Among These Things

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AMONG THESE THINGS

A Thesis Presented

by

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Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Art
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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. BORDERS, IDENTITY AND BODILY FLUIDS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. THE SWARM</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE BODY</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hystermia</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TECHNICAL INFORMATION</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARTIST INFLUENCES</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHOTO OF THE ARTIST AT WORK</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMAGE IDENTIFICATION</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPACT DISK OF IMAGES</td>
<td>IN POCKET</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Untitled (Red Wall), acrylic and graphite on vellum, 24” x 18”, 2008…4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. White Swarm #1, Watercolor and graphite on vellum, 24” x 18”, 2008..8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Prophetess, Watercolor and colored pencil on vellum, 60” x 36”, 2008..11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hysterical Self-Portrait, Graphite on vellum, 60” x 36”, 2008………16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

“…The body can and does function to represent, to symbolize, social and collective fantasies and obsessions: its orifices and surfaces can represent the sites of cultural marginality, places of social entry and exit, regions of confrontation or compromise.”

As I began my exploration of the human body, I most often started by looking through any reference materials that explained the functions of the body through visual examples. Anatomy books explained such things as food digestion, zoology defined human/animal behavior, medical journals pin pointed diseases and cures. But the beautifully rendered images of the uterine lining before menses could not explain the fear and disgust we may feel towards a menstruating woman. A color diagram of a working colon could not illuminate the shame we associate with feces. Our attempt to control the body and the way shame is so heavily attached to what we cannot control does not just reveal bodily functions; it reveals our deepest fears and desires, both as individuals and collectively as a culture. My series of drawings are not simply scientific images. Through the intensive process of drawing small graphite circles and combining them with the viscous nature of watercolors, they begin to change. Size and scale no longer hold as much importance and the precision of scientific illustrations make way for a messier visual metaphor for lived experience. By showing a body turned inside out, a body without containment, I attempt to reveal what we dread and yearn for most.
We leave traces of ourselves. The bodies we inhabit, encased with permeable membranes, leak and drip, leaving reminiscences of ourselves behind. There are strict regulations on bodily fluids in the society we live in. Bodily fluids are considered dangerous wastes, unsanitary messes that pose a threat to our health and therefore need to be properly regulated, cleaned and hidden. But bodily fluids do not simply threaten public well being; they threaten our identity as complete human beings. A large part of our personal integrity is based on the maintenance of the borders between our bodies and public space. To feel that one has the power to willfully decide what enters and exits the body is to feel in control and whole. Yet the permeable membrane that serves as the boundary of our bodies allows fluids to freely transgress those borders. These fluids, be it blood, spit, semen, vomit or urine rarely have a timed schedule, spilling and seeping at will.

_Volatile Bodies_ author Elizabeth Grosz examines our endless regulation over fluids in this way:

“Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside…They affront a subject’s aspiration toward autonomy and self-identity…They attest to the irreducible “dirt” or disgust, the horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence or impossibility of the “clean” and “proper.” They are engulfing, difficult to be rid of; any separation from them is not a matter of certainty…their control is a matter of vigilance.”

As Grosz explains, bodily fluids create a mess. They are a testament to our lack of control over the elements of our own bodies and environment. For all these reasons, for
the threats to health and identity, fluids are seen as disgusting, shameful and terrifying, yet they are a confirmation of our existence in the world. They are necessary for our survival.

Julia Kristeva comments, “My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drops so I might live…” While bodily fluids may be seen as repulsive, their presence reminds us that we are alive.

Similar to bodily fluids, we monitor our emotions in public spaces. Unlike the days when as toddlers, our temper tantrums or crying fits were spontaneous, as adults, these outbursts would be completely unacceptable and embarrassing. The emotions we feel, while having entirely different functions from bodily wastes, go through a similar process of expulsion and regulation. We experience anger, sadness, lust, happiness, inwardly at first, and depending on the intensity of the emotion, we express it outwardly, through crying or yelling, any number of ways. The emotions, once felt only to ourselves, cross a border from a private sphere to a public one. Our identities as rational humans are inextricably tied to our ability to decide when, where and how we express emotion. The loss of control over our emotions would be just as shameful as the loss of control over our bodily functions. And yet, just like the necessity to expel fluids from our body, the expression of emotions is required to remain psychologically well balanced.

