi tiles, June 2023. Pigmented clays, and pigmented clays with inlayed porcelain

(Journal entry) Despite my initial interest in creating more intentional patterns I found myself unhappy with the pieces overall. I decided to cut up the slabs, rearrange the pieces overlapping each other and then compress and roll again into a slab. I then repeated those two steps multiple times, then folded the slab over on itself several times. I am enamored with the randomness and unpredictability of the process. I am in control of many aspects of making nerikomi slabs. I choose the colours and I choose how to arrange them prior to rolling out the initial slab. I also choose the numerous ways in which I alter or abstract the pattern through either folding the slab in on itself or cutting it in half and rearranging the pieces back together. I introduce a second intervention which involves cutting up the previously finished slab into multiple thinner slices and then throwing them down and then kneading them back together which produces unpredictable results. I love the moments where I can let go of control in the studio, it allows me to produce better work.

(Journal entry) Over the course of the spring/summer, while heavily inspired and invested in the process of experimenting with nerikomi to find my own visual expressions of pattern, I had been ruminating on the importance of this process. That process in terms of making nerikomi is more than arranging various chunks of pigmented clay together to produce patterns, but the act *itself* of making these slabs through the processes I had developed had meaning. I would take two slabs with distinctive styles of pattern, each made with their own unique process, the only thing they shared was the same blue colour. After the slabs were used in the construction of a sculpture, I decided to join the scraps to make a new slab. I would then again cut up that slab and reuse the scraps to make yet another unique slab. As I was rolling the scraps together it struck me how different the patterns were now from their original design. I had been altering that design by introducing pieces from other, distinctive designs, and then reworking them together to make a new pattern. Maybe, I thought, in this process lies what I am trying to say in the work.

Nerikomi most distinctively represents transformation for me, and I as I attempt to build my understanding of why the female monster, and why reclaim the female monster specifically, I consider the role I play as the maker and the control in which I exact over material, form, symbol, and narrative. If I'm questioning the role of mythology in shaping and reshaping the narrative of the monstrous woman, beginning with Medusa, with the institution that is misogyny and its power to do the same then I am hoping to strip away, to tear, to rip some of that control out of the hands of men.

Wood bases

The figurative wood base was another important shift in my research creation, I had arrived at the idea of the wood base from a moment of reflection regarding the nature and look of the plinth. It was one of those intuitive moments knowing that the plinth was *not* the right solution to display the ceramic busts. I was interested in something more than placing them on top of a white box, something that gave them more presence in a gallery setting. Something that addressed the space in-between the base of the bust and the floor that was in relationship to the figurative work. At the time I believed that this would be a minor venture into building non-plinth support pieces out of wood. Little did I know that it would evolve into a lengthy process resulting in three large pieces that not only connect visually to the nerikomi through the patterned surface of the wood grain but lend their own voice to the work through their unique and abstracted figurative forms.

With crude sketches in hand, and a critical misunderstanding guiding the process, I began the lengthy procedure of building my first base prototype (which proved to be one of those integral misunderstandings that lead to many positives in the future). The form I had drawn was bodily in nature and based on the shape of the bust. The intention was for it to extend down to the ground, bringing the top of the bust just below eye height. The process to make this base was quite involved, repurposing old

wood pallets into new wood slats through a series of tedious and time-consuming processes (my specialty so it seems). Once I had a pile of finished wood slats, I traced the shape of the base of the bust sculpture onto the wood, cut it out and retraced that piece onto the wood with an extra border around it. Continuing this process until I had twenty-three pieces of wood each one bigger than the last, which were then glued and clamped together. The resulting wood block was carved and sanded into an organic looking shape that was meant to be an extension of the ceramic bust, though this first form did not extend to the ground. It gave the impression of movement through a subtle twisting of the form from the top to the bottom, which had more of a visual impact when the ceramic bust was placed on top. Though this piece was not as successful as I had hoped, the takeaway was that I had developed a unique building process with wood that had potential. Moving forward I was able to seek the support of the woodshop tech in the architecture department who brought new insight and experience to the table, with the aid of a C n C machine. I was introduced to the possibility of building the figures through a 3D modeling program, which was completely new to me and outside of my wheelhouse. It was not possible at the time for me to learn a new program but an idea I will carry forward into the future to explore further.

