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Flower symbolism as female sexual metaphor

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Abstract

The watercolor paintings that I created from September 2009 to March 2010 use flowers as metaphorical subject matter to address issues and emotions associated with the topic of female sexuality. My goal was to use the long-standing tradition of flowers as symbols of female genitalia (which will be thoroughly explained in part two of this thesis) to allude to my personal attitudes, experiences, observations, and worries in a manner that would be easier for me to express and less abrasive for my audience to accept. Creating these watercolors was certainly therapeutic for me; I hope that other women who have trouble expressing and embracing their sexuality can identify with my work and perhaps learn how they can communicate personal feelings about their anatomy and sexuality by initiating their own internal conversations.

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FLOWER SYMBOLISM AS FEMALE SEXUAL METAPHOR

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Pinned for Safety
Andrea Frownfelter, 2009

Part One: Hesitant, Hurt, and Healing Flowers: Watercolors of Female Sexual Anatomy

The watercolor paintings that I created from September 2009 to March 2010 use flowers as metaphorical subject matter to address issues and emotions associated with the topic of female sexuality. My goal was to use the long-standing tradition of flowers as symbols of female genitalia (which will be thoroughly explained in part two of this thesis) to allude to my personal attitudes, experiences, observations, and worries in a manner that would be easier for me to express and less abrasive for my audience to accept. Creating these watercolors was certainly therapeutic for me; I hope that other women who have trouble expressing and embracing their sexuality can identify with my work and perhaps learn how they can communicate personal feelings about their anatomy and sexuality by initiating their own internal conversations.

In part one of this thesis, I will discuss my watercolor paintings in detail, noting some of the issues that I meant each one to raise. I want the works to be somewhat open to interpretation (and thus more universal), but I will still offer a few different clues about what I see in my works and what I want the viewer to consider. In part two, I will present a survey of the historical, mythological, and artistic uses of flower symbolism, commenting also about my own works, to provide a clearer understanding of how they fit in with the tradition of sexually symbolic floral imagery.

I wish that I could celebrate female sexuality the way that feminist artists did during the sexual revolution and second wave of the feminist movement of the 1970s and '80s, but to do so would not be true to how I really feel. Too often women are unknowledgeable of and uncomfortable in their own bodies. I want to show women who

are afraid to acknowledge their own vaginas that they are not alone in their timidity, and I want the women who have suffered physical or emotional harm to their vaginas to know that I feel for them. Therefore, my watercolors feature roses that are tattooed with patterns, wrapped in “caution” tape, bruised and wounded, covered in and juxtaposed against bandages, drastically altered in color, or rubber-banded, stapled, or pinned shut.

The first watercolor I created with these ideas in mind was *Feminine Layers*, (fig. 1) painted in September of 2009. The painting depicts a very close-up view of some of the layers in a rose, with decorative patterns projected onto the petals. The most abstracted part of the flower is also the watercolor’s emphasis – a dark organic shape in the top right of the painting, which is meant to act as the core of the flower, from which the petals radiate. At the time that I created this piece, I was still in the beginning stages of researching flower symbolism; one artist whom I had already stumbled across, however, was Judy Chicago. I was immediately drawn to Chicago’s so-called “cunt-imagery,” that is, paintings with brightly-colored, centralized, symmetrical designs radiating from a center. Though Chicago’s imagery resonated with me, it evoked a feeling I only aspired to, rather than one I had actually felt. With Chicago’s imagery and also my own worries in mind, I created this dark abstract flower center, to symbolize the mystery and shame that many women associate with their vaginas. As Eve Ensler so aptly puts it in her play *The Vagina Monologues*, “There’s so much darkness and secrecy surrounding them – like the Bermuda Triangle. Nobody ever reports back from there. In the first place, it’s not easy even to find your vagina. Women go weeks, months, sometimes years without looking at it.”¹ I wanted to evoke mystery and shame by using a dark blue shape and an overlaying dark red circle.

The patterns present on the rose petals, on the other hand, were meant to be light-hearted. They were patterns that I was drawn to, comprised of organic shapes that echo the shapes of the petals on which they are projected. Furthermore, the patterns' ornate shapes, purely decorative intentions, and references to domestic life – e.g., upholstery, wallpaper, tablecloths – are references to a stereotypical feminine aesthetic (which I do enjoy, though often to my chagrin – for how can I admonish feminine stereotypes if I'm so willing to work within them myself?). For this watercolor, however, I used this flower as a symbol for the female body – when the flower is flesh, the patterns take on a particular meaning. They are like tattoos, which serve as a way of branding one's own body, as well as a mode of self-expression, and a way to define oneself. Tattoos on a rose – a symbol of female genitalia – would then speak to defining a woman's individual sexuality. If our society is of the mind that a woman's sexual anatomy is mysterious or shameful, should women themselves adopt this way of thinking? Should women define their anatomy as society does, or should they express their opinions of their sexuality in a unique way? Can a woman get past society's prevailing view, or is society's attitude too pervasive to avoid?

My second and third watercolors, *Silk Caution* (fig. 2) and *Poisoned Rose* (fig. 3), both created in October 2009, have roses covered with tape with the words "Caution – Do Not Enter" on it. *Silk Caution* uses a similar palette as *Feminine Layers*, with heavy emphasis on pinks, yellows, and violets. In *Silk Caution*, a flesh-colored rose wrapped in caution tape echoes a swath of silk spun into a spiral. Because the silk spiral and rose are circular in shape, similarly colored, and approximately the same size, they may be understood as being either together (in which case they form an infinity sign or suggest

the shape of a woman's breasts) or directly compared with each other (in which case a duality is created between that which is apparently safe – the silk – and that which is covered in “caution” warnings). I've been asked if the caution tape is in place to protect the viewer from the rose or to protect the rose from the viewer, and I plan to leave that unresolved. Because the rose is similar to the silk, and is harmless (especially after being taken off its thorny stem), it is hard to accept that the caution tape is in place for the viewer's sake. I would argue, however, that things do not have to look visibly dangerous to be so. Serial killers are often described by those who know them as friendly, charming, and charismatic. There could be something wrong with the rose that is unrecognizable to the naked eye, just as a woman might appear healthy when she is suffering internally. She may be ashamed, embarrassed, or afraid, yet put on a brave face, showing no outward signs of distress, even after physical trauma.

However, the caution tape could also be there to protect the rose, keeping it safe from damage. I believe the rose is a timid bloom or a hesitant flower. I imagine that the rose has been wrapped in caution tape because it is shy and fearful of the outside world. Of course, couldn't it also be possible that the caution tape was unjustifiably used? Perhaps the rose and the viewer do not need to be protected from each other. Similarly, the lines of silk which run vertically and diagonally at the top of the painting can be read both as leading to the silk and flower (drawing closer by choice or unable to pull away from the flower's gravitational pull, approaching the flower despite its “caution” warning) and as radiating out (exuding energy or joy, spreading news and emotion, or running away, taking the caution tape to heart).

Poisoned Rose also depicts a rose covered in caution tape, although this rose is mostly cropped out and disturbingly colored with greens and violets. The caution tape is a brighter yellow, making the “caution” warning seem more important. Something is wrong with this flower that makes it appear unsettling and uninviting. The bright green is indicative of something dangerous because it evokes how nuclear spills and toxic waste are depicted in cartoons and comic books. But is this green rose actually poisonous? The wings of a non-poisonous butterfly might mimic the bright colors of poisonous butterflies as a survival tactic. Might the rose be green to ward off potential predators?

Bandaged Duality (fig. 4) and *Ace Bandage Field* (fig. 5), created in November and December of 2009, deal with roses that are in the process of healing damage already there. The roses in these two paintings look complete and relatively healthy; they have already been healed or were not greatly damaged to begin with. *Bandaged Duality* returns to the composition of *Silk Caution* by pairing two similarly colored and scaled circular objects side by side. In the case of *Bandaged Duality*, an open rose, whose petals are decorated with small Band-Aids in “X” patterns, is juxtaposed with a spiral created by an Ace Bandage. Once again, I intended the circular shapes to bring to mind the shape of female breasts. Both the rose and Ace Bandage are colored with saturated yellows and violets, suggesting fresh bruises. Other than the indication of bruising, the rose is unharmed; it will clearly be able to make a full physical recovery, despite any residual damage. The “X”s the Band-Aids create are a way to say “do not enter” without including caution tape, or they simply “mark the spot” of the rose’s injuries.

Ace Bandage Field also implies healing, though the flower is not covered in Band-Aids. The ace bandages that surround the rose are overwhelming, but aren’t doing

anything to protect the flower. The flower is slightly malformed and pale in color, but it doesn't have any visible bruises or wounds. Is there anything wrong with the flower? Is there damage done without any scarring? What is the role of the ace bandages beyond its making a triangle with the rose? The triangle, of course, is another symbol of female genitalia used throughout history.

Pinned for Safety (fig. 6), created in December 2009, is the first painting I made that shows violence actively directed toward the rose. I purchased and destroyed real flowers with safety pins, straight pins, tape, staples, and clips; later, I used photographs taken while mutilating the flowers to create my compositions. I used this process for the remainder of my watercolors. Audience members responded more strongly to these paintings than to my previous watercolors of "hesitant" or "healing" flowers, as a result, perhaps, of being able to see the violence in these later works.

In *Pinned for Safety* a rose is held together by safety pins of various sizes. In the background, petals that have fallen off of the flower are seen in various states of damage. Safety pins are everyday tools that we use to hold something together with minimal damage. In this work, however, the rose petals are so fragile that the term "safety pin" becomes an oxymoron. One cannot pin a rose without damaging it, whether the intent is merely to keep the rose safe and together or to force its petals to close. I intended this to serve as a commentary on how even the best intentions can do more damage than good. Because my flowers are symbols of female sexuality and sexual anatomy, however, a number of other interpretations are possible.

With the damage to the flower clearly visible in the fallen petals and the rips in the long petal on the left, one can interpret these as referencing rape, sexual assault, or

female genital mutilation. Statistics show that one out of every three or four women experience sexual violence, so it is likely that everyone knows someone who has experienced sexual trauma or rape.^{2,3} Most often a woman is raped or assaulted by someone she knows (such as a significant other, relative, neighbor, or adult in a position of authority), but these “acquaintance rapes” are very rarely reported. The National Organization of Women estimates that every year 1.2 million women are forcibly raped by their current or former male partners, some more than once.⁴ Similarly, a *Ms.* magazine survey in 1994 found that eighty-four percent of those raped knew their attacker. According to this data then, acquaintance rape and date rape are more common than left-handedness, heart attacks, and alcoholism.⁵ Women are taught to be wary of strangers and avoid walking alone at night, but these strategies do not take into account the reality of the majority of rape situations. By showing how easily flowers are torn and damaged with safety pins, I am trying to raise awareness of the alarming frequency of sexual assault and rape.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) (also known as female genital cutting (FGC) and female circumcision) needs further explanation. Unlike rape, it is unfortunately seen as legitimate, beneficial, and justifiable in many parts of the world. It is estimated that by 1996, FGM had been inflicted on 80 to 100 million girls and young women. “In countries where it is practiced, mostly African, about two million youngsters a year can expect the knife – or the razor or a glass shard – to cut their clitoris or remove it altogether, [and] to have part of all of their labia... sewn together with catgut or thorns.”⁶ FGM can lead to urinary and reproductive tract infections (caused by obstructed flow of urine and menstrual blood), scarring, infertility, epidermal inclusion cysts, increased risk of

acquiring sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), bladder and urethra stones, kidney damage, and death from excessive bleeding.^{7,8} Initially, sexual intercourse is often extremely painful for women who have undergone this procedure; a second cut of their genitals often needs to be made at this time – usually performed by the sexual partner with a knife – to allow the labia majora to be opened for intercourse. This second cut can also lead to medical complications.⁹ Many women never experience sexual pleasure after FGM.¹⁰ Many women who have had their genitals cut experience difficulties in childbirth. All types of female genital mutilation pose an increased risk of death to the baby, with some types also increasing the risk of postpartum hemorrhage in women.¹¹ Finally, because many FGM procedures are performed on young girls who are not given a choice in the matter, psychological and emotional stress is common, with comparable symptoms to post-traumatic stress disorder.¹² Since 1997, the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have spoken out against the practice of FGM.¹³

Like a well-intentioned attempt to hold something together with safety pins, in cultures where FGM is practiced, it is defended under the grounds that it is for the female’s own good. Reasons cited are numerous and varied, including aiding in genital cleanliness (for the sake of the woman and for her future children, who could supposedly die if they came in contact with “unclean” external female genitalia)¹⁴ and removing the “male” part of female genitalia – the clitoris – to create a clearer indication of a woman’s sex,¹⁵ which in turn is thought to enhance the female’s femininity (e.g. docility and obedience).¹⁶ FGM is also performed to cure females of depression, hysteria, and insanity;¹⁷ and to prevent sexual promiscuity and excessive masturbation by eliminating a

female's ability to experience sexual pleasure¹⁸ or decreasing her libido.¹⁹ Other reasons include proving virginity at the time of marriage to ensure an honorable union;²⁰ increasing fertility;²¹ and even making the female genitalia more aesthetically pleasing.²² Women who undergo this procedure are told that it is done for their safety, health, social status, and virtue, but FGM “has no health benefits and harms girls and women in many ways.”²³ Likewise, the rose in *Pinned for Safety* is clearly harmed by attempts to pin it shut. The flower petals have started to tear, and the pile of petals in the background suggests that the pins will eventually destroy the flower, rather than protect it.

