Title: How Menstrual Art Confronts Patriarchal Norms

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Student Name: Athena Usluer

Student Number: 2104247

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Supervisor: Holly Slingsby

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INTRODUCTION

Menstruation, a natural biological process experienced by nearly “1.8 billion” (UNICEF) people monthly, has long been shrouded in cultural stigma, often viewed as ‘unclean’ or ‘impure.’ This taboo, deeply embedded in patriarchal systems, oppresses menstruating individuals, relegating their experiences to silence. However, the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s sparked a radical shift in the cultural conversation surrounding the female body, with artists reclaiming their narratives through bold, confrontational art. This essay explores how menstrual art challenges cultural stigmas around menstruation, empowers women by reclaiming narratives about their bodies, and critiques patriarchal systems that have historically controlled menstruating individuals. Works by artists such as Judy Chicago, Vladimir Victor Dantes, Carolee Schneemann, Catherine Elwes, Ana Mendieta and Rupi Kaur, along with theorists’ voices such as Amelia Jones, bell hooks, Estelle Barrett, Hélène Cixous, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Laura Mulvey and Mary Douglas to emphasise feminist art's transformative power in challenging oppressive societal norms.

CHAPTER I



Fig. 1: Menstruation Bathroom (1995)

Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972) is one of the earliest and most iconic examples of menstrual art and a key part of her groundbreaking feminist installation *Womanhouse* (1972). Chicago's journey began as an art student at UCLA in the 1960s, facing a highly sexist environment. Male professors frequently dismissed her ideas, urging her to "suppress any indication of gender" (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2017) in her work. Frustrated by this inequality, Chicago later moved to Fresno with a dream of establishing the first feminist art program in history, designed to empower female artists.

Her program encouraged women to embrace their identities unapologetically, fifteen female artists were selected and so it began. Chicago executed a curriculum centred on women's contributions to art, literature, and history content often buried or erased by the patriarchal

system. All was surfaced at Chicago's education program, and one rule was applied "For a year they did not read anything by men." (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2017) She created a space for women to explore their voices. As Chicago herself noted, "If you go into your studio with a very little voice, you make very little art." (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2017) She also worked to cultivate confidence in her students, from breaking dress codes to shaking hands assertively, helping them shed ingrained societal expectations that a woman should be poise and gentle (or polite?).

Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro, and Paula Hays Harper collaborated to develop a backup plan after CalArts could not host them in studios due to building renovations. This change aligned perfectly with the themes Chicago's students were exploring. In an article by Mitchell, Harper is quoted in an interview stating: "The idea was conceived to get a house—that place where women had traditionally directed so much of their creative energies—and transform it into an expressive total work of art,"(Stanford Magazine, 2012). This is how this iconic exhibition came to be named *Womanhouse* (1972).

This created the first major female-centred art installation in the Western world. Each room in the house addressed different aspects of women's experience of oppression, with *Menstruation Bathroom* challenging the silence and shame surrounding menstruation. This work was a direct response to Chicago's belief in informalizing the hardships that come with the natural bodily experience.



Fig. 2: Menstruation Bathroom (1972)

Menstruation Bathroom features a bare, white-tiled bathroom symbolizing the possibility of purity. The viewer is then drawn to bloody tampons splatted on the white floor, a bold contrast of ‘purity’ to ‘dirt’. Then it brings the viewers to the key aspect of this installation which is the overflowing white bin. The trash bin is overflowing with used menstrual products, it shows a chaotic state suggesting a sense of suppressed tension ready to erupt. Another key aspect to regard, is the corner shelf layered up with sanitary products. Ranging from all different brands and types, a key factor of the overconsumption people who menstruate are forced to spend. Following these blood spats, we are redirected upwards to a clothing line, where red-shaped pads/underwear are hung to dry. This sharp contrast draws attention to the cultural invisibility of menstruation, challenging viewers to confront their discomfort. For some, the installation evokes feelings of confusion, shock, or even disgust. "Where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and