My original intention was to build large figurative wood forms that the ceramic pieces would complete by being placed on top of to complete a singular form made of two different natural materials. Through the experience of building these pieces I allowed the process of working with the wood to inform the direction and shape of the forms. Since this is something that I naturally do with clay, I wanted to give the same space to the wood to act as a sort of teacher, developing an unspoken collaboration between artist and material. Wood is so different from clay, hard, dry, and must be handled with power tools to define and refine its shape and form. I was interested in replicating the movement I was able to achieve in the form of the original piece but to push it even farther. Hours of carving and sanding helped to refine what started off as a blocky form into three smooth abstracted figurative forms. At this point I could now visualize they would be separate from the ceramic busts, though the extended arms for the

ceramic hands would eventually come together as one piece. Working in an abstract manner is outside of my comfort zone as I strive to represent the figure in a realistic manner through. Now I was also having to build a new muscle memory of working with wood with a large and loud power tool in between me and the material. I kept circling back to my research creation and my intention to reclaim the monstrous woman, I had experience that through clay, wig hair and silicone, but here I was with another material that I was much less familiar with and searching for a connection. After staring at the wood for hours with an understanding that the wood grain shares an obvious visual connection to the patterns in the nerikomi, I was pulled back into my interest in the potential meaning of pattern. What is different with wood is that the pattern already exists in the flesh of the material, and I create the patterns in the clay. It finally struck me that the wood grain represents the story of the tree. A marker of the passing of time, or growth, of change, of disease, abundance, etc. That in these wood pieces was the opportunity to explore how the impact of the monstrous women narrative being controlled by the patriarchy/misogyny could be expressed through an abstracted figurative wood form. A body appearing as if it were not in control of itself and being manipulated by an outside force. As well as a body in motion, multiple positions occurring at the same being seen from a single viewpoint.

I surprised myself with these pieces, but I recognize that I still need time with them to fully understand what they mean to me. I was not completely successful in representing a body in motion from multiple angles at the same time, but I am interested in continuing to develop this process further moving forward through first conceptualizing a figure using 3D modeling program. The choice to position the wood figures distanced from the ceramic busts is in part a nod to the story of Medusa and her head being separated (by force) from her body. It is also inspired by reflections on how often women's bodies are presented in advertising and on social media, cropped and in parts. Additional meditations on being labeled a monster, on the forces that work to pull us (as women) apart, metaphorical separate our heads from our bodies, control our stories, distort how we see ourselves and treat other women via the misogyny

that we've unintentionally and unknowingly internalized. I wanted to present the figurative pieces (wood and ceramic) with distance in between, to emphasize that there is a potency to the space in between, as well as for the viewer to attempt to consider that the pieces make up a whole figure. The space in between I am referring to is both in between the figures as well as the lines in the wood grain and the swirling colours of the patterns in the clay. I chose to leave the wood finish natural; they are sealed with a microcrystalline wax to help preserve the wood. One of the comments I received from one of my peers during my fourth semester crit was about the honesty of the wood in its natural form, and I thought this was such a beautiful statement that I would honour moving forward in the finished pieces.

The never-ending staircase that displays the two silicone glazed pieces, currently titled, *Sisters* (see Figure 4.), was the first collaboration between my partner and me which extended into him designing the platform for Figure 5. The stairs were inspired by a desire to represent a never-ending cycle, like the hair, that would be capable of embodying the idea of an invisible force (patriarchy/misogyny) controlling the narrative of the monstrous female. I had a vision of stairs manifest in my mind, and while looking through visual examples of stairs online discovered the double ended staircase and knew that was the right direction for the base. It needed to be a structured form, reminiscent of real stairs that would act as a support for the busts while also representing a masculine look and energy supporting these two feminine figurative sculptures. As I have also been reflecting on internalized misogyny and its ability to distort or manipulate how we as women see ourselves, behave and treat other women, it became important that these stairs expressed this idea as well. To finish the stairs in the white rubber, for full transparency was a situational decision. My original intention was to coat them in a silicone like finish, like the coating on the busts, however both the form and size of the stairs made it impossible to consider pouring a material over them, so a compromise had to be reached. Full credit must be given to my partner who envisioned the platform for Figure 5. I was struggling to find an appropriate solution to display the bust together with the wood form and then my partner stepped into support. The platform to me feels like an altar space, a