My next four watercolor paintings were created in much the same vein. In *Stabbed* (December 2009) (fig. 7), I held two roses shut with straight pins, which were more effective than safety pins in keeping them closed. More importantly, the straight pins lent themselves more easily to stabbing the flowers. Because they did not have to be held in place by safety pin latches, they could penetrate into the roses in a quicker, jerkier fashion. The straight pins sticking out of the flower petals also look more dangerous; the rose becomes hazardous to touch. Though I initially intended *Stabbed* to be interpreted similarly to *Pinned for Safety*, I also understand how the rose in *Stabbed* can be seen as defensive, ready to fight and ward off potential invaders, or made stronger through adversity.

In *Hanging by a Petal* (fig. 8), created in January 2010, again used safety pins, which despite its name can be used destructively. Two roses are held together with pins, their petals perforated and scarred from earlier. The petal in the foreground – stabbed with safety pins so many times that it cannot stay attached to the rest of the flower – is

starting to unravel, the piles of petals giving evidence to the unfortunate future of the rose.

Stapled Apart (fig. 9), created in February 2010, is similar, although this time the rose petals were assaulted with numerous staples. My palette, instead of my usual pinks, yellows, and violets, incorporates darker and more neutral colors, and sickly yellow-greens. While creating my other pieces, I feared that pleasant colors would cause confusion about what the paintings were about. I worried that *Pinned for Safety*, *Hanging by a Petal*, and *Stabbed* might be too “pretty” – that viewers would think I was advocating or even celebrating violence with them. The darker, more neutral colors look more sinister. However, I quickly returned to the more saturated pinks, yellows, and violets for my remaining watercolors because I am more drawn to saturated colors and want to attract viewers. I wanted the color palette – if nothing else – to seem celebratory and hopeful.

Bound (fig. 10), also created in February 2010, depicts a single rose tightly bound with rubber bands. Roses are aesthetically pleasing and act as a reproductive agent for the plant, but this rose is literally restricted from fulfilling either purpose. These limitations could reference physically violent genital restriction (e.g., FGM) and emotionally or psychologically restrictive social norms placed on expressions of female sexuality. Even when no sexual abuse has occurred, women are taught that their genitalia are unclean or shameful, and should be covered up and avoided at all times. “It’s surprising how much we women don’t know about our own bodies – especially the parts that make us uniquely female... The vulva, vestibule, and vagina are body parts, just like the arm or leg or breast. They needn’t be unmentionable. Yet we often associate these parts with the realm

of the untouchable or dirty.”²⁴ Some women are even unwilling to examine their genitalia enough to properly recognize health problems, successfully use tampons, or have sex; they are ashamed and even fearful of the body parts they know little of, and may be made to feel guilty by societal gender norms or their religious upbringing if they try to learn more.

Vaginismus is only one of several sexual disorders women may acquire due to societal restrictions on sexuality. A woman with vaginismus is so afraid of vaginal penetration that an involuntary spasm of the muscles surrounding the vagina blocks any attempt at entry; the spasms can even be triggered by just thinking about something (a penis, a tampon, medical instruments needed to conduct pap smears) entering the vagina.²⁵ Though physical causes may also contribute, the majority of vaginismus cases are caused by any of numerous psychological issues: anxiety about being vulnerable, losing control, or getting pregnant; fear or anticipation of intercourse pain; performance pressures; negativity toward and guilt about sex; past emotional or sexual abuse; overly rigid parenting; unbalanced religious teaching; and inadequate sex education.²⁶

It is my firm belief that nobody, regardless of biological sex, should have to feel ashamed of any part of her or his body, or guilty for intimately knowing it, regardless of religious upbringing. “It’s simply healthy, both mentally and physically, to think about your genitals as yet another intricate part of your human machinery, with important diverse functions, and worthy of considerate care.”²⁷ Knowledge is indeed power, and our society’s attempts to shroud female genitalia – or male genitalia, for that matter – in mystery, fear, or shame, or to otherwise restrict knowledge, education, expressions, or celebrations of sexuality or sexual and reproductive body organs, is unfortunate and can

even lead to sexual disorders. The rubber bands in *Bound* signify such societal restrictions, capable of causing physical, emotional, and psychological harm.

Debris (fig. 11), painted in March 2010, shows a pile of petals that have survived a rose's destruction. For the first time, I don't include any indication of what destroyed the flower; the focus is instead on the aftermath – the debris of destruction. Alternatively, the rose might not have been intentionally destroyed at all, but simply wilted from age. My palette is hopeful and suggests that life will eventually renew itself – there will be other roses. I hope that with each passing year, more women and girls will find empowerment in their bodies and sexuality. Too many women are hesitant to embrace their sexuality, somehow physically, emotionally, or psychologically hurt, or going through the process of sexual healing, and my heart goes out to all of these women.

Notes

¹Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2008), 4.

²*ibid.*, 169. States that one in every three women experience attempts of sexual violence in her lifetime.

³Robin Warshaw, *I Never Called it Rape* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 11. Notes that one in every four women experiences sexual violence or rape.

⁴National Organization for Women, "Violence Against Women in the United States," <http://now.org/issues/violence/stats.html>.

⁵Warshaw, 11.

⁶Ensler, 67. Quoted from the New York Times, April 12, 1996.

⁷The National Women's Health Information Center, "Female Genital Cutting," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <http://womenshealth.gov/faq/female-genital-cutting.cfm>.

⁸Amnesty International, "What is Female Genital Mutilation," <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ACT77/006/1997/en/3ed9f8e9-e984-11dd-8224-a709898295f2/act770061997en.html>.

⁹*ibid.*

¹⁰*ibid.*

¹¹World Health Organization, "Female Genital Mutilation," <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/index.html>.

¹²The National Women's Health Information Center.

¹³World Health Organization.

¹⁴The National Women's Health Information Center.

¹⁵World Health Organization.

¹⁶Amnesty International.

¹⁷*ibid.*

¹⁸The National Women's Health Information Center.

¹⁹World Health Organization.

²⁰The National Women's Health Information Center.

²¹Amnesty International.

²²World Health Organization.

²³*ibid.*

²⁴Elizabeth G. Stewart and Paula Spencer, *The V Book: A Doctor's Guide to Complete Vulvovaginal Health* (New York: Bantam Books, 2002), xx.

²⁵*ibid.*, 341.

²⁶Mark Carter and Lisa Carter, "What Causes Vaginismus," <http://www.vaginismus.com/vaginismus-causes>. Vaginismus.com is reviewed by the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) and the Journal of Women's Health: Physical Therapy.

²⁷Stewart, 13.



Figure 1
Feminine Layers
September, 2009
20" x 22"
Watercolor on paper



Figure 2
Silk Caution
October, 2009
22" x 30"
Watercolor on paper



Figure 3
Poisoned Rose
October, 2009
20" x 22"
Watercolor on paper



Figure 4
Bandaged Duality
November, 2009
22" x 30"
Watercolor on paper



Figure 5
Ace Bandage Field
December, 2009
22" x 30"
Watercolor on paper



Figure 6
Pinned for Safety
December, 2009
20" x 22"
Watercolor on paper



Figure 7
Stabbed
December, 2009
20" x 22"
Watercolor on paper



Figure 8
Hanging by a Petal
January, 2010
30" x 22"
Watercolor on paper



Figure 9
Stapled
February, 2010
22" x 30"
Watercolor on paper



Figure 10
Bound
March, 2010
30" x 22"
Watercolor on paper



Figure 11
Debris
March, 2010
22" x 30"
Watercolor on paper

Part Two: A Historical and Cultural Survey of Flower Symbolism
as Female Sexual Metaphor

The symbolism of flowers “has a wealth of meanings, above all female and sexual associations, embedded in its history.”¹ Indeed, flowers have always represented female sexuality throughout history, and in almost every area of the world, with the possible exception of Africa, where “flowers do not endure” and it is “the leaves, bark and roots of trees and plants that are important.”² The flower can be used as either a negative or positive symbol, showing either an absence or presence of sexuality. Most negative symbolism uses a flower (most often a rose or white lily) or enclosed garden to mean a lack of female sexuality – sexual innocence, virginity, and/or chastity, characteristics which also describe the Western stereotype of the ideal woman, one with the appropriate degree of femininity. Positive uses include drawing parallels between certain flowers and aspects of female sexual anatomy, such as vulvas, labia, vaginas, and wombs, and using flowers to depict and celebrate sexual acts or preferences. Furthermore, female puberty, menstruation, first sexual experience, fertility, pregnancy, motherhood, and menopause can be described with floral terminology, from enclosed buds and ripe blossoms to mature plants and wilted flowers. Undoubtedly, this connection has been made when considering the purpose of the flower to seduce for the sake of the plant’s reproduction,³ as well as its aesthetic similarities to female genitalia. A catalogue for the 2004 “Flower as Image” exhibition at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark takes the parallel between flowers and the female body one step further, suggesting that flowers are sexy to the masculine gaze, and that “feasting one’s eyes on the beauty of flowers is an

uncomplicated, easily accessible pleasure... like pornography it has no purpose than the pleasure itself.”⁴ Whatever the reason for such symbolism, it has been very prevalent throughout history.