classification of matter."(Douglas, 1991, p. 35). Douglas argues that what is deemed ‘dirty’ reflects systems of classification. Menstrual blood, as both inside and outside the body, disrupts these categories, exposing societal taboos. Judy Chicago’s *Menstruation Bathroom* used the overflowing bin and scattered menstrual products to highlight this constructed idea of dirt, confronting the audience with the absurdity of these cultural norms. Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject provides a lens to analyse Judy Chicago’s *Menstruation Bathroom*. Kristeva defines the abject as that which exists on the boundary between the self and the other, provoking both fascination and disgust. Menstrual blood, as a bodily fluid that crosses this boundary, embodies the abject, challenging the illusion of the clean, closed, and controlled body. In *Menstruation Bathroom*, the overflowing trash bin and scattered menstrual products confront viewers with this abjection, forcing them to grapple with their discomfort. By making menstrual blood highly visible, Chicago disrupts the cultural taboo that relegates menstruation to the private sphere. In Kristeva’s terms, Chicago's work rejects the “purification” (Barrett, 2011), of women’s bodies demanded by patriarchal systems, instead celebrating menstruation as a powerful and unavoidable aspect of human life. By making these items visible, Chicago critiques these systems and invites viewers to normalize a humanly experience.

By exposing this everyday biological process in such a bold and public way, she rejects patriarchal norms that demand menstruation remain hidden. Instead, she reclaims it as a visible and valid aspect of life. *Menstruation Bathroom* empowers menstruating individuals to embrace their bodily realities without shame, by offering an alternative perspective to centuries of stigma, and questioning why this natural bodily function is oppressed and deemed inappropriate for public discussion.



Fig. 3: Red Flag *(1971)*

Red Flag (1971) is photograph showing a hand removing a used tampon. Taken in 1971, this photograph was deemed as a provocative – which is still the case today. The image shocked viewers, with many mistaking the tampon for a "bloody penis"(Beyond Blood, 2021), reflecting a widespread ignorance about menstruation. Which certainly is still an issue we face today. In 2023, the BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health board became the first to conduct tests on menstrual products using actual menstrual blood, rather than the saline solution typically seen in advertisements. *Red Flag* and *Menstruation Bathroom* share the goal of confronting taboos and forcing society to grapple with its discomfort around women's bodily experiences. This formed part of the larger feminist art movement of the 1970s, which aimed to challenge the exclusion of women from art history. Chicago's creation of

Womanhouse proved that the female experience could take centre stage, reshaping the art world's understanding of what could be considered a subject worthy of exploration.



Fig.4: Transition Bathroom *(2022)*

Today, *Menstruation Bathroom* keeps on growing, reshaping, and bringing awareness to aspects of life that are silenced. In 2022, New Mexico, *Womanhouse* celebrated its 50th anniversary, with Nancy Youdelman, a former Fresno student of Judy Chicago's, helping to curate and exhibit the reimagined *Wo/Manhouse (2022)*. The renewal of the exhibition opened its doors to LGBTQ+ individuals, providing a platform to share diverse experiences of home and identity. As part of this exhibition, two bathrooms were presented, each exploring themes of gender, identity, and transformation. In *Transition Bathroom* (2022), artist Vladimir Victor Dantes powerfully conveyed the experience of being a trans man by walking viewers through his daily bathroom routine. Through this brave and intimate portrayal, he offered a glimpse into a deeply private moment. The bathroom, as both a literal and symbolic space, became a site of transformation, vulnerability, and self-discovery. Dantes

captured the emotional complexity of living authentically, highlighting both the challenges and victories of navigating life as a trans individual. By including voices like Dantes' in *Wo/Manhouse*, the exhibition expanded the boundaries of the original *Womanhouse*, creating a more inclusive dialogue about gender, identity, and the domestic sphere in contemporary society.