The drawings are an attempt to express both the fear of making a mess, of making the invisible visible as well as the necessity and beauty in expressing and releasing what has been kept inside. In my work, the hundreds upon hundreds of graphite circles, which I refer to as a swarm, are constantly pushing, stretching or breaking through the boundaries of the page, mimicking the way our repressed bodily functions and emotions
pass borders to become recognized. The semi-frosted drafting vellum, upon which the work is created, blends into the white of the wall and thus becomes a part of the viewer’s space. Due to the transparent surface, there are no clear borders to keep the teeming graphite swarm contained. With the borders gone, the safety associated once associated with those borders disappears too. *Untitled (Red Wall)* was created to highlight the tension between two opposing forces.

![Figure 1. Untitled (Red Wall), acrylic and graphite on vellum, 24” x 18”, 2008](image)

The red oval shapes are metaphors for red blood cells. The red cells have arranged themselves in a tenuous wall and yet, it seems just as the wall is being constructed, it is broken apart by a large graphite swarm. The swarm starts at the top of the page and travels downward, leaving a large void at the center of its mass. The swarm becomes the most dense right above the red cell border. It pushes the cells apart, breaks
through and reconstitutes the swarm just beyond the red cells. The direction of the piece moves seemingly from top to bottom, but there is a question as to whether the red cells have just broken apart or are in some desperate attempt to reconstruct themselves as a whole once again. There is a desire to always keep the direction of the flow ambiguous, to mimic the way the body, in particular the female body, is in a constant state of flux, simultaneously receiving and releasing.
CHAPTER 2

THE SWARM

Piles of ants in an anthill and the buzzing swarm of bees have always terrified me. Their teeming, unfettered excessiveness has always sent chills down my spine. Inspired by this visceral reaction I had to swarms of insects, I felt compelled to create drawings that used a visual swarm to describe the body’s revulsion towards this excess, namely the fear of excessive fluids or emotions. Furthermore, I was attracted to the way a swarm has similar qualities to liquid. The amorphous mass can take the shape of its container and seems impossible to hold, elements of the mass will eventually leak out. With this in mind, the amassing of small, graphite circles is meant to represent the many elements in our minds and bodies that are regulated yet seem to always remain out of our control. The hordes of circles are juxtaposed with the scientific imagery that uses a concrete and understandable language to explain the body. The intestines, ovaries, breasts and uterine lining I draw create order and boundaries. They are elements of the body that the viewer can recognize. The graphite circles, however, have no fixed shape, obey no boundaries and are not recognizable as any entity belonging to the human body. Despite our best efforts, bodily fluids leak and emotions reveal themselves. Similarly, the graphite circles burst through boundaries, they appear where seemingly they should not, and ultimately disobey the rational orderliness of scientific language. The dark graphite dominates the page, it demands attention above all other elements.

The swarm is a large number of individual things that moves adeptly and unpredictably as if it is one singular object. The very fact that a swarm acts as one object, but could, potentially, break into separate elements becomes terrifying for a possible
victim. One could defend against an attack by a single being, but being attacked by a swarm means being attacked by hundreds or thousands. Likewise, in the drawings, the graphite swarms are made of individual circles. One small, seemingly insignificant circle can accumulate to create a large, teeming, undeniable mass. Each small circle, just like one worried thought or lustful impulse is inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, but when grouped, the circles, the anxious and lustful thoughts, become large formations demanding attention. The work plays off the fear that we are always at a tipping point of becoming too much, and therefore becoming messy. In a society that admires controlled and rational people, we do not like what becomes messy. We fear the idea that our insecurities and the most vulnerable aspects of our body can accumulate and expose themselves.

Robert Rawdon Wilson explains,

“The sense of self is rather thin-skinned and open to violation. Invasion, violation, in the guise of needles and knives, may be terrifying, but, as countless horror films have shown, massified insects, in hives, nests or swarms, may be even more frightening, more invasive in their multitude.”

Besides the harm it could inflict, the terrifying aspect of a swarm lies in the fact that it has the power to absorb us. To lose oneself to the teeming swarm means the individual self you have worked so hard to attain disintegrates into the crowd. If the swarm has similar components to liquids, the fears are similar as well. We want to contain liquids and feel that our borders are steadfast. A swarm’s many individual components and mysterious movements pose a threat to our personal borders.

I have always strived to create work that oscillates between desperately wanting to lose oneself in an emotion, loosening the reigns of social regulation, and being
completely fearful of the lack of control. There is a danger in expressing emotions, a
danger of making the invisible visible. The danger lies in the fact that what is said cannot
be unsaid and what is released cannot always be reeled back in. The swarm becomes an
apt metaphor for what is both dangerous and fascinating.

