Research In Practice (ADAD5004)

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Proposed question:

How does the female experience impact the work of female artists?

My proposal will explore three keywords: *Feminism, Zine,* and *Sequential Illustration*. I will be looking at the work of contemporary and historical female artists who interact with these words in their work, and how their identity as women influences their work. I will be exploring how female artists employ certain materials and techniques in their work and how they interact with feminist theory. I will also look at sequential art theory and how it can be used to aid visual storytelling.

Feminism

Feminism is a movement that has seen many different incarnations throughout history, making it famously hard to define. Feminist writer Marie Shear defined feminism as "the radical notion that women are people," (1986); this statement is one with which traditionally the art world has struggled. Historically, fine art and illustration have been male-dominated fields with very few female creators, this environment meant that almost all depictions of women were by men. Feminist artist Judy Chicago struggled with the lack of representation, "Everywhere I looked, I saw representations of the female as passive, seductive, even destructive." (Chicago, 1999, p.16), due to the lack of female artists, she found most of the art unrelatable as a woman. Traditionally, female representation in the work of male artists objectified women and confirmed the notion that women are only "an image, beautiful to look at, defined by her 'looks'" (Pollock, 1988, p.167), as they failed to depict an honest portrayal of women at the time of the piece was made.

Although the feminist art movement has benefited women in the art world, there is still discourse surrounding the treatment of feminist art. Many female artists are now immediately labelled as

feminist artists by critics, even when their art would not be considered feminist art (Freeman, 2016). Art historian Griselda Pollock argues that the term 'feminist art' can unfairly group all women's work; "we must stress the heterogeneity of women's art work, the specificity of individual producers and products" (Pollock, 1988, p. 77) Pollock suggests that by combining all women's artwork into a collective it adheres to a society which devalues women as individuals. However, Pollock also argues that "we have to recognize what women share – as a result of nurture, not nature, i.e. the historically variable social systems which produce sexual differentiation." (Pollock, 1988, p. 77), Pollock could be referring to the use of materials and mediums which have historically had a close connection to femininity such as embroidery and weaving.

Fig 1: *The Dinner Party*, Judy Chicago, 1974-79

Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-79) is a piece that celebrates all aspects of womanhood and highlights often-forgotten female figures, the piece includes many methods and mediums which have been traditionally considered "women's crafts" (Chicago, 1980, p.10) such as china-painting and embroidery. The piece is made up of a ceremonial dining table with thirty-nine place settings commemorating an important woman from history, and on the floor, the names of nine hundred and

ninety-nine other important female figures, both historical and mythological are engraved (Brooklyn Museum, n.d). *The Dinner Party* (1974-79) brings Pollock's quote to life as it recognises what women share (Pollock, 1988, p. 77), through highlighting important female figures and subverting expectations of what is considered women's crafts.

Fig 2: *Noshi and Meg on Earth, Year 2036*, Aya Takano, 2005

In contrast to Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-79) contemporary Japanese artist, Aya Takano's work is rooted in science-fiction and futuristic scenarios. The feminist influence is less blatant in Takano's work as she has never stated that she is a feminist but has stated that: "Living as a female in this society affects to [sic] my work. I want people who are considered socially vulnerable [to] feel free and strong in my painting."(Takano in Hightman, n.d) Much of Takano's work is centred around the naked female form, something which she does not associate with sexualisation "A lot of people think I make direct references to sex in my painting, but that is not the case…my characters just happen to be naked at times." (Takano in Vartanian, 2005, p. 90). Takano's reclamation of the naked female

