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Introduction

The keywords explored within this essay will be **Body; Medical; Mixed media**. These keywords are important for my art as they encompass my main areas of artistic practice, particularly depicting the medicalised body. The second keyword connects to my lived experience of being an artist with medical issues and wanting to express that through my art. The final keyword moves onto to a method of art that I have begun to explore in my own work. As I am using more mixed media, this is something I want to research further to support my practice. The main artists in this essay are Jenny Saville, Jo Spence, and Sarah Lucas. Key theorists will be Disability Studies Scholar AnneMillett-Gallant to discuss the disabled body, Art Historian Amanda Cachia for her work on medical aesthetics, and Stephen Brooks Brooks for his research in mixed media art.

Body

This keyword will be explored in relation to representations of the body in art focusing on artists who depict the human body in its raw form, showing scars, marks and imperfections.

Early artistic studies in anatomy such as the works of Leonardo Da Vinci and Michaelangelo showed the body as a perfect machine. Anatomical drawings showed the complexity of the human body as an intricate biological mechanism, but not the variations of the human body such as different sized bodies or bodies with visible differences (Kemp & Wallace, 2020). Classical Greek art did not represent the body as it was but used images of the body to express ideas of beauty, perfection, proportion and order (Squire, 2011). This was partially due to the belief that inner character should be represented on the outside. Robb & Harris (2013) explain that in Ancient Greek art; “they are not the faces people had; They are the faces the person should have had, given their character” (p. 119). Beauty and symmetry were seen as signs of a good character, so people with visible body differences were depicted differently to how they looked (Robb & Harris, 2013). It could be argued that these perfect bodies have shaped what people think of as ‘normal’ bodies. Squire (2011) argues that bodies in Classical art shaped Western traditions, and has informed bodily ideals, anxieties, and assumptions about human bodies.

However, Modernist and contemporary have artists moved away from traditional representations of perfect bodies, using art to questioning the body, rather than study it scientifically (Kemp & Wallace, 2020). Rather than presenting the human body as a perfected or idealised version, contemporary artists like Jenny Saville are more likely to depict the body accurately, showing a range of human variety. O’Reilly (2025) suggests that the human body remains crucial to how we understand ourselves, socially and culturally. It can become a lens for viewing identity and place. “Contemporary artists continue to explore what it means to be and to have a body... they recognise the individual as a living embodiment of cultural norms, societal pressures, expectations and needs” (O’Reilly, 2025, p. 5). Saville’s *Propped* (1992), is a key example of this, showing natural pigmentation in the skin, stretch marks and a larger body type. The pose could be seen as provocative, yet the position of the arms hides parts of the body, possibly revealing bodily insecurities. The writing on the painting reads: ‘If we continue to speak in this sameness—speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other’. This seems to be urging women to raise each other up and not see bodies in the male gaze.



Figure 1: Propped by Jenny Saville (1992)

Different bodies in contemporary art show the complexity of lived experience rather than depicting stereotypes or harmful interpretations. Millett-Gallant (2024) claims that this shift in how physically different bodies are shown moves away from the oppressive history of the pity model or the charity model of disability. In her book, Millett-Gallant emphasises that the disabled body should be understood not just medically but aesthetically, allowing art to expand conventional standards of beauty, symmetry, and form, challenge assumptions about what a body 'should' look like.

Depicting physically different bodies in art can make audiences consider the politics of the gaze, revealing how society sees some bodies as ideal and others as abhorrent. Millett-Gallant (2024) suggests that when disabled artists represent their own bodies, they interrupt the usual power imbalance between the viewer and the viewed. According to Millett-Gallant (2024), self-portraiture by disabled artists is powerful act of reclaiming narrative authority over their own body. Longhurst (2004) reinforces this by stating that the body is “the ultimate vehicle for writing one’s identity. Bodies are a means of self-expression” (p.19).

While some artists depict disability in their art, in many cases people with different bodies are still underrepresented in art, media and in society at large. Different bodies are rarely shown in the media unless it involves raising awareness. Plus size models are seen more in contemporary fashion magazines than ever before but people who are visible disabled or different are still not often depicted in the modelling world. Even when different bodies are shown, such as in the Dove campaign [fig 1], it is often for the sake of showing different bodies rather than different bodies being part of the normal landscape.