Figure 2. White Swarm #1, Watercolor and graphite on vellum, 24” x 18”, 2008

In the drawings *White Swarm #1*, the graphite swarm is imposed over a multitude
of watercolor marks, painted to look like white blood cells. At the center of the white
cells, a watery purplish red pigment has pooled, resembling an opening or recess in the
body. A large, buzzing formation of graphite circles floats on the top layer of the
drawing. There are two bulbous entities created from the circles, these two shapes meet
half way down the page to form a long, trickling line that ends at the bottom of the page
where circles are congealing, falling and simultaneously bouncing back upwards. There
is simultaneously a sense of gravity and weightlessness. While the viewer recognizes that white blood cells are integral to the body, the graphite circles seem foreign. There is an uneasy sense that the swarm may do harm to the body. The swarm moves by its own logic, draws attention to itself with its multitude and amorphous shape, and refuses to comply with any containment. The swarm is excessive and indulgent in a way that we have been taught not to be.

The swarm in the drawings always has a dual role to play. On one hand, it creates a feeling of tension. The dark value of the graphite overpowers the other material used to describe the body and the uniform shape of the circles seems less organic than the watercolor and the pastel formations. These attributes render the graphite swarm foreign to the body and potentially dangerous. On the other hand, the swarm is also meant to represent the desire to recognize the elements of ourselves that we feel the need to repress. There is a beauty and power in that action and thus the swarm cannot only be seen as frightening. The swarm is carefully drawn and composed in a way that the viewer is mesmerized by its freedom of movement and sheer multitude. A swarm is terrifying and awe inspiring because the parts that create the whole outnumber us. The graphite swarm must differ from the more organically drawn body because it does what the body at times cannot, demand recognition.
CHAPTER 3

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE BODY

We are in a constant state of flux. We expel fluids and emotions while simultaneously taking them in. Women are particularly susceptible to the social regulation of bodily fluids and emotions. A female’s body have been presented as all the more permeable then that of men and all the more vulnerable to violation. In Grosz’s words,

“In our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment…a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order.”

There is an ebb and flow to the fluids of the female body; an accumulation of substances and an inevitable release. And while there is a natural order and cause for the flow of the female body, the fears of liquid and viscosity still persist. Flow cannot be contained or controlled, it has the potential to cause chaos and this deep-seated fear is thus associated with women. And just as uncontainable fluid is fearsome, it is beautiful in its instinctive flow and freedom. Inspired by the way the uterine lining builds during menses only to rid itself of the accumulation or the way an embryo slowly grows into a child and then is eventually pushed out into the world, I wanted my work to speak to the many things in our minds and bodies that exponentially grow to a point of no return, they must be expelled to survive.

Women have the power to give and sustain life and this power inspires both awe and fear. This fear is often manifested in strict social regulations over the construction and expression of the female body. In response to this, the drawings are both expressions
of the beauty and power of the female body as well as reminders of how a woman’s body and bodily functions can be deemed threatening.

Figure 3. Prophetess, Watercolor and colored pencil on vellum, 60” x 36”, 2008.

In Prophetess, a face, constructed entirely of watercolor, is perched at the top of the page just above two hands. There are no other body parts, yet the rectangular orientation of the vellum implies a complete body. The transparency of the material leaves the fragmented figure more ghost-like than complete. Below the hands, where a figure’s abdomen would be, there is a faint mass of oval shapes and pigment. The presence of the shapes seems to have no origin, but due to its placement on the page, it references a female’s reproductive organs. Prophetess represents that which is both beautiful and terrifying.

Prophetess is not entirely welcoming. The mass placed near the abdomen is ambiguous, and implies a formless viscosity that could take over the entire figure if
needed. We do not know if the cells are dropping away from her body or accumulating. We also do not know if the event is benevolent or threatening. The female figure is slightly larger than life and if the viewer stands directly in front of the piece, the viewer’s body is implicated, transferring the fear we have for Prophetess’s body to our own. Furthermore, the transparency of the vellum, and the way it disappears into the wall is essential in highlighting the fear of broken borders of the body. The accumulation of watery cells is now contained to the page, but at any moment could spill out into our space.

