The Vagina Dentata Series

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“There’s a lot of vagina in our work, but it is not about vaginas, rather we are inventing a new form [of] language radiating a female power that cannot be conveyed in any other way at this time...As women artists we are presenting an image of woman’s body and spirit as that which cannot and must not be colonized either sexually, economically, or politically.”

-Faith Wilding

1 Women’s Art News; How the West Was Won, pg.15 1980
Intro

Discussing the female genitalia is not something often done in public, especially not loudly, or in restaurants, coffee shops, or art establishments, as has been my practice recently. I’ve had deeper conversations with people I just met, sparked mutual confessions of positive and negative sexual experiences, and aggressively interrogated assumptions around women’s sexuality.

The female body has been disavowed by society as a whole, to the point where even our mothers are not expected to teach us to know and love ourselves on a physical level. There is, in fact, no conception of this whatsoever within mainstream society.

“Fetishised within the realm of art and pathologised within the discourses of medicine, the female body lives a double life. Fetishism is always based upon disavowal; socially marginal, woman is, however, symbolically central.”

Women cannot be separated from their bodies, even though we have been reduced to just the physical through fetishization. The female body has been relegated to the status of ‘hole’ instead of whole, and the great work ahead will be undoing the cultural history behind that to begin the process of reclamation.

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2 McGrath pg. 13
Why Discuss Sexual Violence Through Art?

“Feminism has re-theorized agency, re-thought the relationship between language and the body, discourse and experience, academic theory and political practice…But the disruptive, troublesome body can never be totally subordinated to discourse.”

Bodies can only be couched in words for so long. Since conceptions around the place of the female body in society are so deeply rooted in the visual/physical, there must be a visual/physical way of representing ideas about them too. Using visual art to interrogate the factors surrounding sexual violence against women in our culture is intuitive. It uses physical mediums to represent experience in a visual way. Further, visual art is uniquely positioned to encourage conversation.

People encountering art have been socially trained to share their opinions of it and often do automatically, since visual actualization is inherently immediate. A purely textual academic paper has very different distribution channels and audiences than a drawing shown in a gallery context does. The socioeconomic barriers to accessing both cannot be ignored, but through visual representation the availability for intellectual consumption is greatly expanded.

The production of the Vagina Dentata Series, seven 23” x 35” drawings on synthetic yupo paper, was aimed at creating a relatable set of images that could convey the complexity of the issues surrounding sexual violence against women. It was also important to me to expand the contexts and mediums through which I explored this topic. Anything to do with the body is fraught with individual association; literally drawing out these issues allows the viewer greater proximity to the lived experience of sexual trauma.

Making the decision to present these issues using the explicit depiction of female genitalia was difficult. Previously, I had considered artwork that featured vaginas, or “central

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3 McGrath, pg.8
core images” as they are sometimes referred to, to be consigned to a very distinct, mostly pink, sphere that I have no interest in inhabiting. Part of what precipitated my entire project was the realization that even though I was a) female, and b) an artist with a strong figure drawing background, I could not accurately draw a vulva off the top of my head. Upon this realization I felt ashamed of my ignorance, and knew that this disconnect was also intertwined with the larger cultural issues that contributed to my own experiences of sexual trauma. This mostly has to do with silencing bodies and a lack of information being shared due to a sense of culturally induced shame. “Central core images do not, despite some critics’ claims, somehow ‘reduce’ women to vaginas, holes: they can, rather, make both the literal (the vagina) and the metaphorical (achievements) seen, giving women depths, complexities and identities.”

It’s important that so-called central core images are given space and place. Expanding their presence can contribute to positive female body image by acknowledging the vulva/vagina’s presence and existence, where as now it is denied and obscured.

Depictions of the female genitalia are phantoms in our society- purveyed by the pornographic more than any other medium and aimed at an audience consuming them for sexual gratification instead of for information. If female physical representation is so denied, how are females in society expected to have a strong grasp of their own physical realities? Partly for my own edification, but to materialize the representation of the female genitalia on a larger and more public scale, I began drawing detailed representations of vulvas in my work. They are the opposite of reductive; they are additive- adding a visual/physical representation, in an art context, to lived female reality. “Feminism as both a political practice and theoretical field places the female body at its de-centered heart. However, this is not any body but a body that can only

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4 Rees, pg.152
be understood in its historical materiality, rather than sexed specificity.” Broken down, this refers to the longer tradition of representing the female body, not making work about individuals. This focus keeps the representation of the female genitalia away from the pornographic context specifically.