Figure 2: Dove’s 2024 Campaign for Real Beauty

As well as disabled bodies, female bodies also have their own place in art. Male bodies in classical art are usually linked with virtue, activity and rationality, whereas female bodies are more often passive, sexualised or both (Squire, 2011). In contemporary art, Adrienne Rich (1986) suggested that “being a woman challenges conventional ideas of boundaries, especially the assumed boundary between the body and the object world, between self and other” (cited in Longhurst, 2004 p.2). In an older but still important journal article, McDowell (1993) explains that women’s bodily experiences such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation characterise the challenges of bodily boundaries and the politics of fluidity versus solidity. Menstruation and lactation cause women to be seen as having leaky bodies. As Longhurst puts it; “It is commonly thought that such bodies are not to be trusted in the public spaces of Rational Man” (p. 2). In contrast to women, men are seen as being in control of their bodies and bodily boundaries.

Medical

This keyword encompasses living with medical conditions and how that is depicted in art. This could be mental and physical illness, permanent or temporary. As O'Brien (2013) points out; “science gives us a way of thinking about disease, but the arts and humanities provide insight, context, and understanding of what it means to be ill” (p.618). To address this, a large focus of this will be looking at art that depicts the realness of living with illness, including scars and bodily differences. This will centre on artists who challenge conventional representations of beauty and normalcy through showing their medical journeys and medicalised bodies. Unlike literature and memoirs of illness which often end with self-discovery and positivity, art that depicts living with medical conditions are usually transparent and truthful about how things are, and there is not always a happy ending (Cachia, 2025).

Well-known artists who have done this include Persimmon Blackbridge, Marc Quinn, Mary Duffy, Kevin Connolly Joel-Peter Witkin, and Sandie Yi to name a few. These artists document their medical history often through portraits and self-expression. An artist

who has shown his medical journey through art in a different way is Dominic Quagliozzi, who used his hospital gowns as his artistic medium, creating 3D wall art, suits as soft wearable sculpture for performances. However, the focus will be on Jo Spence.

Jo Spence was a British photographer born in 1932. A lot of her work explores concepts such as feminism. In 1982, she documented her own experiences as a breast cancer patient, which she described as a way to 'represent a body in crisis'. Cachia (2025) stated that Spence had "used her camera to photograph her body through surgery and recovery as a type of soothing exercise but also to critique the failures of the medical establishment..." (Cachia, 2025, p. 49). In doing this, Spence asserted agency over her own body and addressed an ongoing problem in medicine. At the time, there was a no-photography protocol in medical environments. This was before camera phones, so for Spence to photograph herself in hospital, she had to use a camera. Her photo series is partly to fight against the protocol forbidding her from taking photos of her own body. Taking the photos after being told not to, could be seen as a way of mocking the system. For her, the camera was "a third eye, almost as a separate part of me which was ever watchful" (Spence cited in Hevey, 1992, p. 120).

"Spence's defiance in reclaiming her body was pushed all the way to the point of incision where she wrote in all caps with black marker pen above her breast 'PROPERTY OF JO SPENCE?' before doctors removed it in a mastectomy" (Cachia, 2025, p. 49). The word 'property' mimicked the tradition of clinical photography that sees sick people as human specimens. Hevey pointed out that by using the word 'property' Spence was using "the only wording the culture, the medical industry, understands: Who *owns* this body? Whose right is it to breach its borders?" (Spence cited in Hevey, 1992, p. 120). This is reinforced by her use of the question mark when writing on her body, asking if this piece of her body still belongs to her.



Figure 3: Property of Jo Spence? by Jo Spence (1982)

An important factor of Jo Spence's work was that she was challenging conventional representations of the embodiment of normalcy. Illness in art challenges us to reconsider what it means to be in the state of human condition, as this is a different state of being for everyone (O'Brien, 2013 p.618). Another example if this comes from

Brenda Cook, who said that “My art is about my life. How I’ve been treated. How people use and look at you. People say disabled people can’t do anything... My art shows people what I’m made of and who I am” (cited in Masefield, 2006 pp.80-82).

Many artists have used first-person, creative self-representation to depict their experiences of physical illness in a way that goes beyond documenting their illness. Illness depictions are shown to carry relational, restorative, political, and aesthetic stakes, not just personal expression (Tembeck, 2009). Tembeck (2009) uses the word ‘autopathography’ to describe art that depicts the artist’s own experiences of illness. She claims that autopathography is a “mirror of human vulnerability” (Tembeck, 2009, p. 24). In discussing Jo Spence, Tembeck argues that Spence constructs a ‘living archive’ through her photographs. Instead of a single narrative or fixed identity, Spence documents her illness across time, creating an evolving, self-authored record. A lot of artists who depict illness often show after surgery, or after treatment, so Spence is unusual in that she documents the illness as it is happening. Another artist who has documented ongoing illness is Tracey Emin in her ‘Insomnia’ photo series, 2019.