CHAPTER II

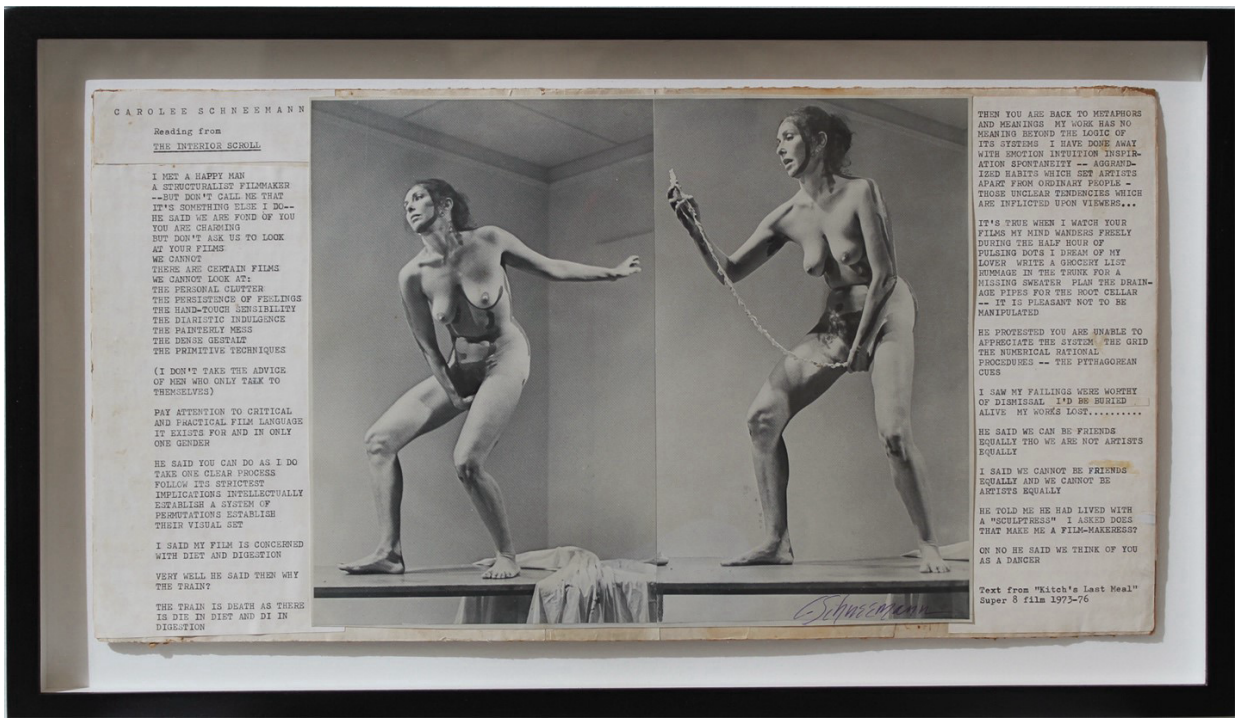


Fig. 5: Interior Scroll *(1975)*

In 1975, Carolee Schneemann acted her performance *Interior Scroll* during the *Women Here and Now* exhibition in New York. After her male colleagues dismissed her filmmaking. Schneemann objective was too “physicalize the invisible, marginalized, and deeply suppressed history of the vulva, the powerful source of orgasmic pleasure, of birth, of transformation, of menstruation, of maternity, to show that it is not a dead, invisible place.”(Elkin , 2023 p.10) In this striking act, Schneemann appeared wearing only a sheet, which she then let fall, revealing her naked body. She stood on a table with paint outlining her form. Grounding herself, she pulled a folded scroll in an accordion style, from her vagina and proceeded to read the script aloud.

"The danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power."(Douglas ,1991 p. 121*)* By outlining her body, Schneemann visualizes the invisible walls constructed by society to confine women’s bodies. Her performance acts against these patriarchal barriers, reclaiming

power over decades of societal restriction. This leads to an opening of a shift of power. A reclaiming a personal territorial space. She creates a new prototype for her body that has been misunderstood purposely. And by doing so, the vagina holds itself a new shift to empowerment. Schneeman claims authority over assumptions of representations of her body. Transforming a typically stigmatized or sexualized part of the female body as a source of knowledge, creativity, and voice. It is almost as if the vagina has awakened and addressed us.