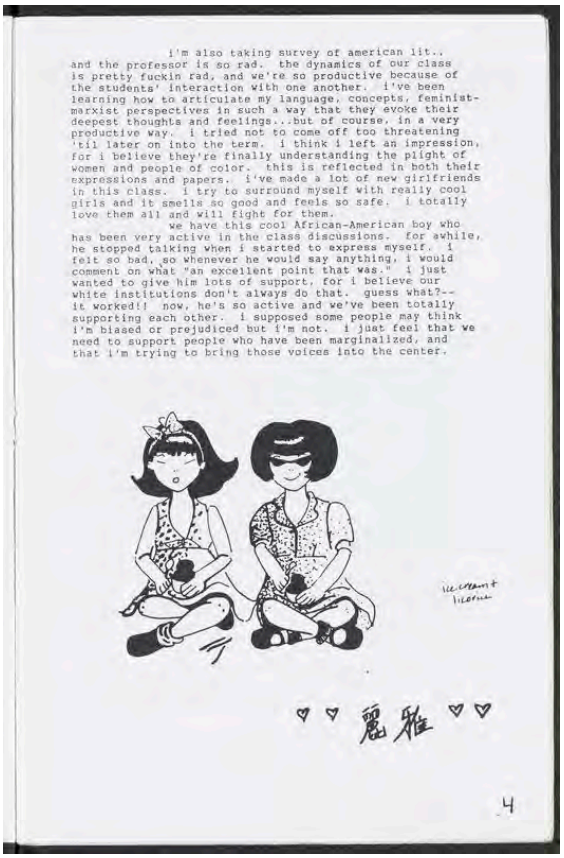
form contrasts with the faceless female nudes historically created by male artists, depicting the naked woman as submissive to the male artist (Duncan, 1973, p.299). Takano's style works in opposition to this cliché as her characters are painted with particularly large heads and eyes in contrast to their androgynous figures. Her use of form is similar to the style found in *Shōjo manga*; a style of Japanese comic often created by women with girls as the primary audience. *Shōjo manga,* although not inherently feminist, "facilitates feminist interpretation due to its creative use of gender transgression in narratives, imagery and practices." (Wakeling, 2011, p. 143), this viewpoint can also be taken into consideration when looking at Takano's work.

Both Chicago and Takano explore the role of women in their work and use their experiences as women to shape how they chose to depict them. Chicago and Takano both subvert preconceived ideas surrounding women in their work, with Chicago choosing to use 'women's crafts' in contemporary art and Takano's use of female nudity in a non-sexualised manner.

Zine

The zine originates from the word "*fanzine*, a term that originated with science fiction magazines of the '30s and '40s" (Friedman, 1997, p. 9) and is now a term that "encompasses any self-published unique work of minority interest." (University of Texas Libraries, n.d) For most of the 20th century, the zine format was used exclusively in fanzines, until the punk movement emerged in the 1970s and publications such as UK-based *Shocking Pink* (1979-1992) began incorporating politics into their zines (Belinky, 2016). Zines became a popular form of creative expression and communication in the 'third wave' feminist movement, defined in the context of the movement as a "community-based form of journalism" (Kidder,2006, p.142). The zine allowed feminists to "articulate their concerns in whatever medium they felt comfortable with" (Kidder,2006, p.142), for example, illustration.

The third wave of Feminism is said to have begun its formation in the United States around 1991-1995 (Heywood, 2006, p. xv), and emerged as a modern successor to the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. Stephanie Samuels argues that “in a third-wave framework, the category of ‘women’ cannot be reduced to assumptions that make all women the same”(Samuels, 2006, p. 20), meaning that third-wave feminists prioritized discussing all matters of social identity regarding gender. The third wave of feminism acknowledged that what constitutes feminist art may include both “mainstream art … but would also recognise grassroots and regional and urban feminist subculture arts” such as “websites, zines, comics” (Samuels, 2006, p. 21), this approach saw increased recognition of feminist illustrators. The shift in the way feminist art was being produced allowed a wider range of people to participate in the movement linking to the vitality of intersectionality in the third wave.



i'm also taking survey of american lit.. and the professor is so rad. the dynamics of our class is pretty fuckin rad, and we're so productive because of the students' interaction with one another. i've been learning how to articulate my language, concepts, feminist-marxist perspectives in such a way that they evoke their deepest thoughts and feelings...but of course, in a very productive way. i tried not to come off too threatening 'til later on into the term. i think i left an impression, for i believe they're finally understanding the plight of women and people of color. this is reflected in both their expressions and papers. i've made a lot of new girlfriends in this class. i try to surround myself with really cool girls and it smells so good and feels so safe. i totally love them all and will fight for them.

we have this cool African-American boy who has been very active in the class discussions. for awhile, he stopped talking when i started to express myself. i felt so bad, so whenever he would say anything, i would comment on what "an excellent point that was." i just wanted to give him lots of support, for i believe our white institutions don't always do that. guess what?-- it worked!! now, he's so active and we've been totally supporting each other. i supposed some people may think i'm biased or prejudiced but i'm not. i just feel that we need to support people who have been marginalized, and that i'm trying to bring those voices into the center.