The historical materiality that McGrath invokes in her book *Seeing Her Sex: Medical Archives and the Female Body*, is what I’m working with in the *Vagina Dentata Series*. My representation of the female genitalia in the *Vagina Dentata Series* is intended to further inclusivity and begin rehabilitating these depictions as ones that can function in a feminist context. Figural representation throughout art history has a strong tradition of allegorical portrayals. This allows my work to be read as more broadly archetypal, even though I’m primarily working from personal experience. It is important to me that the vulvas not read as being autonomized from the larger person they’re a part of. In an extended review of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Table* in her book *Vagina: a literary and cultural history*, Emma Rees includes in her description a beautiful characterization:

“This is the empowered, pulsating, producing cunt; like the parturient body, it’s one which can terrify people. It ‘shouldn’t’ be seen. Chicago invites us to look, and in that act of looking, of seeing the see-word, we also view an entire history which is kept unseen because of the perceived shame of the unseen body. If we reveal one (the cunt) to plain sight, then we reveal the other (women’s power) too.”

In the *Vagina Dentata Series*, representations of female genitalia are revelatory. The vulvas in my work are empowered, active, and included in the conception of the self. They are meant to be the start of reclamation, a way to visualize a part of the female body that has been highly ostracized to the point of otherness.

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5 McGrath, pg.8
6 Rees, pg. 161
Instead of silencing physical bodies by continuing to obscure them, it is best to reveal them honestly. Issues of sexual violence are inextricably issues of the body, and the body where the violence occurred must be portrayed openly in order for the issue to be fully considered. Again, the body being portrayed is the larger female archetype, not necessarily the individual. By advancing the representation of the female body in this way, the intention is to stage an intervention in the business as usual.

“...the ground-breaking work of artists like Judy Chicago facilitated interventions, of which Leonard’s [a feminist artist working in the 1990’s] was a particularly powerful example, into the established art scene. Both artists are preoccupied with making women seen, literally and metaphorically, and not obscene.”

The female body is always obscene in our culture- always hinting somehow at the prurient interest. The representations of female genitalia in my work actively combat the obscene classification by being un-sexy in a cultural sense. The vulva/vaginas in the Vagina Dentata Series are powerful in a way overtly dangerous to the status quo.

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7 Rees, pg.48
Fear

There’s a primordial fear of female creative power, represented and evident in the female encapsulation of the void. The female reproductive system is contingent upon negative spaces, which will always be greater than positive protrusions, for their limits aren’t firmly set. The refusal to conform to one determined shape is threatening since it cannot be quantified - it is a relative unknown. From the perspective of the male-bodied person, questions would obviously arise from the realization that the body they came from, their mother’s, is unlike the male’s body in structure. Who are you, what are you, if you are born of something else?

All these compounding unknowns are handmaidens of fear. Female anatomy becomes a threat, related to a potential of male subsumation, absorption, and castration. This overwhelming castration would not just be physical, but a complete loss of selfhood and being into the vastness of the female void. Summarily, the fear of death. Irigaray dramatically turns to this juxtaposition between life and death as representative of the archetypal struggle between male and female:

“...death will be the only representative of an outside, of a heterogeneity, of an other: woman will assume the function of representing death (of sex/organ), castration, and man will be sure as far as possible of achieving mastery, subjugation, by triumphing over the anguish (of death) through intercourse, by sustaining sexual pleasure despite, or thanks to, the horror of closeness to that absence of sex/penis, that mortification of sex that is evoked by woman…”

Irigaray makes the jump here between fear and fetishization. The way she sets up fear as perhaps being integral to desire is hugely important to sexual violence, especially in how that affects power dynamics between genders. It is clear line of logic that when something presents a threat, or is tangent to danger, it is justifiable to forcefully conquer it. When the female body is- subtly, unconsciously, institutionally, culturally- feared, women are set up to be on the receiving end of violent behavior.