space for reflection, and elevated off the ground. The shapes of the platform and the three-pronged steel support that holds up the ceramic bust feel powerfully feminine, almost symbolic of an ancient matriarchal spirit. I am finally embracing collaboration after having worked as a lone wolf for most of my career as an artist, working with other artists and allowing for their creative input to shift of change the direction or look of a piece has been an invaluable learning experience. Like how I give space to material to inform the work, people bring new insight into my research creation that I could not anticipate bringing in on my own. My hair stylist worked on two of the busts and her vision was beyond anything I could have imagined; it is important that I recognize where my skills lie and where I can benefit from the skills of others.

Figure 4. - Yvonne Kustec, *Spiral of Solidarity*, 2023. Fired clay, elastic, rubber, silicone, wig hair, wood.

Figure 5. - Yvonne Kustec, *The Space in Between*, 2023. Fired clay, grout, steel, wig hair, wood.

Figure 6. Yvonne Kustec, *Reaching, Seeing, Spiraling*. 2023. Fired clay, steel, wig hair, wood.

Chapter 2: Contemporary artists

Shary Boyle

One of the most important artistic influences on both my interest in clay and the figure is Canadian artist, Shary Boyle (see Fig. 5 & Fig. 6). Specifically, her interest in mythology and her unique and distinct visual language across the various mediums in which she works. An important component of my research creation was the expansion of my material expression to include nerikomi, laminated wood, and metal. I have been immersed in the process of learning the language of colour and pattern in ways new to my current understanding of sculpture, which has shifted my expression of the figurative body into a more abstract and installation-based space (or at least I am thinking about installation in a bigger way moving forward). I think one of the most important shifts in my practice because of my MFA experience was the redefining of my personal visual expression in sculpture, and heading into the future I am interested in building a more defined and expansive personal visual mythology of the contemporary female monster.

With clay I find I am always hungry for new ways of working with it as a material and find connection with Boyle's own shifting expressions of the figure in clay. Her ability to draw from the various narratives in Greek and Roman mythology while building a contemporary connection and relevance through her figurative style which shifts between realistic and imagined, compiled figures, raw and glazed surfaces, and small scenes or single figures. She does not always work with a full body, and her pieces that are only a head, or two hands, manage as much magic and whimsy as her full body pieces or more detailed works that include a base or additional symbolic sculptural elements. I found success in maquettes specifically that were free standing and could be displayed without a base, however I tend to find myself stuck in the gravitational pull of the base to complete my pieces which is something I would like to reconsider moving forward. I am continually enamoured with Boyle's imaginative world building

with sculpture utilizing her distinctive visual symbology in clay through both her sculptural style and how she finishes her pieces. I find connection in my own interest in the monstrous woman and distinct and personal expression in sculpture, particularly through patterned clay and laminated wood. What I want to continue to define is my visual expression of the figure to include a personal mythology of the monstrous woman as it relates to reclaiming that space.

Figure 7. Shary Boyle, *Tsunami Lantern*, 2012. Porcelain, underglaze. 28 x 20 x 25 cm

https://www.sharyboyle.com/sculpture/#jp-carousel-313

Figure 8. Shary Boyle, *Untitled (swallow)*, year unknown. Porcelain, glazes, gold lustre. 22 x 48 x 36 cm

https://www.sharyboyle.com/sculpture/#jp-carousel-343

Marigold Santos

Like Shary Boyle, I include Philippine born, Calgarian artist, and personal hero, Marigold Santos for her distinctive and highly symbolic style. Though her work is mainly painting based, Marigold has worked sculpturally, utilizing mannequin forms and hand sculpted clay to express the figure. I find a shared connection in our use of the figure and interest in mythology while Marigold draws inspiration from Pilipino folklore to explore multiple personal experiences in her work. I included (see Fig 9 and Fig

10) newer works specifically because Marigold's visual language seems to have shifted recently to include more colour, features visible eyes on the figure, and the use of flora and fauna indigenous to the Philippines. Marigold's swirling surfaces that make up her figurative characters share a distinct visual connection to both the nerikomi and the wood grain in my sculptural work.