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Fig 3: *Girl Germs*, Molly Neuman and Allison Wolfe, 1991, p. 4

Zines were used often in the Riot Grrrl movement of the early 1990s, a movement that strove to empower women through music, guerrilla art and zines (Grant, 2006, p. 36). The Riot Grrrl zines were independently created and published by members of the scene and were produced in mass to be given out at shows and Riot Grrrl events (Neuman in Downes, 2007, p. 25). The cheap and accessible method of production of these zines aligned closely with the ideas of inclusivity and intersectionality that were core to the third-wave feminism movement. The zine *Girl Germ*s (1991) featured illustrations done by readers, as seen in Figure 4, by including a collaborative element in the zine it reminded readers of the feminist community.

Examples of non-collaborative zines include Kathleen Hanna's *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* (1994), which could be read as a narrative as unlike *Girl Germs* (1991) Hanna focuses exclusively on one topic. Hanna combines text and image to explore her emotions surrounding the difference between the treatment of male and female musicians. In *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* (1994), Hanna pushes the limits of the zine format and treats the zine as a collection of sequential illustrations, rather than a set of individual pages.

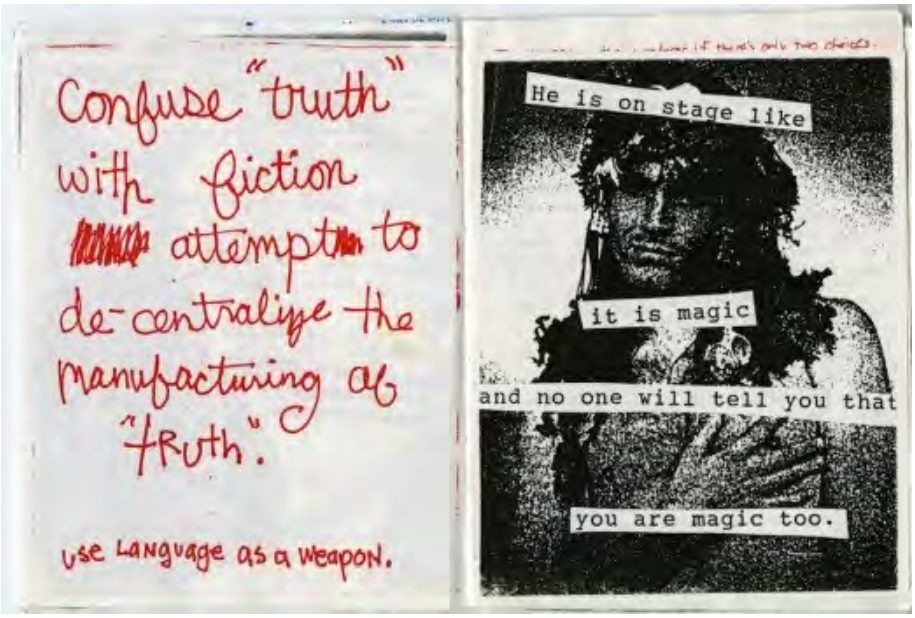

Fig 4: *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar*, Kathleen Hanna, 1994

The contemporary zine scene has been shaped predominantly by the rise of digital zine production and publication. In 2008 Alison Piepmeier argued that:

> "[the paper zine] makes explicit an idea that many zine creators allude and adhere to, the notion that paper is better suited for facilitating human connection than electronic media."
>
> (p. 220)

Piepmeier states that the physical format of the zine helped consumers to better form a relationship with the author as they could hold the physical copy in their hands. Piepmeier also found that one of the zine's charms compared to a book is its physical appearance which is usually small so they can be easily transported and given to people (Piepmeier, 2008, p. 235).

The zine is a medium which has historically been used as a form of communication within communities, particularly during the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s. The format of the zine allows authors to independently produce unique and experimental pieces of work, with or without a narrative. In the Riot Grrrl movement, the zine's low-cost production and ability to reach many people represented the inclusivity and community aspects of third-wave feminism.

Sequential Illustration

Sequential illustration is a form of illustration which has been around for hundreds of years, with one of the earliest recorded examples being Egyptian paintings (McCloud, 1993, p.13). It can be found in many forms, including comics, graphic novels, and artist books, and is often used to represent or tell a narrative, but this is not always the case. One of the charms of sequential illustration is when the same images and symbols are "used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language" (Eisner, 1985, p. 8). Creating a visual language allows artists to convey a narrative or message without having to use text.