As far back as ancient Egypt, flowers were used as both positive and negative symbols. In ancient Egypt, the lotus flower (a plant of the waterlily family) was believed to be a sacred, life-giving force.⁵ According to mythology, the sun god, Ra, was imprisoned in a lotus bud “before the beginning of the world” and emerged from the blossoming flower with his solar disc, giving him the name “the god who rises from the great lotus.”⁶ Similarly, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* describes the process of the deceased being reborn from the lotus into the afterlife. This idea is associated with the solar cults of Ra and the symbolism of “the lotus as the womb from which mankind emerged” (fig. 1).⁷ Though Egyptian mythology about the lotus does not depict female sexuality per se, it does align the lotus with the uterus, a female sexual organ. Conversely, the ancient Egyptians also used the rose to signify chastity, virginity, and “a love that is free from all carnal associations” in the rites of the goddess Isis.⁸

In India, too, a sexual mythology exists around the lotus flower. The Sanskrit term *padma* (lotus) is “quite often used as a secret code for the *yonī*” (Sanskrit for womb or sacred place).⁹ Furthermore, the lotus symbolizes different aspects of female sexuality depending on its parts and age. “The sacred lotus became symbolic of the fruitful womb; its pistil, the fetus. As a bud, it represented the virgin cunnus; when in bloom, the yawning labia of a productive woman.”¹⁰ The phrase “the jewel in the lotus” similarly took on a symbolic meaning, with “jewel” denoting semen, penis, or embryo and “lotus” indicating vulva or womb.¹¹ This phrase, *Om mani padme hum* in Sanskrit, has since

gained popularity as a Buddhist meditation mantra and is still revered in contemporary society by the devotees of the Dalai Lama – though many contemporary Buddhists deny the explicit sexuality of the phrase. Flowers are also used to symbolize women with great sexual appetite, such as in Indian erotic literature's *padmini* archetype. "The *padmini* woman is said to enjoy sexual union much more by day, when her lotus opens up under the rays of the sun, than by night. She also prefers the lushness of flowery surroundings to the cool satin sheets of the bedchamber and especially enjoys strong pressure on her yoni and much stroking of her breasts. The *padmini*'s love juice is said to smell like a newly blossoming lotus."¹² Female genitalia was so often symbolically depicted in India that the word *yonī* has come to mean "a symbol of the female genitalia." The *yonī* symbolism took many forms, including flowers, fruits, a triangle, and a double-pointed oval shape.¹³

Menstruation is another aspect of female sexual experience that played an important role in the flower symbolism of India. "Eastern texts recognize at least sixteen varieties [of menstrual fluid] and all of these terms end with *puspa* (Sanskrit, 'flower'), a common designation for the red menstrual flux and flow."¹⁴ The Sanskrit *yonipushpa*, meaning "vulva flower," also describes a woman's menstrual flowing, as well as a black flower that symbolizes sexual intercourse.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Andaman Islands, located off the coast of India in the Bay of Bengal, are still home to nomadic tribes that give girls an additional name at puberty drawn from a plant or tree which is flowering at the same time. "When a girl reaches puberty the natives think of her as having blossomed...under the influence of the same natural forces, so she is given her flower name which is no longer used after she gives birth."¹⁶ In India, flowers are therefore associated with female

menstruation just as they are female sexual appetite and female fertility. Finally, flowers represent sexuality and sensuality for both sexes in courting and marriage, especially when strung together in garlands. “In one form of marriage known as *Swayamvara*, garlands were exchanged between bride and groom... These early references are largely secular, often sexual, but indicate a wide range of usage.”¹⁷ Indian culture, both historical and contemporary, is filled with examples of floral symbolism as sexual code.

The civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome also used such flower symbolism. The goddess of love and seduction (Greek: Aphrodite, Roman: Venus) was symbolically represented with several flowering plants, including the lily, rose, apple, pomegranate, myrtle, quince, opium poppy, and mandrake.¹⁸ The myrtle was also visually compared to female genitalia, even in clinical discourse. It was the labia specifically, the lips that surround the vaginal opening and make up part of the vulva, that reminded Greeks of the myrtle plant. “The first-century Greek physician Rufus of Ephesus used the names ‘lips of the myrtle’ for the outer labia majora and ‘fruit of the myrtle’ for the inner labia minora.”¹⁹ Perhaps even more telling of the pairing of flowers and sexuality, however, are the rituals associated with worshipping the minor goddess of flowers (Greek: Chloris, Roman: Flora). At first, Flora was believed to look after the flowering of cereals, vines, and fruit trees, acting more as a goddess of harvest. “Historically, the ‘flower’ seems first to have been the promise of fruit, not a thing itself.”²⁰ Eventually, she became the goddess of flowers “in the full meaning of the word.” From 240 BCE to 173 BCE, the Floralia, or floral games, were annually celebrated in her honor²¹ – a festival which included an orgy of ritual promiscuity. Indeed, the worship of Flora was a very sexual affair, and “a number of sources claim that Flora was a deified prostitute.”²² The Greeks

were also among the first to equate certain floral scents with an increase in sexuality, calling such items aphrodisiacs after their goddess of love and desire. The oil from violet flowers was one such aphrodisiac, and Greek women “used it to oil their entire bodies before entering into sexual union.”²³ The Romans carried on this tradition, and considered bean flowers sacred due to their alleged powers to arouse and stimulate the emotions. “For the Teutonic peoples, the bean was a symbol of sexual pleasure and eroticism and it is possible that the Romans picked it up from there, or vice versa.”²⁴

Some Native American groups also continue to use flowers as sexual symbols to this day. In the Paiute, Hopi, and Taos tribes of Northern California, public dances are held in celebration of a girl’s puberty, where women wear flower crowns.²⁵ Further south, the Uto-Aztec peoples use flowers to symbolize human hearts and other aspects of vital force, such as blood, organs of perception, and occasionally the vagina.²⁶

Floral symbolism can also be found in Middle Eastern cultures. Here, the lily was the flower most often associated with the *yonī*. The lily was a prominent sexual symbol encompassing a wide area from the Middle East to Mediterranean cultures, though its symbolism was more ambivalent than that of the lotus. “Aside from *yonī*, love, and passion it may signify – in other instances – the *yonī* or woman, in the aspect of the virgin.”²⁷ The lily would later be used as a symbol of the Virgin Mary in Christian cultures. More generally, Islamic flower gardens represented centers “not only of prayer and meditation but of revelry and sexuality.” Some early court gardens were even made “expressly for the purpose of love.” Furthermore, Islamic paintings show sexual intercourse taking place on a flowered carpet in a garden.²⁸ Eventually the pictorial representation of flowers was not necessary for the word “garden” to have sexual

connotations. The *Perfumed Garden* was “an Arabic erotic manual, comparable to the Indian Kama Sutra.”²⁹ Though flower and garden imagery were not restricted to being sexual symbols, they were frequently evoked in such a fashion.

As Christianity spread in the first part of the Middle Ages, much flower symbolism and ritual in the West was stamped out by the Catholic leaders, who feared any references to pagan religions. Eventually, however, flower symbolism was integrated into Christianity as well, particularly when associated with the Virgin Mary. In direct contrast to how flowers were used as positive symbols of female sexuality in India, they were now being used as negative symbols throughout Europe. The enclosed garden became a symbol for virginity and sexual innocence in general, indicating flowers untainted by the outside world, and the Virgin Mary specifically. Additionally, “Mary’s motherhood enclosed the whole of heaven and earth within her womb, within the space of a single round rose,” according to the Christian poets.³⁰ The Virgin Mary was most often associated with a rose (even then, usually a white rose without thorns), but was also symbolized with a lily or violet.³¹ In the rites of the Virgin Mary the rose stands for “chastity, virginity, and a love that is free from all carnal associations.” Interestingly, however, some medieval alchemists used the term “mystic rose” as a positive sexual code for the *yoni*, even though this term was also used to denote the Virgin Mary.³² White roses are still used as symbols of innocence and purity, while red roses are seen as sexually charged. In my watercolors I exclusively used roses, mainly in yellow and pink hues so that my content would walk the line between positive and negative sexual symbolism.

Flowers were frequently used as decorations in illuminated manuscripts of the

Middle Ages. There was often no sexual symbolism associated with these decorative patterns, but in the case of Hildegard von Bingen's book of her spiritual visions, *Scivias*, this is not necessarily the case. In one passage, Von Bingen, a German nun born in 1098, describes seeing the image of a woman of great size: "Her womb was full of holes, much like a net... Infants entered her womb through the many holes that were in it... The woman, looking at them most kindly, said to them sadly, 'My very own children are turning back into dust. Nevertheless, I conceive and bear many who tire and oppress me, their mother, with their various... heresies and schisms and useless battles, in plunderings and in murders, in adulteries and fornications and in other errors similar to these.'"³³ Though von Bingen encouraged Christian nuns and priests to uphold their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the image created to accompany this description uses positive symbolism to associate the womb with a flowery garden (fig. 2).³⁴

With the Renaissance came the beginning of modern English; it is here therefore that I will bring up some points about the English language, and how it shows our culture's strong connections between flowers and female sexuality as well – though undoubtedly these words were influenced by our culture's symbolism long before the Renaissance. Another definition for "flower" in English and French (other than the obvious reproductive part of a plant) is "the essence" or "the best part" – as in, "the flowers of sulfur," meaning the essence of that mineral. Similarly, the English "flour" is the "essence," or flower, of bread, and thus wheat is the "best part," or flower, of the ground.³⁵ To extrapolate that symbolism further, humankind is born from the wombs of women, meaning that their sexual and reproductive organs are the "essence" or "flower" of humankind. To look at this a different way, we need only to consider the verb "to

deflower,” a euphemism for breaking a virgin’s hymen through sexual penetration. This phrase “has more to do with the plucking of a flower, the taking away of her ‘essence’ (as a virgin), leading to her ‘blossoming forth’ as a woman.”³⁶ Though less common, the term “flowering” is still occasionally used to describe a woman’s menstrual period, as in the phrase, “menstrual flowering.” Finally, the verb “to bloom” may have the same roots as “to blow,” which we see in William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “I know a bank where on the wild thyme blows.”³⁷ “To blow” has sexual connotations today, but even in Shakespeare’s time, its derivatives (blowze, blowzy, blousy) meant both overblown and a wench or whore – a woman who had sexually “bloomed” too much.³⁸

The European Renaissance saw a continuation of this floral symbolism in art, as well. The negative sexual symbolism was often evoked in images of the Virgin Mary, while the positive sexual symbolism can be found in many Italian paintings depicting Greek and Roman mythology. There are countless examples of both negative and positive floral sexual symbolism; for the sake of brevity, I will only touch on a few. Flemish artist Jan (Velvet) Breugel painted an example of the enclosed garden as a symbol for virginity and the Virgin Mary in his *Garland of Flowers with the Virgin* (early 1600s). In this piece, the flowers that decorate the borders step right into the painting itself to form a garland surrounding the Virgin.³⁹ In contrast, Italian painter Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera* (1477) (fig. 3)⁴⁰ celebrates the beauty of sexuality by depicting the Roman goddess Flora naked and garlanded with flowers, exhaling more flowers as she is caught by Zephyr, the Greek god of the west wind.⁴¹ French artist Nicolas Poussin’s painting, *Kingdom of Flora* (1631) (fig. 4),⁴² shows that Poussin was highly conscious of

the implications of foliage and flowers as decoration. Here, “the themes of flowers, sexuality, garlands, classical statues and gardens are closely interwoven.”⁴³ In the Netherlands, Rembrandt van Rijn also took up the association of the goddess Flora with love and sensual pleasures, depicting his own mistress as a contemporary Flora (1654).⁴⁴

Using flowers as both negative and positive symbols were commonplace until the Victorian era, when negative symbolism prevailed. Victorian artists promoted society’s values, and used flowers as symbols of virginity, sexual innocence, and generalized femininity. American painters Charles Courtney Curran and Robert Reid returned to the idea of an enclosed garden (*hortus conclusus*) as representative of sexual purity, going one step further to manipulate color, texture, composition, and form to blend their painted women with the flowers and fences that surrounding them. “Curran extended the symbolism of the water lily, signifying ‘pure of heart,’ to two young women by rendering them in a manner that transformed them into flowers.” (1888)⁴⁵ The art of these male artists conformed to the traditional Victorian definition of femininity at a time when many women began to question their rigidly defined societal and familial roles.⁴⁶ Lilly Martin Spencer’s 1902 painting *The Circassian in the Slave Mart* is another example of Victorian American art. In this work, petals falling off a rose show a loss of sexual innocence,⁴⁷ literally depicting the verb “deflower.”

Indeed, by the early twentieth century, “to deflower” had become popular in so many different cultures that it led to new terminology centered around the use of the word “flower” in circles of prostitution – especially in China, where prostitution was known as a “flower market.” Wine poured by prostitutes was “flower wine” (*huaqiu*). In the hierarchy of prostitution during the early part of the twentieth century, the lowest

facilities were the “flower smoke rooms” (*huayan jian*), where customers could smoke opium and visit prostitutes simultaneously. And a patron who paid heavily for the privilege of “deflowering” a new recruit to the profession would host a banquet for his friends at the brothel, a procedure known as “celebrating the flower” (*zuo huatou*).⁴⁸

Still, the symbolism of flowers as embodiments of explicit sexuality persisted as well. Artists who neglected context and instead focused on a close-up view of a single flower often encouraged this more overtly sexual interpretation. American painter Martin Heade’s still-life paintings of orchids and magnolias – such as *Magnolia Flower* (1888) (fig. 5)⁴⁹ – were identified as being too explicit to sell well or receive much critical notice.⁵⁰ In literature, Marcel Proust evoked the image of the common orchid (“catleya”) specifically to refer to sexual intercourse, “a personal metaphor that he imposes on the work and on the reader.”⁵¹ Similarly, the calla lily was seen as exotic and sexual, even becoming a symbol for specific sexual behaviors – homosexuality and bisexuality – due to its androgynous form. The calla’s dramatic concavity and roundness provoke obvious associations with the feminine, yet its prominent spadix is often seen as phallic. Its combination of male and female elements makes this flower an appropriate representation of sexual malleability. A memorable example of this symbolism appears on a painted porcelain teapot from 1882. On it, Oscar Wilde, one of England’s most brazen homosexuals at the time, offers his limp wrist as the teapot’s spout and sports an enormous calla on his breast.⁵²

Incorporating floral sexual symbolism in twentieth-century art, however, did not consist of merely following a tradition. For the first time, many women were finally able to pursue careers in art, and with an increase in female artists – and an increase in their

recognition – artworks about the theme of female sexuality understandably changed.