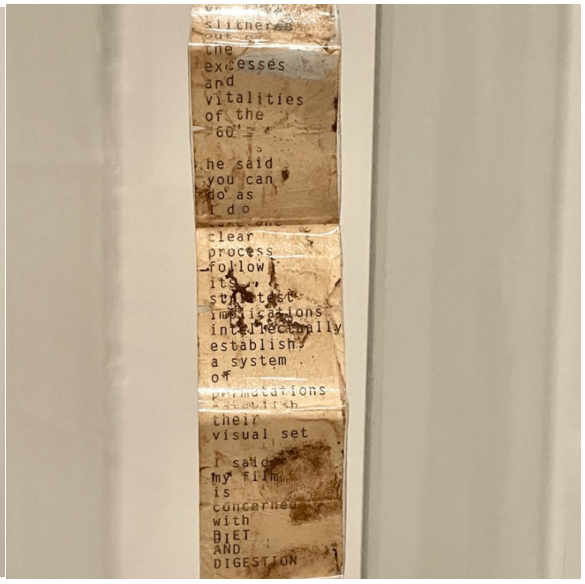


Fig. 6: Interior Scroll *(1975) detail* *Fig. 7:* Interior Scroll *(1975) detail*

"Women are not inherently passive or peaceful. We're not inherently anything but human" (hooks, 2000, p. 110). By this hooks mean, that women are versatile, destroying the symbol of gentleness, caregivers, nurturers etc limiting women into a stereotypical vessel. Not one of these characteristics can define any gender collectively. Emphasizing 'human' rather than these stereotypical traits men portray women to be. Like Schneeman she opens a new realm, of ideology that we can be whoever we are, creating a new norm of the realities of being a being. Allowing us to define in ways that please ourselves and we challenge societal expectations. She becomes more than what her male colleagues deem to make her be. Schneemann's poses, reminiscent of traditional life-drawing models, subtly referencing an era when art was dominated by male artists who often excluded women from participating. By

positioning her body as both subject and author, Schneemann challenged the objectification of the female form, using her body as a source of authority and knowledge to redefine cultural and artistic perceptions of women.

Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity' highlights how repeated "societal norms construct gender." (Butler, 1999) Schneemann's performance deliberately shatter these norms by presenting her body as a site of authority and creativity, rather than "passivity" or sexualization. "The scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object) and, in contradiction, ego libido (forming identification process) act as formations, mechanisms…The actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of a man takes the argument a step further into the content and structure of representation, adding a further layer of ideological significance demanded by the patriarchal order…"(Mulvey, p.52) Her act of pulling a scroll from her vagina critiques not only the male gaze but also the constructed broader societal reinforce femininity into modest, resulting to us becoming invisible.

"The corpse is the most abject of all objects, a border from which the body must extricate itself in order to live. Faeces, urine, vomit, pus, and blood in an open wound are adjected or expelled from the body to protect it from contagion and death." (Barrett, 2011, p.95) To live, the body ejects natural fluids to be recycled by mother nature. These materials are considered abject because they exist at the boundary between the interior and exterior of the body. Do our body fluids threaten men's fantasy that the female body is not perfect and clean? And by so, protecting themselves by silencing it to oppression. These boundaries constructed by social taboos have a negative impact by false accusations about clean and dirty.

The text Schneemann read aloud was a commentary on her experiences as an artist in a patriarchal art/world. She critiqued how male colleagues dismissed her work if it didn't conform to their idealized, masculine notions of art. Her choice to subvert the stereotypical

associations with the female body shocked her audience but directly challenged the male gaze. Schneemann's work was a deliberate attack on this objectification. It was an attempt to smash the conditioned mindset that reduces women to passive objects of desire. By reclaiming her autonomy and using her body as both the medium and the message, she positioned herself not as an object to be consumed, but as a creator, a goddess-like figure, asserting her place above the traditional male-dominated hierarchy.

"Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard." (Cixous, 1976, p.880) Hélène Cixous's call to "write yourself" finds a direct embodiment in Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, where the artist pulls a physical text from her vagina and reads it aloud. This act literalizes Cixous's metaphor of "writing the body" (Cixous, 1976), by transforming the vagina a space traditionally shrouded in taboo into a site of speech, creativity, and power. Schneemann's performance asserts the vagina as a producer of meaning and knowledge, reclaiming a part of the female body that has historically been silenced or sexualized. In doing so, Schneemann performs the kind of embodied writing Cixous advocates, creating an artistic language that defies patriarchal suppression and reclaims women's autonomy over their narratives.