Though Marigold doesn't define her figures as specifically monstrous, however her use of the Aswang (shape shifting creatures in Pilipino folklore) in earlier works, like Shary, works to redefine traditional mythological creatures or narratives in a contemporary context. I feel that in terms of my interest in building a personal contemporary mythology around reclaiming the female monster that is distinctive of the traditions of monstrous representations, Marigold's visual language is in the realm of magical, symbolic embodiment, and figurative abstraction that I am hoping to further define in my own research creation. Marigold's figures or characters exude a darkness that I find interesting, especially in contrast to the beautiful and detailed craftsmanship of her paintings, which have included fabric elements, flowers and other plant life. I say interesting because the duality of something existing as distinct opposites in the same plane, like being both beautiful and grotesque, first connects to theories around a continued and contemporary interest in monsters (Cohen, 1996) as well as work that I feel is more compelling visually. Recent conversations about my work (in my thesis defense) included references to beauty as it relates to my own abilities and craftsmanship of clay, which has been a consistent element of my visual expression of the figure in clay. Though I have been reluctant or hesitant to acknowledge it because of an attachment to beautiful objects being just that, I am working to redefine my relationship to beauty to be able acknowledge that as an aspect of my work. The introduction of nerikomi to my process library did shift how I built the figure in clay as I was developing an understanding of the process in 3D, in *Reaching, Seeing, Spiraling* (Fig 6) the face of the figure is distorted, the eyes are flat and abstracted, and the lips are puffy and exaggerated. I feel the contrast between the way I sculpted the face, and the

smoothness of the clay that comprises the neck and shoulders of the bust, with the stylized wig hair represents the duality I am interested in pursuing in future figurative works.

Also, like Shary, Marigold's ability to alternate between a realistic style (as seen in the rail bird and sailfin lizard) and a more abstract and imaginative style in her paintings contributes to a visually distinctive expression unique to her work. I found a renewed interest in expanding beyond a realistic style of sculpting the figure to explore a more abstract expression of figuration through my inclusion of the figurative wood pieces in both Figure 5 and 6. Working in wood outside of building bases is new to me, however the obvious connection between the wood grain and the nerikomi as well as the freedom of expression of a body not bound by the strict boundaries of realism I feel is in line with my interests in representing a contemporary monstrosity. I had worked with both reclaimed and purchased wood of a similar colour, that I finished with museum wax to preserve the raw look of the wood while revealing a minimal satin finish. I had completed a series of minor experiments attempting to dye the wood with stains and pigment with no success, I am interested in continuing my experiments to include different types of woods and pre-stained woods to see if it will add to the visual richness of the pieces.

Having been familiar with both Shary Boyle and Marigold Santos for a decade or more at this point, it is inspiring to witness the growth and continued development of their practices visually and conceptually. I think there were moments over the course of my research creation in which I overly focused on what I did not accomplish vs being able to find pride in what I did achieve. Which was a monumental shift in material and process exploration as well as a conceptual foundation that will continue to shift and expand into my own distinct and visual symbolic expression and personal mythology of the monstrous woman.