8 Irigaray, pg. 27
Medicalized Oppression

Death, darkness, and pain are all concepts that have been associated with women through the lens of fear. They are mechanisms of rationalizing female oppression. In Roberta McGrath’s book *Seeing Her Sex: medical archives and the female body* she recounts the ascent of modern gynecological and obstetric medical practice in the western world during the 1800s. Practices around women’s healthcare were extremely altered in the course of the Scientific Revolution. McGrath’s focus is on how women began to be portrayed and written about in the light of new photographic technologies. Much of her book relates to concerns about gathering knowledge and the latest brand of non-inclusive rationality imposed on the female body. Introducing the ways in which women’s bodies were anatomically portrayed in order to purportedly further medical knowledge, McGrath tells us:

“It is not a knowledge born of love, but a defensive knowledge born of fear. It is a means not to comprehend or understand the world but to control its meanings and master its material. It is, in short, a discourse of domination. Produced in the infancy of industrialisation, it is a language that betrays a child-like belief in man’s omnipotence.”

The western fields of obstetrics and gynaecology have never rid themselves of the domination discourse they were born with. McGrath is really giving form to the scientific system that came into being in the 1800s and which completely disavowed the more subjective systems of belief that people had lived with until then. With this break in tradition came a need to quantify, and it was expressed in ways that completely disenfranchised anyone female. That this mode of discourse was taken up strongly in the medical profession damaged the lives of women profoundly.

The female body is still problematized in contemporary medical practice, itself is a feedback loop between the societal and scientific.

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9 McGrath, pg. 12
“The term gynaecology comes into play sometime between 1820 and 1850; it signified the pathology of all women’s bodies, not just the pregnant female body. Gynaecology quickly came to mean gynaecopathology, and this meaning has stayed with it to the present day.”

In the Vagina Dentata Series, I’ve chosen to represent this aspect of female body oriented oppression through the image of the speculum. It is a phallic-shaped intrusion into the female body, and is a tool directly connected to the male-based knowledge of the rigid western medical profession. The speculum is also directly related to seeing into the vagina, which is a form of knowledge practically unavailable to women in regards to their own bodies due to physical positioning. The perspective provided by the speculum and light cannot be afforded to the individual being examined, so not only is it intrusive, it is also exclusive, and therefore perpetuates the disconnect between self (individual) and othered-self (vulva/vagina). Again, the unknown becomes disavowed and feared, and women have been left with fractured understandings of themselves.

Graves speculum, the most common type. Wikimedia licensed for reuse.

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10 McGrath, pg. 34
The unknown begetting danger via fear teleology is at the root of modern western obstetrics and gynecology. McGrath supports this point in her history of the profession in 1800’s Britain:

“The development of obstetrics as a reputable profession for men was not straightforward. The transformation from lay female practice to male medical profession depended not only upon prising the practice of midwifery from the hands of women, but also upon pathologising the female body. This connected obstetrics to gynaecology. The ‘source’ of woman’s pathology was located in her capacity for creating life. Once that connection had been made and turned into practice, women and their diseases were no longer marginal but were perceived to threaten masculinity and men’s health.”

The discourse of domination continues with added silencing of women as valid and valuable individuals in and of themselves. The idea of being threatening is operative- medical practices around the female body were not ideated to improve the health of the female patient, but instead to curtail threats to maleness.

11 McGrath, pg. 34
Teeth

Fear-based connections to the female body are made highly evident in myths surrounding the female genitalia. The one that I find most nuanced and relevant is the legend of *vagina dentata*, which exists in varying forms in a number of cultures’ mythologies around the world. In this story, the fear around female anatomy is crystallized into the physical form of teeth. The basic idea is that there is a woman, or women, who has teeth in their vagina. Sometimes the woman herself is unaware of this fact until a man has intercourse with her and is harmed by the teeth in some way—sometimes getting bit, but most often being fully castrated. In some cases they are killed by this castration. Once the unique state of the woman’s sexual apparatus is found out, the man who encountered it or his representative(s), violently pulls or knocks out the vaginal teeth in order to protect future men encountering the vagina from the same fate.

I read a Native American version of the myth in a class and hadn’t thought much more about it until I was recounting an experience of sexual violence to a close friend and she said, “Do you think things like this would happen if men were the ones who got hurt during sex instead of us [females]? If they could get bit by us?” Upon recalling the myth, I began to consider it a story used to justify and explain the oppression of women’s bodies and sexuality. The vagina had to be tamed and conquered, and had lost its power in the form of teeth in a fight. Based on this, it was acceptable to then use the resulting toothless vagina however desired as a result of its conquered state. A logic formed to reinforce oppression.