CHAPTER III

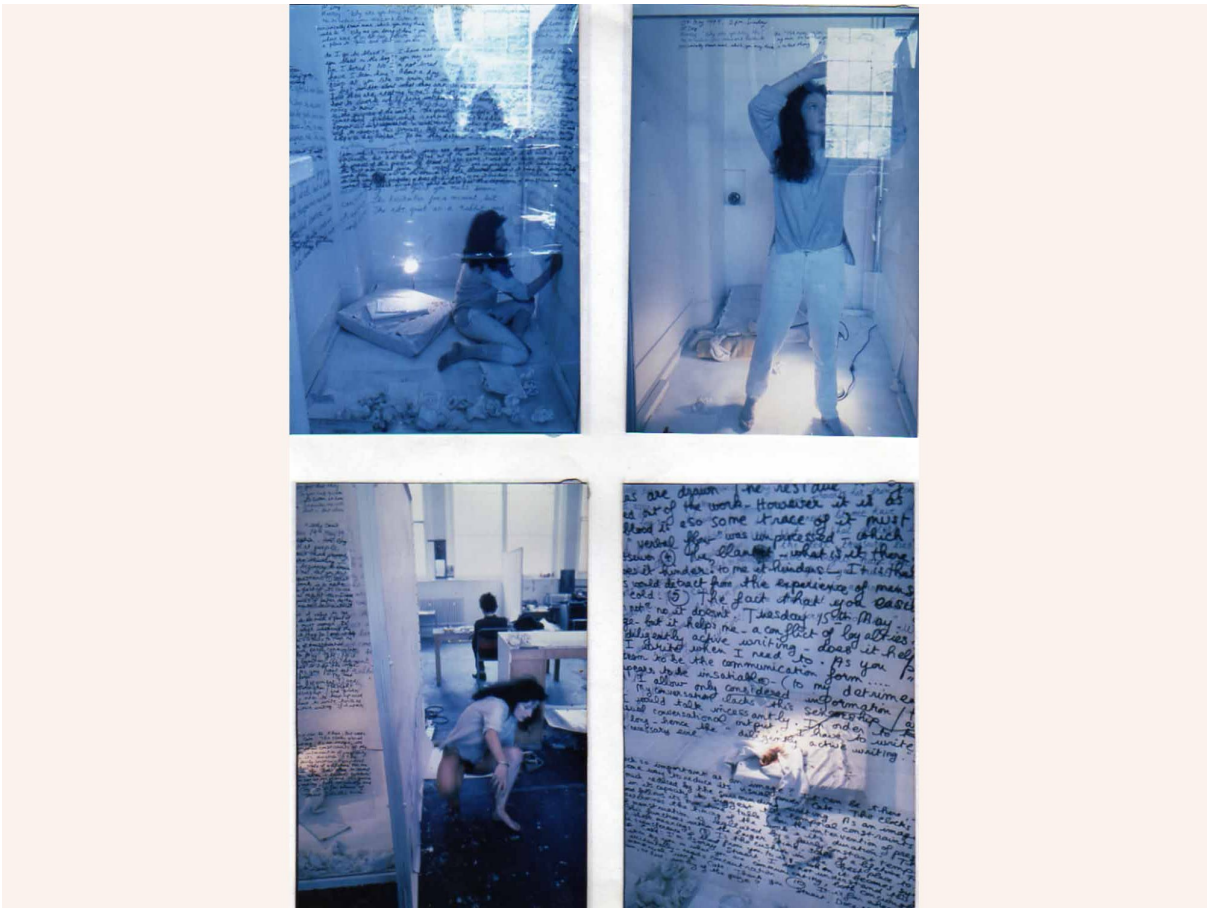


Fig. 8: Menstruation II *(1979)*

Catherine Elwes' *Menstruation II* (1979) is a powerful performance art piece and installation that explores the natural cycle of menstruation and its tension with societal taboos. Elwes is known for themes about gender, the body, and femininity. As a student at the Slade School of Art, Elwes was inspired by the new technology emerging, giving opportunity for a chance as a female artist to thrive. In an interview Elwes states, “gave us a space that was not occupied” (Leuzzi, 2015 p.2:09).