Many women, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, communicated female sexuality metaphorically rather than literally, undoubtedly in part because sexuality was still unacceptable to be explicitly discussed or depicted. Because flowers were one of the few acceptable subjects for women to paint before the twentieth century, and due to the long history of using flowers as sexual symbols, some women logically chose to use floral imagery that way.

Furthermore, Freudian theory – which attributed sexual symbolism to everyday objects, including flowers – was in vogue in Europe starting in the 1910s and in the United States by the 1920s. This increased the use of positive sexual symbolism, as the West became more comfortable with depicting and celebrating sexuality. Even artworks that were not intended by the artists to be read as positive sexual symbols were interpreted in this way. Finally, at the start of the Feminist movement in the 1970s, there was a particular fear among women that explicit female sexual imagery could be perceived as indistinguishable from mainstream pornography, and different kinds of metaphors were thus encouraged.⁵³ British feminist scholars like Griselda Pollock argued strenuously for “replacing realism with representational strategies... on the grounds that the female body when directly imaged is too easily co-opted for male viewing pleasure.”⁵⁴ For all of these reasons, many women – and men – continued to employ flower symbolism to address female sexuality.

As Freud’s groundbreaking ideas spread from Europe to the United States in the early 1900s, artworks that dealt with sexuality in a metaphorical way grew in popularity, and critics began to search for hidden psychoanalytic meanings in the works of several

artists regardless of their true intent. Hutchins Hapgood, a journalist and occasional member of photographer Alfred Stieglitz's circle of artists and friends, reflected upon the age's preoccupation with Freudian interpretations as follows: "Psychoanalysis has been overdone to such an extent that nobody could say anything about a dream, no matter how colorless it was, without his friends' winking at one another and wonder how he could have been so indiscreet."⁵⁵

The calla lily was an especially poignant symbol at the turn of the century, in part due to Sigmund Freud's reference to the flower's sexual symbolism.⁵⁶ Within a year of Freud's publication of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905, fellow Austrian Alfred Kubin painted *Marsh Plants* (fig. 6), in which tremendous calla lilies bloom from the vagina of a figure floating in marshlands.⁵⁷ The symbolism of the calla was so widespread that Charles Demuth could take for granted the viewer's understanding of its sexual connotations in his work. His *Calla Lilies (Bert Savoy)* (fig. 7), for instance, exhibited at Alfred Stieglitz's Intimate Gallery in 1926, required reading the calla lily as a symbol for the bisexual persona of Savoy to appreciate the meaning of the work.⁵⁸ Bert Savoy was a flamboyant female impersonator, and part of the vaudevillian team of Savoy and Brennan who represented "the vast vulgarity of New York incarnate and made heroic." Demuth's painting shows the calla lily in the orifice of an elaborate sea shell, further complicating and enriching "the sexual schema of his homage,"⁵⁹ because shells, like flowers, have a long history of being interpreted as a symbol of female sexual anatomy. Demuth painted other calla lilies such as his watercolor *Calla Lilies* in 1929.⁶⁰

The American painter and poet Marsden Hartley, a friend of Demuth and fellow exhibitor at Stieglitz's gallery, also called attention to the androgynous character of the

calla lily “by simultaneously emphasizing the masculinity of its erect spadix and the femininity of its enclosing oval bloom,” in such pieces as his 1920 pastel drawing *Calla Lilies* (fig. 9).⁶¹ However, Hartley “also painted the flower in more modest guises with the bloom closed or nearly closed and the spadix partially or completely hidden.”⁶²

Hartley was himself homosexual, and spent as much of the 1910s and 1920s as he could in Berlin, a distinctly male-oriented city with a large homosexual subculture. As Hartley said of himself, he “lived rather gaily in the Berlin fashion – with all that implies.”⁶³ He “was a sexually alert, but often frustrated man who funneled his passions into art.”⁶⁴

Indeed, Hartley is best known for his painting *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914), which is often read as an ode to Karl von Freyburg, a Prussian lieutenant whom Hartley met and became enamored with in Berlin. Hartley suffered from bouts of depression throughout his artistic career, and friend and poet William Carlos Williams once commented on feeling sorry for him, because of his apparent sexual loneliness and frustration.⁶⁵ Though Hartley would later write an essay interpreting Georgia O’Keeffe’s flowers as sexually explicit, of his own flower paintings he simply said, “one escapes into simplicity without mood,”⁶⁶ implying that the act of painting flowers had, for him, no personal meaning.⁶⁷ Freudian overtones were still read into Hartley’s paintings, however, especially by journalist Paul Rosenfeld, another member of the Stieglitz circle⁶⁸ – though not to the extent that they were in Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings.

American artist Georgia O’Keeffe’s close-up paintings of floral forms from the 1910s – 1930s have been almost exclusively read as sexual metaphors, despite her continuous denial of such an intent. O’Keeffe once threatened to quit painting if Freudian interpretations of her work continued to be made, complaining that Hartley’s and

Demuth's flower paintings were not nearly as often interpreted erotically. As a female artist, O'Keeffe had to face the cultural identification of being a woman and her female sexual biology.⁶⁹ In part, these Freudian interpretations were egged on by her eventual husband, Alfred Stieglitz, as a way to promote her work. Although many art critics insisted that the velvety texture, sumptuous color, and organic forms of her paintings all pointed toward sexuality, O'Keeffe reasoned that she merely wanted to paint what she saw, scaling up the images to force busy New Yorkers to stop and take the time to look at them.⁷⁰ "In the twenties," she explained, "huge buildings seemed to be going up overnight in New York. ... So I thought I'll make [the flowers] big like the huge buildings going up. People will be startled; they'll have to look at them – and they did."⁷¹

Throughout O'Keeffe's time in New York with Stieglitz (1917-1929), "O'Keeffe and Stieglitz definitely had different agendas with regard to the promotion of her work around issues of sexuality."⁷² In their 1921 Freudian interpretation of O'Keeffe's work, Marsden Hartley and journalist Paul Rosenfeld reinforced Stieglitz's inclination to advocate her art as a manifestation of the erotic. When critics continued to interpret O'Keeffe's flower paintings as symbols of sexuality or even direct equivalents of body imagery,⁷³ O'Keeffe made no attempt to veil her contempt: "Well – I made you take the time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you wrote about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower – and I don't."⁷⁴ American historian and philosopher Lewis Mumford, in his review of an O'Keeffe exhibition, conceded that "perhaps only half the sex is on the walls, the rest is probably in me."⁷⁵ Late in her life, however, O'Keeffe admitted that feelings of intimacy and sexuality might have

unconsciously entered into her work, planted in her mind during this Freud-obsessed period. Eroticism, she asserted, was “something people themselves put into the paintings. They’ve found things that never entered my mind. *That doesn’t mean they weren’t there*, but the things they said astonished me. It wouldn’t occur to me. But Alfred talked that way and people took it from him.”⁷⁶ Consciously symbolic or not, O’Keeffe’s works nevertheless tend to be interpreted in a sexual manner, to this day. Indeed, it is this readiness of the public to still read large floral forms as sexual that I am relying on for interpretations of my own artwork.

Early in her career, O’Keeffe created a ten-inch tall abstract standing figure in plasticene for her May 1916 show⁷⁷ that was described as “decidedly phallic” in shape. Two years later, she painted the abstract *Music – Pink and Blue* (fig. 10), which supposedly “conjures up flower petals and human sexual anatomy,”⁷⁸ despite being devoid of recognizable subject matter. Stieglitz showed this sculpture and painting in his 1919 photograph, *Georgia O’Keeffe: A Portrait – Painting and Sculpture* (fig. 11),⁷⁹ provocatively placing the sculpture in front of the gaping hole in *Music – Pink and Blue* and thus encouraging a sexual reading of her work. O’Keeffe’s *Gray Lines with Black, Blue and Yellow* (c. 1923) (fig. 12), *Gray Line with Lavender and Yellow* (1923), and *Flower Abstraction* (1924) (fig. 13) have prominent “V” forms. The “V” is another symbol for female genitalia, causing her works to be suggestive of both female sexual anatomy and flower petals in their openings and delicate layering.⁸⁰ O’Keeffe’s *Black Iris* of 1926 (fig. 14) and *Dark Iris No. 2* of 1927 were also described as exceedingly sensual and sexual, as if the artist had paid particular attention to the intriguing shapes and textures at the flower’s center.⁸¹ Her *Oriental Poppies* painting of 1927 (fig. 15)⁸²

functions in a similar way, placing two similarly sized poppies next to each other. I have used this format for my *Silk Caution* and *Bandage Duality* watercolors. Each poppy invites the viewer to delve further into the darkly painted centers. Finally, O'Keeffe's *Two Calla Lilies in Pink* (1928) (fig. 16)⁸³ demonstrates that, like Hartley, she called attention to the bisexual character of the calla lily by highlighting both the femininity of its cup-like oval bloom and the masculinity of its erect spadix.⁸⁴ This interpretation carries even more weight considering that, as a member of Stieglitz's circle, O'Keeffe would have been exposed to different meanings behind the flowers she chose to paint.⁸⁵

Imogen Cunningham was another female artist of the early twentieth century who portrayed flowers. Her floral photographs of the 1920s were created independently of O'Keeffe. Though it is often hypothesized that O'Keeffe's floral paintings influenced Cunningham, "Cunningham stated that she did not see them until visiting New York in 1934."⁸⁶ She took several photographs of calla lilies, such as *Callas* (1925) (fig. 17)(86) and *Two Calla Lilies* (1926) (fig. 18),⁸⁷ as well as magnolia flowers, "which became increasingly simplified as she sought to recognize the form within the object."⁸⁸ Interestingly, Cunningham's extreme close-up photograph of a magnolia's stamen, titled *Magnolia Blossom Tower of Jewels* (1925) (fig. 19),⁸⁹ brings to mind the Sanskrit phrase *Om mani padme hum*, the "jewel in the lotus,"⁹⁰ mentioned earlier.

Cunningham's botanical interests were supported by Johan Hagemeyer, a professional Dutch horticulturist who became a photographer after moving to California and meeting Alfred Stieglitz. Hagemeyer created a limited body of floral still lifes during the 1920s, including the "moody, erotic, chalice-like *Calla Lily*," described by fellow photographer Edward Weston as reaching "such heights that even Eunuchs ejaculate

from excitement.”⁹¹ (90)(Lorenz, 27) In addition to plant forms, Weston, Hagemeyer, and Cunningham all photographed human forms, venturing into an exploration of body parts.⁹² Cunningham and Weston also photographed seashells throughout their artistic careers. Weston’s shell photographs, such as *Shell* (1927) (fig. 20),⁹³ were often compared to O’Keeffe’s flower paintings; and “like her still lifes, his photographs elicited varied interpretations, including the sexual.” Tina Modotti, an Italian photographer working in Mexico, related to Weston that the shell pictures caused excitement among her friends, making “everybody, including myself, think of the sexual act.”⁹⁴ Weston, however, “denied the sexual import of his shells.”⁹⁵ These three artists undoubtedly saw similarities between flowers, seashells, and the form of the (often nude) human body of their photographs; whether they intended their photographs to be read as sexual symbolism, however, is uncertain.