While she is fragmented, Prophetess does not appear to be harmed or frightened. She has a serene face and the warm colors of the paint indicate calm, not pain or illness. The liquidity of the watercolor forms a female face almost by happenstance. The use of aqueous materials, such as the watercolor used to describe Prophetess’ face and hands, is highly important as it explores the association of liquids and formlessness to the female body. Her hands indicate an event happening within her, she points downward, wanting to draw your attention to this action while she herself does not look. At the heart of the Prophetess drawing, the woman represented is in control. She shows the viewer the interior, reproductive world of her body that she is not only aware of but also happy with. It is the viewer, not the drawn female figure, which must deal with why the accumulating viscosity of her body could be potentially frightening.

Prophetess is not meant to provide any affirmation. While the events happening within the figure are unspecified and could be seen as disturbing in their unfettered accumulation, the female’s hands and calm face indicate that she is inviting us into an
invisible world to see what one could not see before. She asks us to confront what is both frightening and fascinating.
CHAPTER 4

HYSTERIA

Hysteria is defined as an uncontrollable outburst of emotion, often associated with irrationality. As a medical affliction, hysteria has a complicated and varied past. In antiquity, the study of the uterus was found to be helpful when diagnosing menstrual and childbearing ailments. With this in mind, physicians felt the uterus could help explain other illnesses as well and began to infer that unexplainable symptoms such as choking, convulsing, loss of breath, speech and sensibility and a heavy head were the result of a wandering uterus that had misplaced itself within a female’s body. In the 19th century, the uterus was not the sole factor in diagnosing hysteria. During this time, physicians felt that a “disrupted nervous system” was to blame for a hysterical patient, who often “did not permit her reproductive organs to function normally.” The disease no longer was seen as a physical ailment, but rather an ailment of the nervous system that manifested physically in the body of the patient. As the nervous system played a more central role in hysteria, doctors found that there was a higher instance of male patients, slowly changing the idea that only women were afflicted with hysteria, although the majority of those diagnosed were still female.

Although I feel that science and culture have moved beyond the ancient and 19th century definition of hysteria and its association with women, I am very interested in how hysteria illuminates the relationship between the mind and body. It shows that instead of a concrete separation between an all controlling mind and a subservient body, the relationship is much more equal and entangled than we are at times lead to believe. The presence of hysterical symptoms can actually be seen as the mind and body’s subversive
act against a socially accepted way of acting or looking. The mind and body, more than acting together, act simultaneously to process situations. As the rational and cerebral aspects of a human are confronted with a trauma they are unable to process, the body manifests physical ailments to draw attention to the trauma happening within.

Some writers, including Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth*, have theorized that the typical 19th century symptoms of hysterical women, which included outbursts of anger or fear, paralysis and convulsions, were the body’s response to a century that prevented them the freedom to express their feelings and even less freedom to express sexuality. Similarly, the current epidemic of anorexia among young women may be the body’s answer to a society that wants women to be thin, voluptuous, athletic, sexy and demure all at the same time. In each example, the body has concurrently acted as the mind continues to process the present situation.

The mind is asked to repress and control bodily functions and emotions and is asked to do so on an endless basis. As it has been mentioned before, this unrelenting task is an impossible one; our bodies are not entirely containable. Therefore, the mind has been presented with a task it cannot carry out. The work attempts to draw attention to the conflict by illuminating the interior world of the body. Psychological conflicts are physically felt in the body, just as illness and physical trauma are. I attempt to give a visual reference of what it feels like to be anxious, lustful, and enraged. The outpouring of bodily fluids goes hand in hand with the outpouring of emotion, both are felt and are represented in the work. In this sense, the body speaks just as loudly as the mind, calling attention to itself by making the invisible visible.
In *Hysterical Self-Portrait*, I represent the antiquated diagnosis for hysteria. A group of drawn circles forms the shape of a uterus and hangs just above a massive graphite swarm that covers most of the page. Within the large swarm, there is the negative space of a uterus of the same size of the uterus suspended above, indicating that the positive uterus has dislodged from its original site and now is floating away.

The swarm has come to represent what is repressed and hidden, and what the mind attempts to control. In *Hysterical Self-Portrait*, there can be no control over the excesses of the body because the body is represented entirely through the excessively drawn circles. When the mind could not resolve the need to both repress and express, the body represented in my drawings speaks by bringing attention to the conflict through its multitude. *Hysterical Self-Portrait* does not seem hysterical in its composition, rather there is a quietness about the drawing. The mass creates an ambiguous shape that at one
place looks like a large blanket and in another like the curve of a human shoulder or the sleeve of a dress. There is a ghostly, ephemeral way in which the uterus floats above its former home, leaving just enough space to still be connected. *Hysterical Self-Portrait*, while quiet, becomes hysterical with each and every circle drawn.
CONCLUSION

In an interview for *Between Artists*, Felix Gonzales Torres discussed the many driving forces behind his paper stack and candy pile pieces. Torres recognized that by making the paper stacks and candy piles, he was refusing “to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of a disappearing, changing, unstable and fragile form.”