Fig. 9: Menstruation I *(1979)*

In *Menstruation II*, she continues the themes introduced in her earlier piece, *Menstruation I*. While both performances feature Elwes dressed in white, *Menstruation II instead* of a white dress she decides rather on a top and trousers, symbolizing a ‘purity’ that is then butchered by the act of free bleeding, a transparent and focal point in the piece. *Menstruation II* took place in a self-constructed enclosed white room with glass walls. The installation's glass walls create a confined, transparent space, symbolizing a rejection of societal boundaries. The walls served as a medium for conversation between Elwes and her audience. Inviting them to conversate in dialogue, her audience would ask questions about menstruation on slips of paper, which Elwes rewrote and answered herself on the walls. As the performance kept going for three consecutive days the glass was covered in writing.

This performance visually connects the menstrual cycle to broader natural cycles, making the private into public and the taboos visible. By engaging with her menstruation directly, Elwes reclaims the narrative of menstruation, transforming it from a hidden or shameful act into an open and shared human experience. Her act of public menstruation challenges the persistent taboo surrounding it. By presenting menstruation in a visible and public way, Elwes normalizes it. The photographic stills of her performance ensure its impact lives on.

Like Elwes and Schneemann, Ana Mendieta's work explores the body as a site of ritual, transformation, and empowerment. In her iconic *Silueta* (1973-1977) series, Mendieta used her body to engage with the earth, creating earth-body sculptures and ritualistic performances that blended physicality with nature.





Fig.10: Untitled: Silueta Series *(1973-1977)* *Fig.11:* Untitled: Silueta Series, Mexico, *(1976)*

For instance, her *red Silueta* works in this series, where she imprinted a blood print on a white sheet which was hung on an exterior wall, and another figure silhouette with red powder on top, embody both a connection to the earth and an assertion of the body's raw power. These works speak to themes of presence, absence, and the cyclical nature of life and death, positioning the female body as both a physical and spiritual vessel.

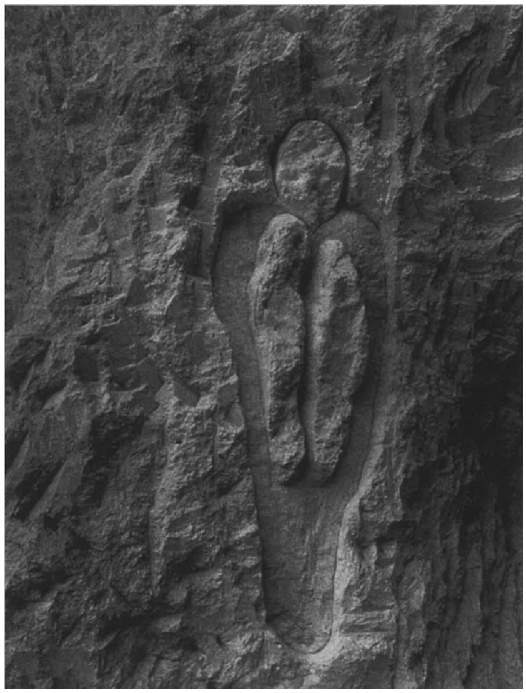


Fig.12: Atabey (Mother of the Waters), from the series Esculturas Rupestres (Rupestrian Sculptures), *(1981)*



Fig.13: Guanaroca (Esculturas Rupestres) [First Woman (Rupestrian Sculptures)], *(1981)*