Following are excerpts from Verrier Elwin’s 1943 article in the British Journal of Medical Psychology entitled *The Vagina Dentata Legend*. He includes examples of myths from the Chicoltin and Shuswap Native American traditions, the Maori, the Ainu people of Siberia
and the Baiga people of Central India. Elwin did his primary research in Central India, and so
begins with around 15 stories he collected in the field related to Vagina Dentata.

A Brahmin and his pretty daughter came to a Baiga’s house to beg. After they had been fed the Brahmin lay down to sleep, and the girl went into the garden to steal some cucumbers for their supper. The Baiga caught her in the field and had intercourse with her. But she had teeth in her vagina and with these she cut off the Baiga’s penis. He began to shout with pain. His elder brother’s wife, who was in love with him, had been watching to see if he would go to the Brahmin girl or no, and when she heard the noise she ran to the field and said to the girl, ‘Put back the bit you have cut off, or I’ll tell your father.’ At that the girl was frightened and she put the penis back in its place. When it was fixed on again, they laid the girl down on the ground and the Baiga pulled out the teeth with a bit of string. The Baiga soon found himself in love with the Brahmin girl, and after a few days they ran away together.

2. A Baiga story from Bohi, Pandaria Zamindari:

There was a Baiga girl who looked so fierce and angry, as if there was magic in her, that for all her beauty, no one dared to marry her. But she was full of passion and longed for men. She had many lovers, but—though she did not know it—she had three teeth in her vagina, and whenever she went to a man she cut his penis into three pieces. After a time she grew so beautiful that the landlord of the village determined to marry her on condition that she allowed four of his servants to have intercourse with her first. To this she agreed, and the landlord
Towards the end of his article he brings in the myths from other traditions, as follows:

If we know what the moving door means we shall understand the missing tail. The motif is very frequent in the mythology of north-west America, and its unconscious meaning can be studied there with advantage. The Chilcotin and Shuswap tradition of Little Dog contains a series of episodes which evidently all have the same meaning.... Little Dog and his children come to a house with a great stone door. Inside the house sits a woman who is weaving a basket. Suddenly, while they are talking to her they notice the stone door beginning to shut and Little Dog quickly places his staff so that it holds the door open. The boys slip through, and Little Dog after them, but when he pulls the magic staff out behind him his little finger is caught by the door and the end cut off. Now they come to a woman whose vagina is full of teeth. She wants our hero to have intercourse with her, but he first inserts his magic staff into the vagina and breaks her teeth. Then he and all his boys cohabit with her....

If the door is the vagina, the pigeon's tail or the little finger snapped off can only mean the penis.... The passage of the soul is coitus, the soul itself the semen, yet at the gate of the other world we find castration. But primitive views on death are modelled on the castration anxiety, and therefore if by castration we mean death it is natural enough that this should be the preliminary to the entry into heaven.

If there should still be any doubt our meaning is made perfectly clear by the (Maori) myth of Maui, crushed between the opening and closing legs, in the vagina of his ancestress Great Mother Night.
Sarah Alison Miller, in her essay entitled *Monstrous Sexuality: variations on the vagina dentata*, invokes more instances of the legend while placing it in a larger psychological context relating the myth to societal fear of the female. Miller examines wide-ranging instances of the myth, many of which escape the myth form and have become part of human experience. She is constantly relating the myths to real world sensibilities fed by them. As a whole, Miller characterizes the *vagina dentata* legend as follows:

“Perhaps more than any other toothed monster, the *vagina dentata*—the “vagina with teeth”—is monstrous sexuality incarnate. It is seductive, engulfing, treacherous, and transforming. Its bite, rooted in the female sexual organ and aimed at the male sexual organ, transforms sex, which is an amalgam of pleasure and vulnerability, into a dangerous, bloody, deadly affair. The object of pleasure becomes the agent of violence, the passive pleasurable body becomes the active punishing body, and that slippage of meaning is horrifying.”

In a retaliatory sense, this feminine transformation into a position of agency and power to punish is sickly exhilarating. It seems that it would be nice to finally have the power to fight back against the overwhelmingly pervasive sexual exploitation and violence which society is marked by. However, the symbology of teeth transcends that. Teeth as included in the *vagina dentata* are not only offense and defense, but also tools of expression. The teeth give agency, but not only through the lens of violence. In my *Vagina Dentata Series*, the teeth are symbolically important as a sense of power, forging a pathway towards reclamation of the vulvar/vaginal space.