Tembeck also notes how Spence’s work contrasts with mainstream imagery of breast cancer patients as being passive, beautified, or ‘heroic survivors’. Instead, Spence exposes vulnerability, anger, and fear and foregrounds the medicalisation of the body (Tembeck, 2009). A key element of autopathography is that it “promotes the empowerment and visibility of those who appear to be ‘other-than’ healthy” (Tembeck, 2009, p. 24). This connects to Cachia’s (2025) argument that non-healthy bodies can also be an aesthetic. “The disabled body then, in all its manifestations, can be an aesthetic... the unhealthy body is an aesthetic too” (Cachia, 2025, p. 20). By showing disabled, unhealthy or medicalised bodies in art, it rejects the notion of the healthy body as the only determination of beauty.

Mixed Media

Mixed media in visual art refers to the use of multiple materials or mediums in a single art piece. Artists often do this “when a single medium by itself is insufficient to fully

develop an artistic idea” (Brooks, 2007, p. 1041). By mixing different materials and exploring the unique qualities of each medium, the result often creates a unique dynamic that would not be possible to achieve with a single medium. One example of how mixed media art can be used is collage. This involves combining printed matter with mediums such as paint or ink. Other mixed media artists used one artistic method as a base that can be added to with another medium. However, Probst (2009) argues that all media is mixed media because no form of art exists in a pure, isolated way as different senses, experiences, materials, and art forms overlap.

Mixed media art is usually seen as an artform that began in the early 20th century and is often associated with Picasso’s Cubist collages (Tate , 2026). However, mixed media art has existed for centuries. Early examples can be found in Egyptian and early Christian art, which combines gold leaf with ink work. In the 15th century some artists mixed oil painting with tempera to create a unique effect (Brooks, 2007). Rembrandt also combined different media in his works, such as gouache, bistre washes, and pen, as well as creating texture lead white pigment and linseed oil. His prints often combined etching, dry point, and engraving techniques (Roberts, 2022).

By including mixed media in traditional art like painting, is can create physical depth, texture, and structure. Cyr (2011) points out this sort of textural layering can enhance the story behind the painting and help artists move beyond technique to create work with depth and narrative power.

Other mixed media artists use a combination of materials and form to create sculptural work. A good example of an artist who uses this technique is Sarah Lucas. Lucas is an English artist who was part of the Young British Artists Generation. Using a blend of mixed media sculptures, collages and photography. She plays physical puns of women’s body parts.



Figure 4: From Happy Gas exhibition 1997



Figure 5: From Bunny private collection (1997)

Some of the materials she uses are found objects and readily available soft fabrics including tights filled with stuffing. Tights are often used in her soft sculptures to represent sex and femininity. The stuffing also evoked “marbled fat and blood vessels” and the seams of the tights form nipples and labia (Tate, 2026). The first time she that tights were used as one of her main materials was in 1993, and they have become a core part of her work since then.

In Lucas’ soft sculptures, the fragile nature of the tights are often contrasted with large, rough materials such as chairs. The structures themselves relate to the body in different states; “sometimes exhausted, sometimes excited or performing. Often sitting in a chair, they seem vulnerable and very human” (Tate, 2026). Her work depicts the female body without showing a full body. The leg shapes give the pieces a feminine form. In the image in figure 1, the pink tights and shoes, and the thin legs arranged in feminine sitting posture are all indicators of a female body. The multiple breasts further emphasise the female form, almost reducing the female form into its sexual areas. In figure 2. the pose is more sprawling without being masculine. The dainty nature of them indicate femininity in a more dominant pose. Looking at this from the point of view of the male gaze where man frequently view women as sexual objects, it could be argued that this is a sexual position (Tirrell, 1999). In contrast, from a female perspective, it resonates

more with lounging around after a long day. The mixed media sculptures by Lucas use materials in a conscious way to represent femininity, showing different sides of women.

Conclusion

Through researching these keywords, it has led me to consider the medical body in more detail for next year. This links to my own current practice as I am trying to open up more in my work and depict my own experiences as someone who is living with medical conditions, and as a woman. For my practical work, I want to continue with the sculptural form using mixed media. Although not studied in this essay, Tracey Emin is an interesting artist who I would like to study in more depth in relation to this topic. I am interested in how Tracey Emin documents living with illness through various art mediums and how studying Emin can inspire different ways to display my own art work in a variety of ways.

Proposed title

Documenting living with illness through art: An investigation into Tracey Emin's work relating to health.

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