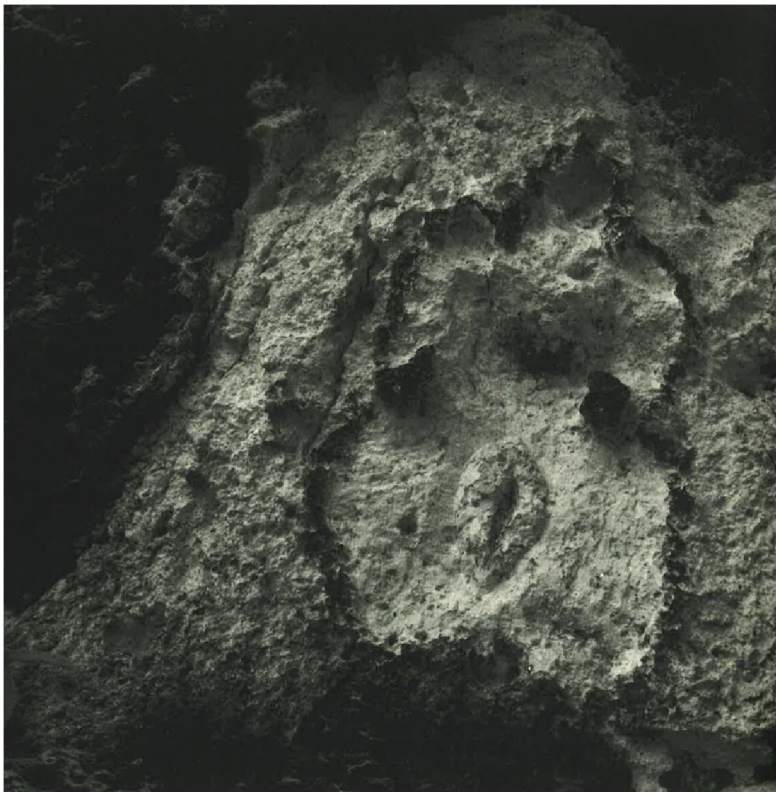


Fig.14: Maroya (Esculturas Rupestres), [Moon (Rupestrian Sculptures)], *(1981)*

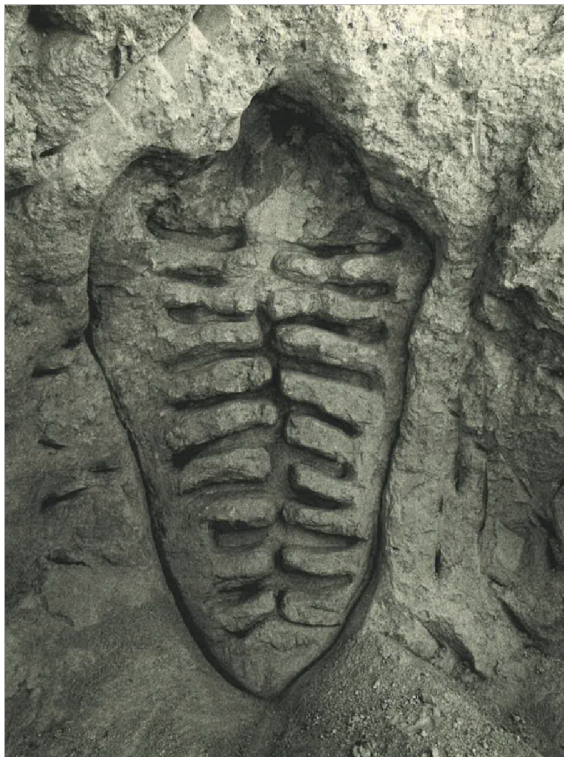


Fig.15: Itiba Cahubaba (Esculturas Rupestres), *(1981)*

Similarly, in her *Rupestrian Sculptures* (1981) series, Mendieta carved goddess like figures into Cuban caves, further merging her identity with mother nature.

In reflecting on her use of blood, Mendieta emphasized its symbolic and transformative qualities. As quoted in Judith Wilson's article, *Plants Her Garden*, Mendieta says: "I started immediately using blood – I guess because I think it's a very powerful, magical thing. I don't see it as a negative force." (Wilson, 1980) Then continued with, "I really would get it, - because I was working with blood and with my body. The men were into conceptual art and doing things that were very clean." (Wilson, 1980) This statement highlights Mendieta's intention to reclaim blood as a symbol of vitality and spiritual power, contrasting it against its traditional association with violence or impurity. Her works both with blood and with natural materials defied the "clean," detached aesthetics of male conceptual artists of her time. Instead, Mendieta embraced the visceral, the messy, and the embodied, framing the female body and its processes as sources of strength.



Fig.16: period. *(2015)*

Despite ongoing efforts to combat menstruation stigma, public displays of menstruation still provoke anger and discomfort. A striking example of this occurred in 2015, when artist Rupi Kaur shared an image as part of her university project on menstruation stigma. The photo, which went viral, showed Kaur fully clothed, facing away from the camera, with a small stain of menstrual blood visible on her clothing, seeping onto the bedding—a common occurrence during heavy periods experienced by many. However, the image was quickly censored by Instagram. Following collective support from online users, Instagram apologized and allowed the photo to resurface.