The visual makeup of a graphic novel or comic book is most noticeable through its use of panels or frames. According to Eisner, the creation of the comic book is distinguished by the breaking up of the events in a narrative into sequenced segments (Eisner, 1985, p.38) which define how the story flows. The appearance and placement of the panels affect the rhythm of a story, as McCloud argues:

> "Comic panels fracture both time and space offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these movements and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality."
>
> (McCloud, 1993, p.67)

Panels allow the artist to dictate the speed and rhythm a narrative is told, giving them more control over how their work is perceived.

Fig 5: *Beer Night*, Lisk Feng, 2014

In Lisk Feng's *Beer Night* (2014) Feng uses the panel format to tell a two-page story without words. The first page features six evenly spaced identical square frames with different angles. According to Eisner's theory, the straight-edged borders of the panels suggest that the story

takes place in the present tense (Eisner, 1985, p. 44), by using a “conventional container-frame” (Eisner, 1985, p.44) Feng provides the reader with a stage that does not distract from the artwork. Feng uses a range of angles in the comic, beginning with an establishing shot of the environment and then moving inwardly to the shopping bag with the beer. Feng uses what McCloud dubs “subject-to-subject” (McCloud, 1993, p. 71) transitions throughout the comic, in which the artist relies on human imagination to improve the flow of the comic and to keep it concise.