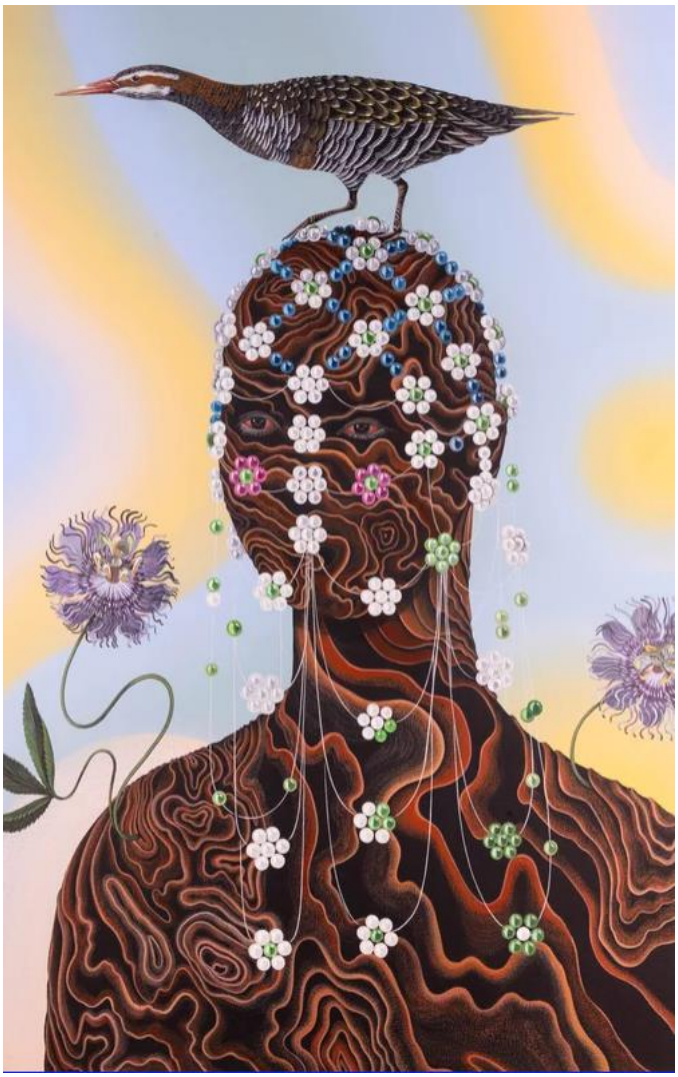

Figure 9. Marigold Santos, *shroud caring for self (tikling/ rough banded rail)*, 2023. Acrylic, pigment, gesso on canvas. 41 × 26 1/2 × 2 in.

https://www.artsy.net/artwork/marigold-santos-shroud-caring-for-self-tikling-slash-ruff-banded-rail

Figure 10. Marigold Santos, *shroud caring for self (ibid / sailfin lizard)*, 2023. Acrylic, pigment, gesso on canvas. 41 × 26 1/2 × 2 in

https://www.artsy.net/artwork/marigold-santos-shroud-caring-for-self-ibid-slash-sailfin-lizard

Conclusion

I can say with absolute assurance that I did not expect my work to shift so dramatically through engaging with research creation over this MFA program. I am grateful to have worked through and developed as many new processes as I did by responding to the facilities here at the University, though my stubbornness got in my way more often than I care to admit. If the aim of both the patriarchy and misogyny is to in part control women and to man (if you will) the reins of our stories and the autonomy over our bodies, then my research creation is an attempt at a counterstrike. There is a continued assault against autonomy over bodies, and specifically those bodies that do not belong to cis white men. If monster theory describes in part, a creature created that reflects the culture, fears, and anxieties in which it was born (Cohen, 1996), then my monstrous women will work to embody contemporary attitudes surrounding bodily autonomy. The process of constructing the patterns in the nerikomi speaks to a loud and aggressive transformation that reveals a beautiful and grotesque shift of inside taking over outside in a bold and colourful typography of pattern. The nerikomi, wood, and wig hair, work to redefine the visual boundaries of the monster to reflect the original stories of monstrous female transformations of mythology, beginning with my muse, Medusa, while attempting to reclaim the monstrous from the stronghold of misogyny. Perhaps though my monstrous women will become something entirely different, perhaps they will shed their connections to monstrosity all together and give space to clay, to nerikomi, and laminated wood to build their own symbolic visual world while crafting their own modern mythology.

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