To explain some of his artistic choices, Torres referred back to a Freudian theory that states “we rehearse our fears to lessen them.” Torres felt this was especially true in his own work. Audiences were allowed to take away individual pieces from the massive candy piles he created. Even though the act was permitted, the thinning of the pile was a painful reminder of the deterioration of Torre’s partner to AIDS. My work similarly practices what we fear, constantly confronting what we dread most about the body. Each small circle and dripping watercolor mark attempts to put the viewer face to face with the perceived fallibility of humans. As the circles accumulate and envelop cells and organs, a growing feeling reminds us that we have very little control over our bodies and even less over our surrounding environment, but the work refers to more than just insecurity, there is also life and freedom.

Our comfort with our bodies shifts easily, never settling in a totally secure place. We are at one moment disgusted and the next in awe of what the body is capable. The drawings too quickly shift. They are at once aggressive and invasive, beautiful and delicate. At times the drawings present the body as exposed and open to violation, at other times, defiant, mysterious.

It has never been my intent to construct a view of the body that is merely powerless or in contrary, simply beautiful. The drawings are never firmly categorized in
just one way, thus they are then able to speak to the very rich, complex and endlessly shifting relationships we have with our bodies.
TECHNICAL INFORMATION

The drawings were created on single-sided, semi-frosted drafting vellum, that is approximately 24” x 18” or 60” x 36” in size. The vellum was hung in the studio using Scotch tape or clipped to the wall. The graphite swarm was drawn using Paper Mate 0.7 mm mechanical pencils. The 18” x 24” are pre-made to that size, but the larger pieces are cut from a roll and then measure while hanging on the wall. They are measured to be closely 5’5”, which corresponds with my own height.

The drawing Untitled (Landscape) was created by first drawing with a cream colored soft pastel. I then used Karat watercolor crayons to paint the several sepia colored oval shapes. The accumulation of circles was drawn next using the previously mentioned .07 mm mechanical pencil.

The drawings White Swarm #1, White Swarm #2 and were made by first painting the watercolor cells and then drawing on the opposite side of the vellum with mechanical pencil. However, Uterus was made by first painting the shape of the uterus at the bottom of the page and then drawing small graphite circles on the same side of the page. In contrast, the pieces entitled Self-Portrait in Lymph Nodes and Prophetess were largely created with just the use of watercolor; although Prophetess also includes a mass of oval cells drawn with Prisma Color colored pencils. Prophetess was laid out on a table to more aptly control the aqueous material, but Self-Portrait in Lymph Nodes was painted while being completely taped to the wall.

Untitled (Red Wall) was made much the way Uterus was, however, instead of using watercolor, the colored pigment is acrylic paint. The Untitled White Series of white oval shapes was made only using white watercolor paint. I would start at a random point
on the page and move outward from there. As marks dried, I would paint over them to achieve a layering effect. And finally, *Hysterical Self-Portrait* was created with only mechanical pencil allowing the graphite circles to accumulate to create larger shapes. I started by drawing a uterus shape and then flipping the page to continue the graphite swarm on the other side.

After completing any graphite drawings, I would fix the graphite by spraying them with either Aqua Net or Suave aerosol hairspray.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ARTIST INFLUENCES

Felix Gonzalez Torres
Janine Antoni
Kiki Smith
Cynthia Lin
Matthew Ritchie
Hiroyuki Doi
Julie Mehretu
Chloe Piene
IMAGE IDENTIFICATION

4. Untitled (Red Wall #2), 24” x 18”, graphite and watercolor on vellum, 2008.
5. Untitled (Red Wall #1), 24” x 18”, graphite and acrylic on vellum, 2008.
6. White Swarm #2, 24” x 18”, graphite and watercolor on vellum, 2008.
7. White Swarm #1, 24” x 18”, graphite on watercolor on vellum, 2008.
11. #1 from Untitled White series, 24” x 18”, watercolor on vellum, 2008.
12. #2 from Untitled White Series, 24” x 18”, watercolor on vellum, 2008.
13. #3 from Untitled White Series, 24” x 18”, watercolor on vellum, 2008.
14. #4 from Untitled White Series, 24” x 18”, watercolor on vellum, 2008.

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