In her own right, Tina Modotti photographed still-lives of calla lilies, such as *Calla Lilies* (c. 1927) (fig. 21),⁹⁶ after seeing the accomplishments of her friend Edward Weston. “If her paired blossoms are read as lily-embryos, analogues to the female reproductive system become readily apparent.”⁹⁷ It seems likely that Modotti would have intended sexual symbolism in her own work, having been excited by the apparent sexuality in Weston’s work. However, we cannot be certain, considering that several artists already discussed were quick to interpret others’ artworks as holding Freudian symbolism while discouraging similar readings in their own works (including Marsden Hartley and Edward Weston). It seems that many artists of this time were unwilling to admit intentional incorporation of sexual symbolism in their works – Modotti perhaps among them.

Italian painter, writer, and etcher Enrico Vannuccini, however, could not deny the intentionality of female sexual anatomy symbolism in his widely collected and commissioned erotic bookplates – nor did he seem to want to. His mid-twentieth-century bookplate titled *Flos Florum* (fig. 22) shows two women with legs spread, surrounded by flowers. The words that accompany the image read: “are not the most beautiful adornment of plants their sexual organs?”⁹⁸ Some people do not care about any part of a plant other than its flowers, and, in a similar way, Vannuccini saw women as nothing more than their sexual organs. He once said, “Women are not made to think, because their bodies are built for making sons.”⁹⁹

Mexican painter Frida Kahlo also used the sexual flower symbolism intentionally, and to her advantage. Though best known for her self-portraits, Kahlo made still life paintings as well, some of which incorporate flowers or fruit that can be understood as clear sexual metaphors. In 1938, Kahlo created *Xochitl* (fig. 23),¹⁰⁰ “a small but powerful image of a flower made up of two opposite but well-integrated parts: a red, bell-like vagina, and a penis received from above.” The title translates to “flower” or “something precious, delicate” in *Nahuatl*, the traditional language of the Aztecs. Furthermore, according to Aztec mythology, flowers were created from the genitals of *Xochitl*, the goddess of love. The visual inspiration for Kahlo’s painting came from a glyph depicting a single red flower penetrated from above by a reed¹⁰¹ that is found in the *Codex Mendoza*. This Aztec codex was created about twenty years after the Spanish conquest of Mexico and contains a history of the Aztec rulers and their conquests, as well as a description of daily Aztec life and traditions. Kahlo’s painting clearly connects floral imagery with sexual connotations, and unlike O’Keeffe and others, Kahlo consciously

intended this reading of her artwork.

Kahlo's *The Flower of Life* (fig. 24)¹⁰² from 1944 is another example of her use of flowers as a metaphor for sexuality. Here, Kahlo plays up the visual similarities between flowers and female sexual anatomy by having flowers take the place of female sexual and reproductive organs. Most of Kahlo's works are personal and reflective, and *The Flower of Life* is no exception. The flower onto which she projects herself is a mandrake plant, that has had a reputation as an infertility cure as far back as the Book of Genesis. The mandrake's supposed ability to aid in conception "and even to make barren women fertile" was still believed by Orthodox Jews in nineteenth-century America, according to Sir James G. Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*. The mandrake was also thought to "aid in more copious lubrication of the *yonis*."¹⁰³ Kahlo's red mandrake "grows out of red leaves that form a woman's internal sexual organs. The vagina and fallopian tubes are present, but the ovaries and uterus are missing. Lightning strikes as the penis ejaculates within the vagina, and the sun echoes the orgasm. Here, Kahlo presents a woman's genitals, available to gratify a man's pleasure but unable to experience pleasure or conceive."¹⁰⁴ In many self-portraits, Kahlo alludes to her pregnancy complications with more concrete metaphors, so an interpretation of the mandrake plant in *The Flower of Life* as specifically symbolic of Kahlo's own sexual experiences seems accurate.

In Kahlo's *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) (fig. 25),¹⁰⁵ painted while Kahlo was in Detroit with husband and Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, Kahlo combines this flower symbolism with a self-portrait. In this disturbing work, Kahlo is lying unclothed on her back in a hospital bed after a miscarriage, surrounded by bloody sheets. The bed floats in an abstract space circled by six images relating to the miscarriage. The image in the

bottom center is a purple orchid, directly linked to her failing body through a blood-red filament suggesting an umbilical cord – as are all six images, which include a male fetus, a pelvis, and a side view of the female sexual and reproductive organs. Kahlo's inability to carry a baby to term was due to her many injuries resulting from a horrible bus accident in 1925. She had studied medicine and knew the odds were against her to ever deliver a healthy child, yet her barrenness sadly caused her to feel a sense of incompleteness as a woman, something that she saw as contributing to Rivera's compulsive infidelity.¹⁰⁶ Kahlo died when she was only 47, from complications stemming from that same bus accident. In a similar way, I am using personal experiences, observations, and fears to influence my own floral paintings, though I don't depict any personal scenes explicitly.

Other female artists, influenced by O'Keeffe and Kahlo, similarly used floral imagery to represent their own sexual experiences – especially with the rise of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s. O'Keeffe, who continued to make art until her death in 1986, concentrated on desert landscapes and still lifes of animal bones in her later paintings, but the Georgia O'Keeffe Retrospective Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970 brought renewed attention to her earlier flower paintings, prompting feminist artists to interpret O'Keeffe's floral images as sexual and sensual. A 1982 article from the *Woman's Art Journal* describes O'Keeffe's huge floral paintings, such as *Black Hollyhock* and *Blue Larkspur* (1930), as depictions of the sacred center, utilizing a central organizing core from which petals radiate – bringing back to light the feelings of enclosure, protective spaces, vaginas, and wombs that O'Keeffe so disliked.¹⁰⁷ As expected, O'Keeffe responded with “little sympathy to attempts by feminist artists and

critics during the 1970s to annex her formal language to the renewed search for a 'female' imagery.”¹⁰⁸

Feminist artist Judy Chicago played perhaps the most pivotal role in promoting a sexual reading of O’Keeffe’s flower pieces in the 1970s and ‘80s. She compared her own overtly sexual floral imagery to O’Keeffe’s work, stating, “I used the flower as the symbol of femininity as O’Keeffe had done.”¹⁰⁹ She also cited O’Keeffe as an important female artist who constructed her images around a central core, implying a relationship between her own body and that centered image.¹¹⁰ Chicago further asserted that she came across many instances of such central images in her visits to female artists’ studio spaces with her friend, fellow artist Miriam Schapiro: “We found a frequent use of the central image, often a flower, or abstracted flower form, surrounded by folds or undulations, as in the structure of the vagina... We felt sure that what we were seeing was a reflection of each woman’s need to explore her own identity, to assert her sense of her own sexuality.”¹¹¹ Indeed, Chicago’s “central core” paintings – “cunt imagery,” in her words – certainly follow such a pattern, as do Miriam Schapiro’s hard-edge abstraction paintings (i.e. *Big OX Number 2*, 1968) (fig. 26).¹¹² Though not all of these central core images openly evoke flowers, some certainly resemble floral forms or are titled to associate flowers with sexuality. In Chicago’s 1973 work *Through the Flower* (fig. 27)¹¹³ (one of her earlier central core images), she presented a floral image with strong, red-orange petals opening onto a radiant blue-green center. “The painting seemingly offers a vision from *within* the vagina onto a celestial field of light, an image of birth that simultaneously implies a path to ‘enlightenment’ by way of the flesh.”¹¹⁴ In my watercolor *Silk Caution* there is a similar emphasis on radiating lines in the background silk, which I intended to

be read as both growing out and coming in.

In 1974, Chicago created a series of “Rejection Drawings,” the first of which asks, “How does it feel to be rejected? It’s like having your flower split open.”¹¹⁵ In between these words are six images of symmetrical flowers with four petals each. The third drawing in the series (fig. 29)¹¹⁶ shows an image of a flower being “split open,” or peeled apart. The final drawing of the series (fig. 30) asks, “How does it feel to expose your real identity? It’s like opening your flower and no longer being afraid it will be rejected.”¹¹⁷ Though the stylized flowers are not aesthetically similar to female genitalia, it is clear that this is what Chicago is referencing with her words. To Chicago and Schapiro, flowers referenced vaginal iconography, which in turn was seen as a metaphor for the “core” or “essence” of womanhood.¹¹⁸ Chicago’s “Rejection Drawings” therefore allude to how deeply rejection hurts the very essence of a person, by directing the feeling through both female sexuality and flowers.

Also in 1974, Chicago began her series of painted porcelain miniatures, which included *Cunt as Temple, Tomb, Cave or Flower* (fig. 31).¹¹⁹ According to Chicago, the porcelain miniatures “transform the female sexual organs into ‘every possible thing the vagina [can] become... the vagina as temple, tomb, cave, or flower, [or] the Butterfly Vagina which gets to be an active vaginal form.’”¹²⁰ (37 → 119) Chicago criticized the passivity of O’Keeffe’s supposedly vaginal forms,¹²¹ calling them a form of imprisonment.¹²² In Chicago’s works, female sexuality is therefore depicted in much more active ways – often more like a butterfly than a static flower, though still evocative of both.

These miniatures eventually became studies for her most famous work – the

installation *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979), a mammoth undertaking, involving collaboration with several other artists. The triangular table – a shape evocative of female sexual anatomy – measures forty-eight feet on each side and houses thirty-nine place settings for prominent women in history, including Georgia O’Keeffe. Each place setting includes a delicately painted and often sculptural ceramic plate – all but one of which depicts a butterfly or flower-like sculpture as a centralized vulva symbol. Three of the most obviously floral ceramic plates belong to the place settings for Georgia O’Keeffe, the ancient Greek poet Sappho, from the island of Lesbos, and Sophia, the mythological virgin spirit who intercedes on behalf of humanity to bring spiritual seekers to the wisdom and love of God. (fig. 32)¹²³ Chicago described the sexual symbols of the plates as female butterflies that would “at the same time be shells, flowers, flesh, forest.”¹²⁴

Another female artist of note in the 1970s was Hannah Wilke, an American sculptor and performance artist. According to Joanna Frueh, in an essay written for a Hannah Wilke retrospective, “it was Wilke, not Judy Chicago as some believe, who originated vaginal imagery, as signature, as feminist statement, and as universal symbol.”¹²⁵ In 1972, Wilke began to work with latex, a material already wrought with sexual connotations, as “latex is rubber, used for diaphragms and condoms.”¹²⁶ Wilke poured and dried thin sheets of pigmented plastic, and then assembled them with metal snaps to hang on a wall.¹²⁷ This series of latex wall sculptures, created from 1972 to 1977, range in color from “lobster to luscious and fleshy pinks, to light, tanned-hide yellow” and “address female sexual pleasure, its plurality in terms of orgasms, [and] the overall responsiveness of the female body.”¹²⁸ Many of these latex sculptures “suggest flowers, as well as excited vaginal and clitoral flesh.”¹²⁹ One such piece is *Pink Champagne*

(1975) (fig. 33).¹³⁰

Wilke is perhaps best known for her *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* of 1975 (fig. 34), which includes photographs of the artist, often fully or partially nude, covered with the small vulva-like forms she shaped from used chewing gum and kneaded erasers.¹³¹ Wilke also placed her vulva-like sculptures on flowers, such as in the photograph *Gum with Grasshopper* (1976) (fig. 35).¹³² Wilke observed as she conducted her performances that “people are frightened by female organs because they don’t know what they look like.”¹³³ The labial gum sculptures, read as vulva or vulva and womb simultaneously,¹³⁴ also evoke imagery of unexpected growths, emotional and psychological scars,¹³⁵ and tiny wounds, “identified with feminine pleasure and pain.”¹³⁶ Wilke’s simplifications of female sexual organs also evoke the sensuality of plants and flowers with their organic shapes and layering, especially when the sculptures are placed directly on flower petals and leaves, as in *Gum with Grasshopper*.

Other artists of the 1960s through ‘80s used floral imagery to bring their sexuality and feminist agenda to public attention. Indeed, the high frequency of these symbolic representations even has its impact on literature. *Delta of Venus*, an erotic book written by Anais Nin and published in the early 1970s includes the following description: “One of them was talking about the woman painter who was filling the galleries with giant flowers in rainbow colors. ‘They’re not flowers,’ said the pipe smoker, ‘they’re vulvas. Anyone can see that. It is an obsession with her. She paints a vulva the size of a full-grown woman. At first it looks like petals, the heart of a flower, then one sees the two uneven lips, the fine center line, the wavelike edge of the lips, when they are spread open.’”¹³⁷ Because this passage could be referring to any of several actual artists of the

time (or a fictional conglomeration of them all) gives evidence for the popularity of such subject matter.