What I believe is missing in the prevailing conception of female sexuality, and which is made very evident through the *vagina dentata* myths here invoked, is individual integration of body parts to equal whole person. As it stands, there is a deep separation between conception of “self” and “vulva/vagina.” Reconciling these ways of thinking is necessary for individual and societal progress. Rees discusses the concept of, to follow her words “cunt as other” through the concept of agency via expression in relating the body to an instrument:

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12 Miller, pg. 312
“This image of the musician controlling his or her instrument is a very persuasive one in terms of identity and selfhood: the body- like an instrument- is subordinate to the will or intention of the individual. What happens, then, when the body is rendered subordinate to the will or intention of another individual? What if the body itself becomes an Other, rebellious and self-destructive?”

Rees then goes on to describe how indeed the female body is an Other to itself, and uses the *vagina dentata* legend, as well as other representations of the vagina in culture, to support this.

Teeth have a chance at biting through stereotypes, of arresting, of intervening. The pervasive presence of oppression has created an environment of ambiguous female selfhood. The normal, every day female body is rendered more visible by how the monstrous, *vagina dentata* bearing body is conceived:

“As a monster, the vagina dentata is a corporeal cipher made to express the conflicts of the cultures that produce it. It expresses the contradictory roles constructed for female sexuality by imagining the vagina to be a threshold that invites and threatens, that ushers new life into the world but also augers death. Conquering, de-toothing, and raping the *vagina dentata* is, in part, an effort to stabilize the meaning of the sexual female body…”

Instead of continuing to live in this oppressive space born of (male) fear, a strong theoretical foundation needs to be formed upon which integrated, expressive, whole female agency can be claimed. Potent and powerful teeth are my answer to a first step towards this, as executed in the *Vagina Dentata Series*.

A bridge between self and othered-self needs to be built- the solidifying factor of which needs to be female reclamation of power. I advocate this can be effectively portrayed through teeth- vaginal teeth. This is also about unifying voices, which is touched upon in Miller’s essay,

“...the female body- with its lipped, and possibly toothed, orifices- is imagined as saying one thing, but meaning another, that it always speaks its sexual availability, even when it sets limits on that availability. The female voice, the one that consents to or refuses 

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13 Rees, pg. 66
14 Miller, pg. 327
sexual acts, is thus stifled while the vagina is ventriloquized to speak the desires and fears of the other.”

When thought of as contributing to speech, teeth are even more important to include in the vaginal space. Rees examines the "vagina loquens", or “the talking vagina” in her book extensively, and makes the observation that whenever it is portrayed it speaks the truth. Even though the stories she analyzes, primarily French fableaux, are highly satirical the idea of a vagina’s voice being perpetually truthful makes sense. It isn’t enough to be able to talk though, and one cannot speak without teeth regardless. For true reclamation of power there need to be teeth.

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15 Miller, pg. 327
Conclusion

This work is a beginning for my art practice - never before have I interrogated an issue in this large a series, let alone an issue this close to my personal experience. In a social practice context, I want this work to give fodder to dialogues about sexual violence, and encourage it to be talked about as openly as possible. It was a very difficult topic for me to explore, and the process of writing about and creating The Vagina Dentata Series was an emotionally painful one. I can only hope that my trajectory in working through these issues can be helpful in furthering understanding or conversation that will promote healing.

In the best case scenario, discussions around sexual violence contribute to preventing violent behavior, as best practices for sexual encounters and fundamental beliefs around gender roles in sexual situations can begin to be examined. Especially if sex isn’t something that is normally discussed, conversations about sexual violence can be highly helpful for sharing knowledge about what constitutes healthy behavior and expectations in sexual engagements and/or relationship settings.

Where the drawings are shown will be a pivotal step in their distribution. I would like them to be available, either in the form of onsite installation or book distribution, to people who are championing the fight against sexual violence. I would also like them to be available to others who have experienced sexual trauma, but I want to avoid triggering negative emotions or flashbacks in any way.

Next, I want to interrogate the reclamation of the whole female body as re-integrated self. In producing The Vagina Dentata Series, I found that anger had to be represented as a necessary step in my healing process. Making angry work was difficult and exhausting, especially as anger is not an emotion I generally keep court with. In the next series I want to leave anger behind.
The void that Irigaray determines as inherently female will be a point of departure in future work; especially in how the void relates to the creative, generative, potential-bearing space invoked in mythology. Medium choice and distribution channels for these ideas will be instrumental to their success in reaching a larger audience. Utilizing more written work through the medium of zines, a format I am already invested in, will be helpful here.