The image sparked a wave of misogynistic responses, including death threats and comments labelling menstruation as 'disgusting.' This episode highlights the rooted refusal of recognising menstruation as a natural and necessary aspect of human life.

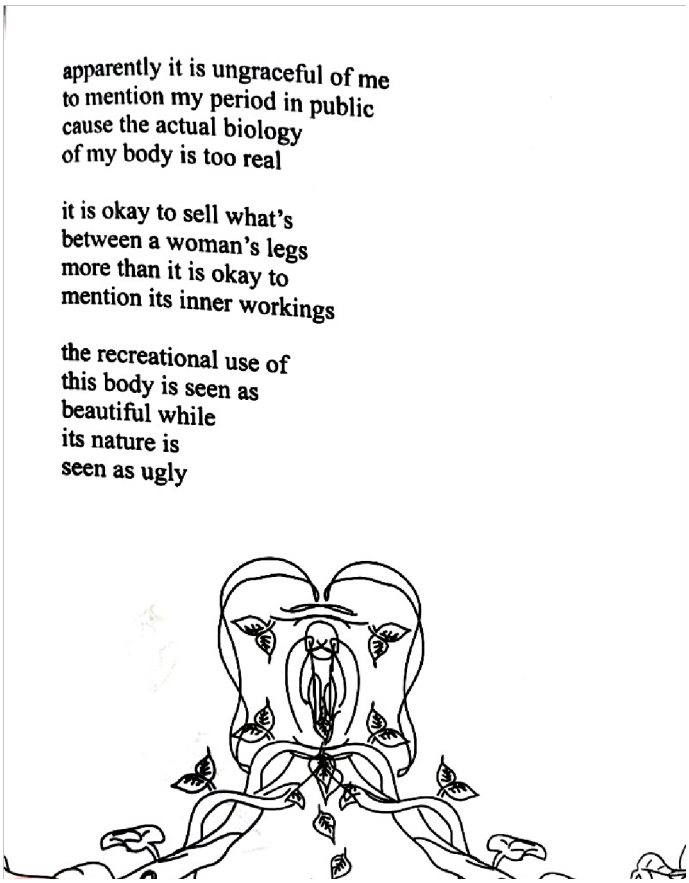


Fig.17: Milk and Honey*, p.177, (2015)*

In her poetry book *Milk and Honey* (2015), Kaur critiques the societal double standard surrounding women's bodies. Her poem is accompanied by an illustration of a pelvic area/vagina, surrounded by vine leaves, with some leaves dropping to resemble menstrual blood. The poem reads:

"apparently it is ungraceful of me to
mention my period in public cause
the actual biology of my body is too
real

it is okay to sell what's
between a woman's legs more

than it is okay to mention its
inner workings the
recreational use of this body
is seen as beautiful while its
nature is seen as ugly”

(Kaur, 2015, p.177)

Kaur's poetry emphasises the societal discomfort with menstruation, portraying it as a natural but stigmatised element of women's bodies. She emphasises the contrast between the sexualised exterior aspects of a woman's body, and the natural, biological processes menstruation that are deemed "disgusting". This critique speaks of the subjugation of women's health and experiences.

As Mendieta expressed in an interview stating that “art has to be experienced” (Wilson, 1980) and that her art is physically temporary “as opposed to an object you can own.” (Wilson, 1980) Like the many other artists mentioned hold a similar position, which is the beauty that their original artwork cannot be owned by museums or by a wealthy collector. Instead, these works are empowered with political messages, and an immersive experience to be felt. Their documentation and dialogue will be only a glimpse into the visual essence of the experience.

CONCLUSION

Menstrual and feminist art empowers individuals who menstruate, both within and beyond the art world, allowing them to reclaim control over the narratives surrounding their bodies. With pride, we celebrate menstruation without shame. By confronting deeply ingrained stigmas, feminist artists have transformed this once-taboo subject into a powerful symbol of empowerment and identity. Together, these artists and theorists dismantle stigma and reframe menstruation as a source of strength and visibility. Their collective efforts are reshaping societal perceptions of the body, promoting greater openness, acceptance, and recognition of its natural rhythms. While these works were once provocative and may remain so for some today. With hope, we look toward a future where this no longer is the case.

However, we must keep on brining awareness to repetitive history.

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