American photographer Suzanne Santoro created *Per una espressione nuova/Towards New Expression* (fig. 36)¹³⁸ during a stay in Rome in 1974. In this tiny volume, close-up photographs of women's genitals are juxtaposed with objects such as flowers and shells, invoking a comparison between them. An additional motivation for the work was to reject the notion of female genitals as being undefined and unknowable by exhibiting the diversity found in the pubic regions of actual women.¹³⁹ Lowell Nesbitt painted huge flower forms in the 1970s, reminiscent of Georgia O'Keeffe's work. Nesbitt's gargantuan irises, roses, lilies, and tulips, such as *Tulip* (1972) (fig. 37)¹⁴⁰ and *Two Electric Yellow Roses* (1973) (fig. 38),¹⁴¹ were depicted close-up so that their petals fill the canvas in a dramatic and implicitly sexual way. In *Two Electric Yellow Roses*, a series of stripes radiate out from the flowers, making the roses seem electrically charged. He has remarked, "I've been trying to treat the flower monumentally, to get beyond its prettiness."¹⁴² Buffie Johnson's similar paintings of flower images from the 1960s and '70s, which she dedicated to the Mother Goddess, also celebrate feminine attributes and strongly evoke sexual icons.¹⁴³ "In Buffie Johnson's paintings... the vagina is a flower, a colorful, huge, exploding flower."¹⁴⁴

Cuban-born performance artist Ana Mendieta made a strong connection between her body and the natural world in a series of earth-body performances executed between 1973 and 1980 and collectively titled *Silueta* (Silhouette). This title is based on the outline of her body that Mendieta would leave behind on the earth, filled with different organic materials, including rocks, twigs, and flowers.¹⁴⁵ She would take photographs of

either her body's imprint (fig. 39)¹⁴⁶ or her nude body (fig. 40)¹⁴⁷ in these environments, letting flowers and other natural substances cover her. Dedicated to an earth goddess, Mendieta's works symbolize a return to the goddess's womb and evoke sensuality by pairing her flesh or its silhouette with wildflowers.

Photo-realist American painter Audrey Flack also incorporated floral symbolism into her still lifes, although this was not her main focus. Her *Marilyn (Vanitas)* painting of 1977 (fig. 41) shows a photograph of Marilyn Monroe surrounded by "feminine" items, such as makeup, fruits, strings of beads, and a pink flower. To Flack, all of these items symbolized the quintessential American sex symbol, Marilyn Monroe, whom Flack describes as "fragile, vulnerable... addicted obsessively to reaching out for love." Furthermore, Flack says, "Sex was only her vehicle, her contact was far deeper... Like an icon she sits, the tools of her trade surrounding her."¹⁴⁸ Flack put a lot of thought into the placement and color of each item in the still life, which she set up as a photograph before painting. She admits that she first tried a white rose before changing it for "this very specific coral pink one, open and delicate."¹⁴⁹ Though she does not explain why she made the change or what each item in her still life symbolizes, Flack does remark, "I believe in universal symbols, Jungian archetypes. Everyone will understand the difference between a black rose and white one... a rose that is open and full and a tightly closed young bud. All of the objects are carefully selected in terms of the feelings I hope to evoke in the viewer."¹⁵⁰ To me, the pink rose is a positive symbol of Marilyn's overt sexuality; if Flack had kept the white rose, I would have interpreted it as a negative symbol of Marilyn's sexual innocence and purity. These interpretations are backed up through history, as we have seen, and could very well be the Jungian archetypes that Flack wished

to evoke.

Maureen Conner's delicate 1980 sculpture *Bishop's Rose* (fig. 42)¹⁵¹ is another prime example of sexual floral imagery in feminist art. Though titled as a flower, the artwork clearly resembles vaginal forms. Made of organdy (a sheer cotton fabric), *Bishop's Rose* expresses a subtle and multilayered relationship to the complexities of female sexuality, much like Hannah Wilke's latex wall sculptures.

Victoria Nodiff's 1981 polyptych *Turning* (fig. 43)¹⁵² focuses on the calla lily and its established symbolism. The center of the composition enshrines a lily "as if it were a Renaissance Madonna, recalling the plant's traditional associations with purity." On its sides are two images of women, suggesting the lily's identification with generalized femininity in the Victorian era; one of these women is Marilyn Monroe, whom we have already seen as the twentieth century's quintessential sex symbol. Above the women and lily are two aroused stallions, which suggest both the flower's masculine associations and, "more importantly, its reference to sexual passion."¹⁵³

American painter James Rosenquist spliced together large format flower paintings with close-ups of a woman's face in his paintings *Pearls Before Swine, Flowers Before Flames* (1990) (fig. 44)¹⁵⁴ and *Untitled* (1990) (fig. 45).¹⁵⁵ By interweaving the two images, Rosenquist begs for flowers to be compared to women and vice versa. Though not explicitly sexual in nature, the close-up views of flesh-colored flowers and the hints of a woman's lips or wide-open eyes are clearly sensual and are worth noting as works which continue to equate flowers with femininity, females, or female sensuality and sexuality.

Of course, one cannot consider postmodern art pertaining to sexuality and floral

forms without mention of Robert Mapplethorpe, an American photographer, sculptor, and collagist. Renowned for blurring the boundary between art and pornography, Mapplethorpe's work has been heavily censored, making it difficult to find examples. His figure studies, flowers, portraits, and photoconstructions have "explored male beauty, homosexual desire and sado-masochism,"¹⁵⁶ and his interesting use of photographic cropping "fetishizes and sexualizes the body."¹⁵⁷ His *Calla Lilly* (1988) (fig. 46)¹⁵⁸ clearly shows the "veiled phallus of a flower's pistil,"¹⁵⁹ and is thus read similarly to his photographs of penile erections. As Mapplethorpe succinctly states, "I'm looking for perfection in form... I do that with portraits. I do it with cocks. I do it with flowers."¹⁶⁰ Although the sexuality that he evokes in his floral forms is more masculine than feminine, his work is clearly a part of the tradition I have explored in this thesis.

Finally, the vast career of feminist American painter, Joan Snyder, also connects flowers and herbs to the female body and female sexuality. To Snyder, art is not about simplicity, but rather the layering of many things – the more, the better. She is a major proponent of the idea that there exists a female aesthetic, different from that of male artists: "Our work comes out of our lives, and... women's experiences are somehow different from men's experiences, so our work is going to be different."¹⁶¹ She then goes on to define female sensibility as a long list of possibilities: "Layers, words, membranes... repetition, bodies, wet, opening, closing, repetition, lists... intimacy, doorways, breasts, vaginas... repetition, red, pink, black, earth colors, the sun, the moon, roots, skins, walls, yellow, flowers, streams..."¹⁶² Snyder claims further that pink is always flesh, and certainly the flesh is female.¹⁶³ The most important aspect of the feminine aesthetic, according to Snyder, is autobiographical content. Snyder admits that

“if anybody was looking at my own work, I’d be very embarrassed because they’d know all about me. My work is an open diary.”¹⁶⁴

Snyder’s works since the 1980s consistently include flowers and herbs, often in conjunction with female body imagery. *Bedeckt Mich mit Blumen (Cover Me with Flowers)* (1985) (fig. 47)¹⁶⁵ is the most obvious example. Funny and light-hearted, *Bedeckt...* shows a female nude covered with flowers, reminiscent of Ana Mendieta’s *Silueta* series. *Mud, Silk, Cherries* (1993) (fig. 48)¹⁶⁶ places a dense field of flowers and herbs against a pink and flesh-tone background. A gaping void is left in the center of the painting, calling to mind the centralized-core images of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. Snyder’s *Red Field* (1993) (fig. 49)¹⁶⁷ pairs a black circular form with a red one. In a similar way, I paired a rose with a swatch of silk in my painting *Silk Caution*, or an Ace Bandage with a rose in *Bandaged Duality*. The background of Snyder’s *Red Field* is dense with floral imagery, black rectangles, and violently painted red brushstrokes. Furthermore, the “red field” that the two main circles inhabit is threatened. In my watercolors *Pinned for Safety*, *Stapled Apart*, *Hanging by a Petal*, and *Debris*, the petals that have been fallen off the roses populate the backgrounds in a comparable dense matter.

Snyder’s *And Acquainted with Grief* (1997) (fig. 50)¹⁶⁸ is reminiscent of her more violent early works of the 1970s, though *And Acquainted with Grief* is infused with optimistic yellows. Many of Snyder’s 1970s paintings reference violence against women by listing names of rape victims in the backgrounds of paintings and/or physically cutting the canvas near simplified vagina and breast symbols.¹⁶⁹ *And Acquainted with Grief* is similarly wounded; in this case, however, Snyder’s favored pink flowers surround the

gash instead of painful red brushstrokes evocative of a murder scene. Snyder “once insisted that the cuts... are not sexual symbols” but merely “part of her formal language.” She further clarifies thusly: “I mean, when I’m doing it to canvas, I’m doing it to canvas, not to anything else.”¹⁷⁰ However, considering that some of Snyder’s 1970s paintings are evocative of physical and sexual violence, it is plausible to read the violence Snyder does to her canvases responses to events in the real world. My watercolors have similar themes, but the ways that Snyder and I suggest our destruction differ. In Snyder’s paintings the physical destruction of the canvas is not done *to* the flowers or herbs that populate her backgrounds. Indeed, it seems that the surrounding blossoms convey hope for the canvas’s eventual healing.

Snyder’s *And Always Searching for Beauty* (2001) (fig. 51) is another interesting painting to consider. A landscape with “glorious sensuality,” it is made up of numerous circles that are transformed into breasts, flowers, hearts, fruits, suns and moons, or just plain spots of color.¹⁷¹ In *Nipples, Lakes, etc.* (2004), Snyder similarly creates pink dots that resemble both nipples and abstracted flowers. Now female breasts, rather than vulva and womb, are juxtaposed with floral forms. In my *Silk Caution* and *Bandaged Duality* paintings, my roses and circular shapes are more similar to breasts than vulva, too, though I hope that they are also read as female genitalia, due to the long-standing history of interpreting flowers in this way.

Clearly, artists still use the flower as a metaphor for sexuality – and most often female sexuality. However, the need for such floral symbolism in art has lessened. Negative sexual symbolism, so popular in the Renaissance and Victorian eras, has all but completely died out. Even positive sexual symbolism is less pervasive than it was in the

past. It is easy to find myriad examples of contemporary artists who make work about their sexuality; the difficulty lies in finding examples of those who use floral forms to do so. While female artists of the past had to use symbolism to address sexuality, today's society is more open to the topic, even in its most explicit forms. For some artists, using flowers as sexual symbols has become cliché. They either seek new personal symbols or do not use symbolism at all.

The contemporary connection between flowers and sexuality is most easily recognized in popular culture around the world. Flowers are still given in Western societies as part of courting and sexuality rituals. According to one 1982 survey on the use of flowers in England, "if a man gives a girl roses, she thinks tonight's the night." Furthermore, sending flowers after a date is seen "possibly as an indication of intimacy achieved, possibly of intimacy devoutly wished for."¹⁷² In Spain, flamenco dancers dress in costumes representing carnation petals, flowers that "in many ritual ways... are the Iberian equivalent of roses." At bull fights, red carnations, possibly symbolic of menstrual blood, are worn behind the ear to denote sexual "availability;" at the successful conclusion of the fight, the carnations are thrown into the bull ring.¹⁷³ In some Italian circles, a woman offering a man flowers (instead of the more common reverse scenario) has sexual overtones. "It would be like touching a man's tie or commenting upon a woman's dress... it means you want to undress him or her – an overt sexual act."¹⁷⁴ Hindu temples still use the ancient *yoni* symbolism equating flowers, triangles, and double-pointed ovals with female genitalia.¹⁷⁵

Flower imagery is evoked in four separate monologues in Eve Ensler's popular play *The Vagina Monologues* (1996): "I realized then that hair is there for a reason – it's

the leaf around the flower, the lawn around the house”;¹⁷⁶ “My vagina is a flower, an eccentric tulip, the center acute and deep, the scent delicate, the petals gentle but sturdy”;¹⁷⁷ “In order to survive, I began to pretend there was something else between my legs... Whenever I had sex with a man, I pictured him inside a mink-lined muffler or a red rose or a Chinese bowl”;¹⁷⁸ and “Don’t believe him when he tells you it smells like rose petals when it’s supposed to smell like pussy. That’s what they’re doing – trying to clean it up, make it smell like a bathroom spray or a garden.”¹⁷⁹ Christina Camphausen, a contemporary artist who paints vulva portraits, describes her work as showing “the flowery beauty of the yoni in a manner that is not pornographic but rather empowering.”¹⁸⁰ References to flowers, petals, buds, blooms, and blossoms are still very prevalent in present-day discourse on female sexuality.