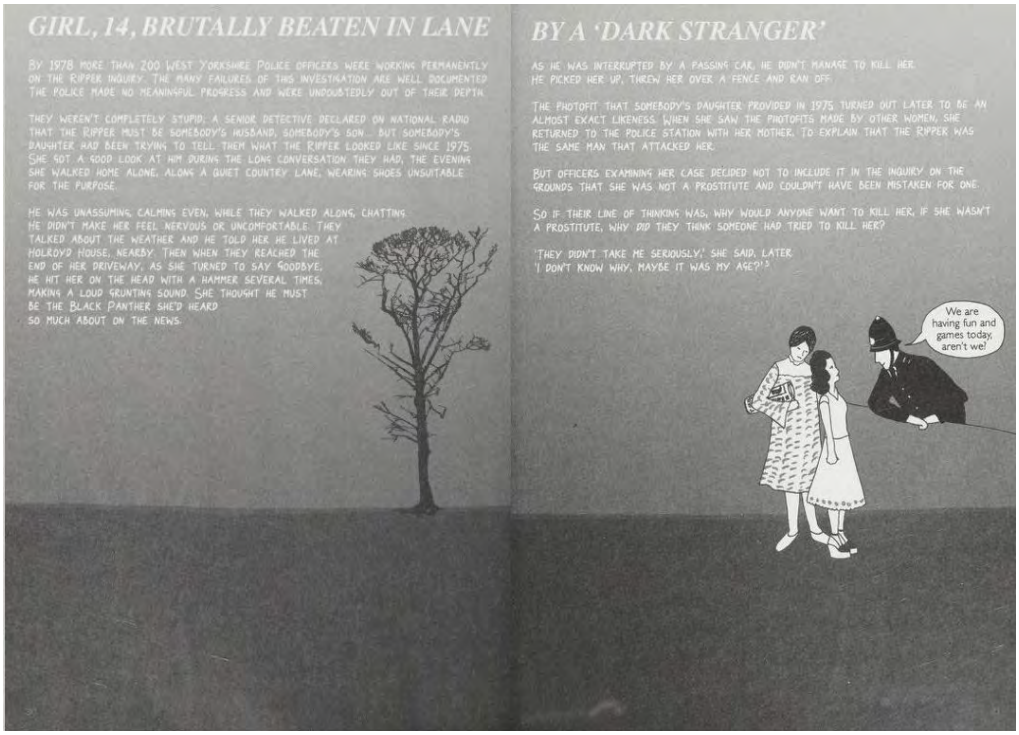

Fig 6: *Becoming Unbecoming*, Una, 2015, pp. 30-31

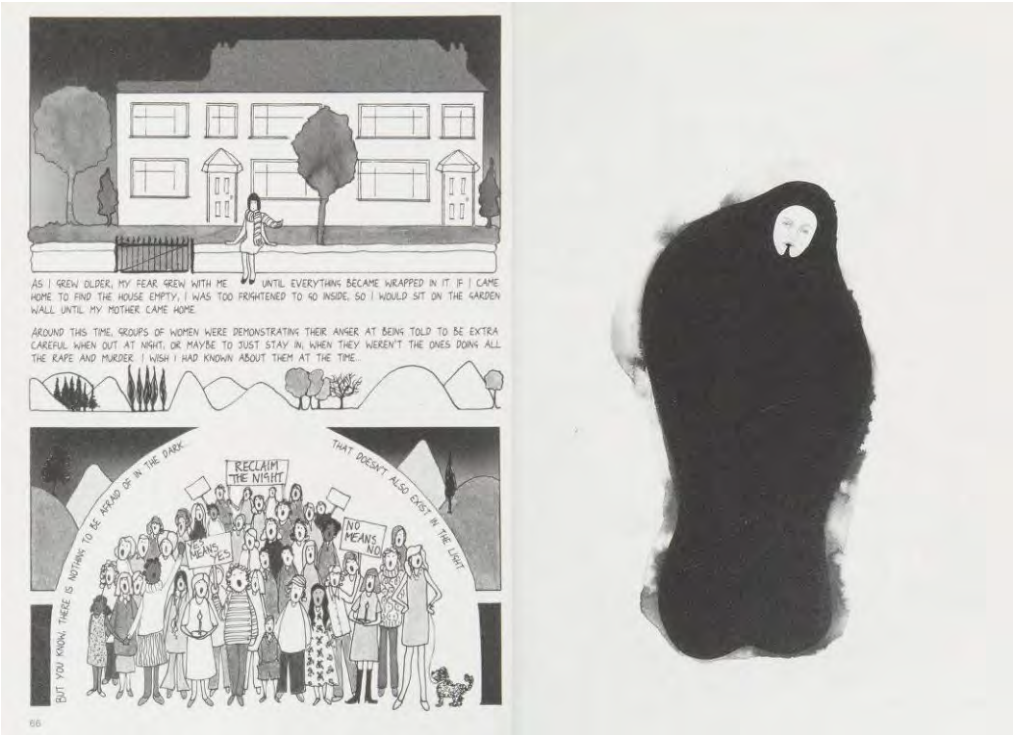

Fig 7: *Becoming Unbecoming*, Una, 2015, pp. 66-67

Some examples of sequential illustration use a combination of different types of framing and panels in their work, for example *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015) by Una. *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015) is a graphic novel that accounts the author's childhood in West Yorkshire and the sexual abuse she faced, alongside her anger surrounding the Peter Sutcliffe murders which were occurring at the same time. *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015) also explores the treatment of women who have experienced sexual abuse and the injustice in the legal system towards women. *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015) is made up of a range of different layouts and mediums, including newspaper cuttings and photography, which can be seen in Figure 7. Unlike Feng's *Beer Night* (2014), *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015) is "unconstricted by any regularized format, and she often features double-spread bleeds … that are silent, without speech." (Chute, 2018, p. 163). Una uses different types of page layouts together, as seen in Figure 8, in which she contrasts a page with a large group of women with the facing page of the main character alone in a cocoon, which highlights her isolation from society.

Sequential illustration can take a variety of different forms, with it mainly being used to tell a narrative in a graphic novel or comic. The layout and use or absence of panels in sequential illustrations can change how the viewer understands and feels about the piece, for example changing how the panels appear halfway through a narrative might indicate a change of pace or direction in the story. This makes it an interesting medium to use alongside a narrative as the sequential illustrations can form their visual language.

Conclusion

My proposed practice will consist of a set of sequential illustrations in a zine format, based on the poem *The Goblin Market* by Christina Rossetti. I chose to illustrate *The Goblin Market* as I am interested in Christina Rossetti's work, particularly her poetry which can be viewed from a feminist perspective. The illustrations will be created in a panel format, like a graphic novel, as this is the best way for me to fully represent the poem's intricate detail. Due to the poem's size, I will not be illustrating the poem word for word but instead will pick out the key moments from the narrative.

As the poem I am going to be illustrating is regarded as having a feminist message, I am interested in referencing mediums and techniques which have been popularised by feminist artists. I am wanting to explore the technique and format of zines, particularly the cut-and-paste style adopted in the Riot Grrrl zines of the 1990s. In my exploration of the medium, I found that the zine can be used in a narrative format, for example, in Kathleen Hanna's *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* (1993) but also that the techniques used in zines, such as collage and photography can be used in graphic novels, like Una's *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015). Like in *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015), I am interested in using different layouts and panel styles to indicate characters' emotions or changes in tone.

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