Advertising in particular makes frequent use of floral imagery in lieu of explicit sexual organs, or to evoke a general feeling of sensuality and sexuality. Some campaigns even rely on knowledge of the floral-sexual link to express their message, such as the magnificent 2007 campaign by ad agency Publicis Stockholm for Amnesty Sweden that employs imagery of stitched-shut roses to raise awareness of violence against women and female genital mutilation (fig. 52).¹⁸¹ The relationship between floral imagery and female sexuality clearly persists in the mind of the public, which is what I was hoping for when making my watercolors.

Notes

¹Michael Juul Holm, ed., Ernst Jonas Bencard, ed., and Poul Erik Tojner, ed., *The Flower as Image* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 21-22.

²Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Wiltshire, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 12-14.

³Andrew Moore, ed., and Christopher Garibaldi, ed., *Flower Power: The Meaning of Flowers in Art* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2003), 11.

- ⁴Holm, ed., *The Flower as Image*, 66.
- ⁵Rufus C. Camphausen, *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom: A Reference Guide to the Symbolism, Techniques, Rituals, Sacred Texts, Psychology, Anatomy, and History of Sexuality* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, Ltd., 1991), 110
- ⁶Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 39.
- ⁷*ibid.*, 39. ID images
- ⁸Camphausen, *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom*, 162
- ⁹*ibid.*, 110.
- ¹⁰Allen Edwardes, *The Jewel in the Lotus: A Historical Survey of the Sexual Content of the East* (New York: The Julian Press, Inc.: 1959), 47.
- ¹¹*ibid.*, 75-76.
- ¹²Camphausen, *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom*, 143
- ¹³Elizabeth G. Stewart, M.D. and Paula Spencer, *The V Book: A Doctor's Guide to Complete Vulvovaginal Health* (New York: Bantam Books, 2002), 5.
- ¹⁴Camphausen, *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom*, 124
- ¹⁵*ibid.*, 216.
- ¹⁶Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 18-19.
- ¹⁷*ibid.*, 323.
- ¹⁸Camphausen, *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom*, 14
- ¹⁹*ibid.*, 130.
- ²⁰Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 17.
- ²¹*ibid.*, 17.
- ²²Camphausen, *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom*, 64
- ²³*ibid.*, 205.
- ²⁴*ibid.*, 20.
- ²⁵Jane H. Hill, "Flower World of Old Uto-Aztecans," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 48, no. 2 (Summer, 1992), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3630407?seq=1>, 133.
- ²⁶*ibid.*, 122.
- ²⁷Camphausen, *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom*, 105
- ²⁸Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 109-110.
- ²⁹Camphausen, *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom*, 147
- ³⁰Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 155.
- ³¹*ibid.*, 155-156.
- ³²Camphausen, *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom*, 162
- ³³Guerrilla Girls, *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 24-25.
- ³⁴Image from Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 4th edition (New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 2007).
- ³⁵Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 5.
- ³⁶*ibid.*, 6.
- ³⁷Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 6. Quoting William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.i.249.
- ³⁸Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 6.
- ³⁹*ibid.*, 171.
- ⁴⁰Image found on ArtStor database. ArtStor lists source data provided by SCALA, Florence/Art Resource, NY, and repository of Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

- ⁴¹Moore, ed., *Flower Power*, 28.
- ⁴²Image from Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*.
- ⁴³Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 197.
- ⁴⁴Moore, ed., *Flower Power*, 28.
- ⁴⁵Annette Stott, "Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition," *American Art* 6, no. 2 (1992), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109092>, 65.
- ⁴⁶*ibid.*, 61-63.
- ⁴⁷*ibid.*, 66.
- ⁴⁸Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 372.
- ⁴⁹Image found on ARTstor database; ARTstor information lists source data from University of California, San Diego. Image's repository is the Timken Museum of Art.
- ⁵⁰Stott, "Floral Femininity," 66.
- ⁵¹Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 298.
- ⁵²Barbara Buhler Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily in American Art, 1860 – 1940* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 14-15.
- ⁵³Amelia Jones, ed., *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 221.
- ⁵⁴Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 4th edition (New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 2007), 377.
- ⁵⁵Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*, 23
- ⁵⁶*ibid.*, 18.
- ⁵⁷*ibid.*, 19.
- ⁵⁸*ibid.*, 23.
- ⁵⁹*ibid.*, 23.
- ⁶⁰Image from William Murrell, *Charles Demuth: American Artists Series* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, c. 1930).
- ⁶¹Image from Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*.
- ⁶²Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*, 2
- ⁶³Barbara Haskell, *Marsden Hartley* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 31.
- ⁶⁴*ibid.*, 60.
- ⁶⁵*ibid.*, 60-61.
- ⁶⁶*ibid.*, 99.
- ⁶⁷*ibid.*, 60-61.
- ⁶⁸Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*, 21-22
- ⁶⁹Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 307.
- ⁷⁰Lisa Mintz Messinger, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (London: Thames and Hudson World of Art, 2001), 70.
- ⁷¹Marilyn Hall Mitchell, "Sexist Art Criticism: Georgia O'Keeffe: A Case Study," *Signs* 3, no. 3 (1978), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173179>, 684.
- ⁷²Lynes, *O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*, 47.
- ⁷³*ibid.*, 46.
- ⁷⁴Mitchell, "Sexist Art Criticism," 684-5.
- ⁷⁵Guerrilla Girls, *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion*, 74.
- ⁷⁶Messinger, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 30. Emphasis added.
- ⁷⁷*ibid.*, 28.
- ⁷⁸*ibid.*, 45.

- ⁷⁹*ibid.*, 28.
- ⁸⁰*ibid.*, 50-51.
- ⁸¹*ibid.*, 74.
- ⁸²Image from Holms, *The Flower as Image*.
- ⁸³Lynes, *O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*, 2.
- ⁸⁴*ibid.*, 2.
- ⁸⁵*ibid.*, 25.
- ⁸⁶Richard Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham: Ideas Without End, A Life in Photographs* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 26-27.
- ⁸⁷Figure 17 from Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham*. Figure 18 from Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*.
- ⁸⁸Richard Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham*, 27.
- ⁸⁹Image from Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham*.
- ⁹⁰Edwardes, *The Jewel in the Lotus*, 75-76.
- ⁹¹Richard Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham*, 27.
- ⁹²*ibid.*, 31.
- ⁹³Images found on ARTstor database; ARTstor information lists source data from University of Georgia Libraries, with repository at the George Eastman House.
- ⁹⁴Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*, 27.
- ⁹⁵*ibid.*, 29.
- ⁹⁷Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*, 29.
- ⁹⁷Image from Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*.
- ⁹⁸Betsy Stirratt, ed. and Catherine Johnson, ed., *Feminine Persuasion, Art and Essays on Sexuality* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 87.
- ⁹⁹*ibid.*, 86.
- ¹⁰⁰Salomon Grimberg, "Frida Kahlo's Still Lifes: 'I Paint Flowers So They Will Not Die,'" *Woman's Art Journal* 25, no. 2 (2004-5), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3566514>, 27.
- ¹⁰¹*ibid.*, 27.
- ¹⁰²*ibid.*, 27.
- ¹⁰³Camphausen, *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom*, 118.
- ¹⁰⁴Grimberg, "Frida Kahlo's Still Lifes," 27.
- ¹⁰⁵Image from Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith, *Women and Art: Contested Territory* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1999).
- ¹⁰⁶Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith, *Women and Art: Contested Territory* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1999), 53.
- ¹⁰⁷Celia Weisman, "O'Keeffe's Art: Sacred Symbols and the Spiritual Quest," *Woman's Art Journal* 3, no. 2 (1982-3), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1358028>, 11.
- ¹⁰⁸Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 307.
- ¹⁰⁹Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 141.
- ¹¹⁰Mitchell, "Sexist Art Criticism," 685.
- ¹¹¹Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 143.
- ¹¹²Image from Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).
- ¹¹³Jones, *Sexual Politics*, 63.
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- ¹¹⁶Image from Lippard, *Judy Chicago*.
- ¹¹⁷Image from Lippard, *Judy Chicago*.
- ¹¹⁸Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 223.
- ¹¹⁹Chicago, *Through the Flower*, Plate 8.
- ¹²⁰Jones, *Sexual Politics*, 64-6.
- ¹²¹Chicago, *Through the Flower*, Plate 8.
- ¹²²Lippard, *Judy Chicago*, 219.
- ¹²³Images found on ARTstor database; ARTstor information lists source data from University of California, San Diego. Copyright 2007, Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS).
- ¹²⁴Jones, *Sexual Politics*, 66.
- ¹²⁵Thomas H. Kochheiser, ed., *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 15.
- ¹²⁶*ibid.*, 18
- ¹²⁷Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, 317.
- ¹²⁸Kochheiser, ed., *Hannah Wilke*, 18.
- ¹²⁹*ibid.*, 18
- ¹³⁰Image from Kochheiser, ed., *Hannah Wilke*.
- ¹³¹Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, 317.
- ¹³²Image from Kochheiser, ed., *Hannah Wilke*.
- ¹³³Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 367.
- ¹³⁴Kochheiser, ed., *Hannah Wilke*, 15.
- ¹³⁵Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, 317.
- ¹³⁶Kochheiser, ed., *Hannah Wilke*, 15.
- ¹³⁷Stewart, *The V Book*, 18.
- ¹³⁸Jones, *Sexual Politics*, 181.
- ¹³⁹*ibid.*, 181
- ¹⁴⁰Image from Holm, *The Flower as Image*.
- ¹⁴¹Images found on ARTstor database; ARTstor information lists source data from University of California, San Diego.
- ¹⁴²"Lowell Nesbitt: A Comprehensive Retrospective," Absolute Arts: Worldwide Art Resources, <http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2003/09/12/31358.html>.
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- ¹⁴⁵Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, 265.
- ¹⁴⁶Image from Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self Portraits* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1998).
- ¹⁴⁷Image from Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: A Dutton Paperback, 1976).
- ¹⁴⁸Audrey Flack, *Audrey Flack on Painting* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1981), 84-85.

- ¹⁴⁹*ibid.*, 84-85.
- ¹⁵⁰*ibid.*, 30.
- ¹⁵¹Jones, *Sexual Politics*, 25.
- ¹⁵²Lynes, *O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily*, 33.
- ¹⁵³*ibid.*, 33.
- ¹⁵⁴Images found on ARTstor database; ARTstor information lists source data from Larry Qualls, photographer. Copyright James Rosenquist, licensed by VAGA, New York.
- ¹⁵⁵Images found on ARTstor database; ARTstor information lists source data from Larry Qualls, photographer. Copyright James Rosenquist, licensed by VAGA, New York.
- ¹⁵⁶Michael Archer, *Art Since 1960* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2002), 194.
- ¹⁵⁷Jennifer Blessing, "Classical Allegory in Photograph," *Robert Mapplethorpe and the Classical Tradition: Photographs and Mannerist Prints* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2004), 30.
- ¹⁵⁸Image from Holm, *The Flower as Image*.
- ¹⁵⁹Mira Schor, *Wet – On Painting, Feminism and Art Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 28.
- ¹⁶⁰Germano Celant, "Mapplethorpe as Neoclassicist," *Robert Mapplethorpe and the Classical Tradition: Photographs and Mannerist Prints* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2004), 40.
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- ¹⁶²*ibid.*, 25.
- ¹⁶³*ibid.*, 23.
- ¹⁶⁴Lucy R Lippard, *From the Center*, 86.
- ¹⁶⁵Image from Herrera, *Joan Snyder*.
- ¹⁶⁶Image from Herrera, *Joan Snyder*.
- ¹⁶⁷Image from Herrera, *Joan Snyder*.
- ¹⁶⁸Image from Herrera, *Joan Snyder*.
- ¹⁶⁹Herrera, *Joan Snyder*, 40.
- ¹⁷⁰*ibid.*, 36.
- ¹⁷¹*ibid.*, 57.
- ¹⁷²Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 295.
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- ¹⁷⁴*ibid.*, 313.
- ¹⁷⁵Ensler, Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2008), xxix.
- ¹⁷⁶*ibid.*, 11.
- ¹⁷⁷*ibid.*, 43.
- ¹⁷⁸*ibid.*, 54.
- ¹⁷⁹*ibid.*, 70.
- ¹⁸⁰Stewart, *The V Book*, 22.
- ¹⁸¹Image found on *Shameless Magazine's* website, "Amnesty International Awareness Campaign," <http://www.shamelessmag.com/blog/2007/11/amnesty-international-awareness-campaign/>.



Figure 1
Young Son Rising From the Lotus
Ancient Egypt



Figure 2
Womb Image from Scivias Book
Hildegard von Bergen, 1100s



Figure 3
Primavera
 Sandro Botticelli,
 1477
 Tempera on panel
 203 cm x 314 cm



Figure 4
Kingdom of Flora
 Nicolas Poussin, 1631



Figure 5
Magnolia Blossom
Martin Heade



Figure 6
Marsh Plants
Alfred Kubin, 1906



Figure 7
Calla Lilies (Bert Savoy)
Charles Demuth, 1926



Figure 8
Calla Lilies
Charles Demuth, 1929
Watercolor

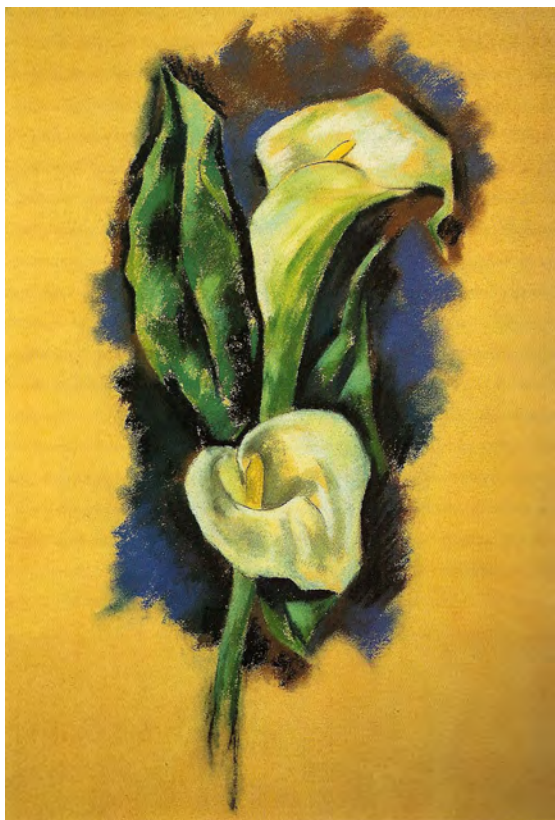


Figure 9
Calla Lilies
Marsden Hartley, 1920
Pastel on Paper
24.5" x 16.25"



Figure 10
Music – Pink and Blue
Georgia O’Keeffe, 1918



Figure 11
*Georgia O'Keeffe: A
Portrait – Painting and
Sculpture*
Alfred Stieglitz, 1919
Photograph



Figure 12
*Gray Lines with Black,
Blue and Yellow*
Georgia O'Keeffe, c. 1923



Figure 13
Flower Abstraction
Georgia O'Keeffe, 1924



Figure 14
Black Iris
Georgia O'Keeffe, 1926
Oil on canvas
36" x 29 7/8"



Figure 15
Oriental Poppies
Georgia O'Keeffe, 1927



Figure 16
Two Calla Lilies on Pink
Georgia O'Keeffe, 1928
Oil on canvas
40"x30"



Figure 17
Callas
Imogen Cunningham, 1925
Photograph



Figure 18
Two Callas
Imogen Cunningham, 1926
Photograph



Figure 19
*Magnolia Blossom Tomer of
Jewels*
Imogen Cunningham, 1925
Photograph



Figure 20
Shell
Edward Weston, 1927
Photograph



Figure 21
Calla Lilies
 Tina Modotti, c. 1927
 Gelatin silver print
 9.25" x 7"



Figure 22
Flos Florum
 Enrico Vannuccini, mid-1900s
 Engraving



Figure 23
Xochitl
 Frida Kahlo, 1938
 Oil on metal
 7 1/16" x 3 3/4"



Figure 24
The Flower of Life
 Frida Kahlo, 1944
 Oil on masonite
 11" x 7.5"



Figure 25
Henry Ford Hospital
 Frida Kahlo, 1932



Figure 26
Big OX Number 2
 Miriam Schapiro, 1968

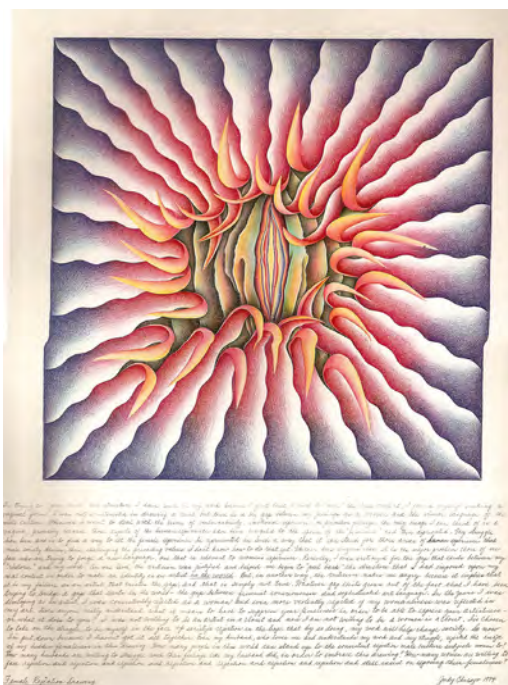


Figure 29
Female Rejection Drawing 3
Judy Chicago, 1974



Figure 30
Female Rejection Drawing 5
(How does it feel to expose your
real identity?)
Judy Chicago, 1974

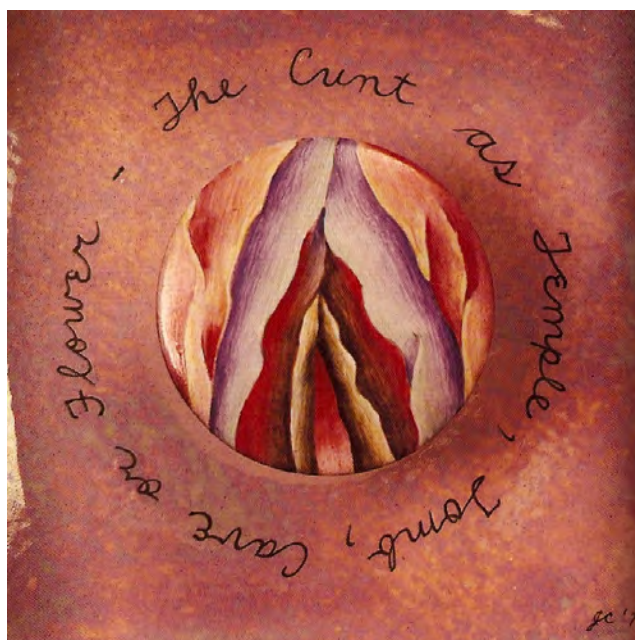


Figure 31
*The Cunt as Temple,
 Tomb, Cave or Flower*
 Judy Chicago, 1974
 Painted ceramic plate



Figure 32
*Georgia O'Keeffe, Sappho, and Sophia Plates,
 Dinner Party*
 Judy Chicago, 1976
 Painted ceramic plates



Figure 33
Pink Champagne
 Hannah Wilke, 1975
 Latex sculpture



Figure 34
S.O.S. Starification Object Series
 Hannah Wilke, 1975-6
 Black and white photograph of chewing gum sculptures



Figure 35
Gum with Grasshopper
Hannah Wilke, 1976
Photograph

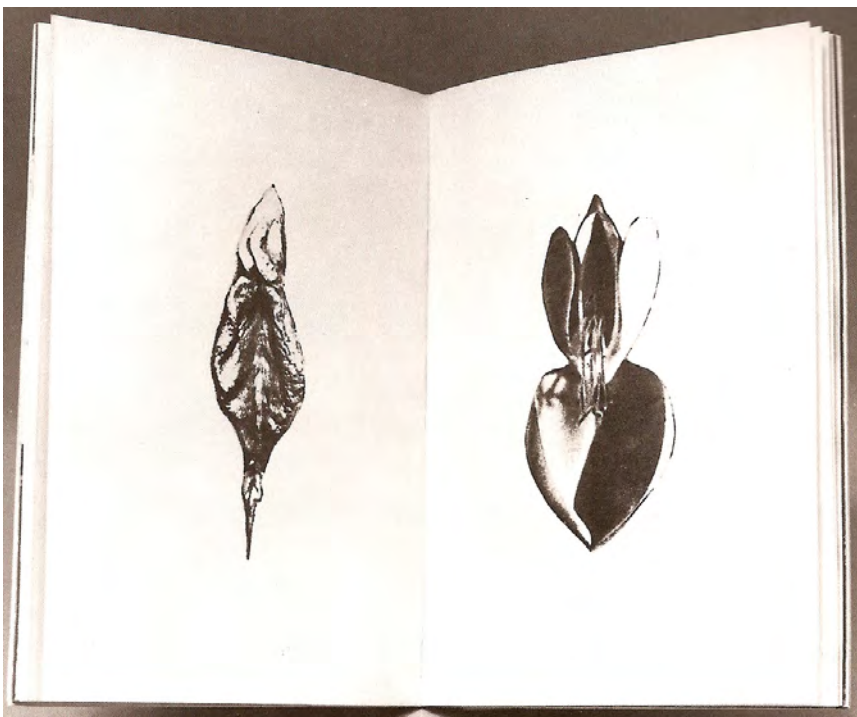


Figure 36
Towards New Expression
Suzanne Santoro, 1974
Photographs



Figure 37
Tulip
Lowell Nesbitt, 1972
Oil on canvas



Figure 38
Two Electric Yellow Roses
Lowell Nesbitt, 1973
Oil on canvas
90" x 60.5"



Figure 39
Silueta
Ana Mendieta 1973-77
Photograph of performance art



Figure 40
Silueta
Ana Mendieta, 1974
Photograph of performance art



Figure 41
Marilyn (Vanitas)
 Audrey Flack, 1977



Figure 42
Bishop's Rose
 Maureen Conner, 1980
 Organdy sculpture



Figure 43
Turning
 Victoria Nodiff,
 1981
 Mixed media
 25"x34"

80



Figure 44
Pearls Before Swine, Flowers Before Flames
 James Rosenquist, 1990
 Oil on canvas
 90" x 120" (2 panels)



Figure 45
Untitled
James Rosenquist, 1990
Oil on canvas
78" x 81"



Figure 46
Calla Lily
Robert Mapplethorpe, 1988
Photograph



Figure 47
Bedeckt Mich mit Blumen
(Cover Me in Flowers)
 Joan Snyder, 1985
 Oil, acrylic on canvas



Figure 48
Mud, Silk, Cherries
 Joan Snyder, 1993
 Oil, acrylic, mud, silk, wood on linen
 36" x 72"



Figure 49
Red Field
 Joan Snyder, 1993
 Silk, oil, acrylic,
 papier-mache on
 canvas
 63" x 72"



Figure 50
And Acquainted with Grief
 Joan Snyder, 1997
 Silk, acrylic, velvet, linen, oil, papier-mache and charcoal on canvas
 40" x 128"



Figure 51
And Always Searching for Beauty
 Joan Snyder, 2001
 Oil, acrylic, papier-mache and herbs on linen
 78"x102"



Figure 52
Amnesty Sweden advertisements
 Publicis Stockholm ad agency, 2007

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