Ambiguous Love:

A Reflection of Self in Relation to Popular Romance Fiction

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Declaration:

I hereby declare that the work herein, now submitted as an exegesis for the Master of Arts Degree at the Charles Darwin University, is the result of my own investigation, and all references to ideas and the work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged. I herby certify that the work embodied in this exegesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

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Linda Rice
5 February 2007

Acknowledgments:

Abstract :

Ambiguous Love: A Reflection of Self in Relation to Popular Romance Fiction encapsulates the essence of my Master of Arts Degree consisting of one third exegesis and two thirds studio practice. As the title suggests this research revolves around a teenage fascination for popular romance fiction that informs the autobiographical theme within my studio practice. The impetus for this research project was a solo exhibition in 2005 entitled *Where is she?* where I began to actively draw upon autobiographical themes within my work using metaphorical references to popular romance and traditional fairy tales to address the clichés of 'idealized romance' and the cultural myth of 'happy every after'.

The aim of this research is to understand the dominant discourses that have informed the evolution of popular romance influences such as patriarchal and sexual ideologies, popular literature and gender constructs. In turn this research has provided the basis of my autobiographical work within my studio practice and assisted in placing it within both an art historical and contemporary art context. Working from a cultural studies perspective my aim is not to critique these dominant discourses. Rather, it is to achieve a process of empowerment through knowledge and understanding which will, in turn, inform the ongoing cultural negotiation of my 'interpersonal' and creative scripts.

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Introduction:

Ambiguous Love is a Master of Arts research project that consists of two components: the studio practice and an exegesis which provides a context and explanation for the studio work. The main aim of the exegesis is to theoretically explore popular romance fiction as the basis for the autobiographical content within the wider framework of my studio practice. In undertaking this research my aim is not to critique popular romance fiction but rather to achieve empowerment through knowledge which will, in turn, inform the cultural discourse of my studio practice.

Methodology

My research project is informed by a postmodernist perspective. By that I mean that my work rejects the idea of "a single, unified, whole subject speaking from one place with a sense of authority" (D'Alleva, 2005: 153). In contrast to modernism focused on creating uniquely original work in response to the contemporary world of capitalism and technology, postmodernism gives voice to individuals and rejects traditional hierarchies, elitist systems and institutions by challenging their 'rigid truths'. Postmodernism also provides strategies for examining cultural, political and artistic representations by appropriating from historical imagery. Therefore I have drawn upon postmodernism to:

> . . . identify the master narratives that shape our culture and society, those narratives that conceal as much as they reveal, and that work to oppress as much as to enable human action. History and culture are not single narratives, in this view, but conversation which struggles to come to terms with the relations of power (D'Alleva, 2005: 153).

In striving to understand the broader context of the art sector and my position within it, I acknowledge the valuable work of previous generations of female artists such as Georgia O'Keefe and the second wave of feminist art discourse, when female artists connected with common autobiographical themes and their position within patriarchal society as a process of collective empowerment through "consciousness-raising" to " . . . discover the commonality of [their]

experiences as woman, and to analyse how [they] had been conditioned and formed on the basis of [their] gender" (Wilding, 1994: 35). Within an exegesis of this length I do not have the space to deal with this history in depth and this is not the aim of this exegesis which is to locate my work within a contemporary context. In the exegesis I draw upon a cultural studies perspective because it offers a more complex understanding and interpretation of gender constructs required for the analysis of cultural discourse in the visual arts. In keeping with contemporary artists such as Tracey Emin I see myself as an individual creating autobiographical artwork that speaks from my own experience. As such my work may or may not have some commonalities with the experiences of other women.

In the exegesis I have used a cultural studies perspective to examine the history and meaning of courtly love and fairy tales as part of Western ideology. In cultural studies writers are concerned with the underlying meanings of written texts; the process of analysing these meanings is seen as a 'symbolic act' of cultural negotiation with regard to wider power and social relations. Frederick Jameson for example sees ". . . the production of aesthetic or narrative form . . . as an ideological act in its own right" (Jameson cited by Zipes 1988: 5). A cultural studies perspective is well-suited for my purposes because it retrieves agency for historical actors. Stuart Hall argues for example that "people are simultaneous makers and consumers of culture, participating in that culture according to their place in economic and political structures" (Hall cited by D'Alleva, 2005: 77). Therefore, according to Jameson and Hall, authors act as cultural filters who 'make' ideology through the act of writing, informed by their culture and status within it. Thus the postmodern position argued by Jameson and Hall allows for ". . . fragmented, decentered, [individuals] speaking from a particular place with only his or her own authority from a particular viewpoint" (D'Alleva, 2005: 153).

 I have produced four major bodies of artwork during my Master of Arts Degree: *Cultural Bites, Visual Fiction, Flesh* and *Myth Makers. Cultural Bites* was completed in the first year of research using a combination of realism and irony to challenge feminine stereotypes within Western ideology. This series used scanned and manipulated digital imagery appropriated from traditional fairy tales. I used Adobe Photoshop to achieve colour separations in preparation for

the screen printing process. In the second year of my studio practice in the series titled *Visual Fiction, Flesh* and *Myth Makers,* I reconnected with autobiographical themes and began to develop a more abstract style conveying a greater level of ambiguity. In these series I scanned details from historical romance covers using digital manipulation enhanced by special effects within Photoshop to create composite imagery that is enlarged, blurred, lit, screened and dissected utilising digital effects. To retain the depth and variety of colours required for a photorealist style, I utilized a CMYK colour separation process, made easier through the use of digital technology. Over the course of the degree I moved from the production of small individual screen prints to large-scale wall installations consisting of multiple images. These installations take the form of serial works some of which exploit the grid. The grid has played a powerful role since the early twentieth century as artists sought to reject previous traditions of realism and create new work that spoke of the present. I argue that the grid continues to have contemporary relevance and in my studio practice I have used the grid to explore a broader range of meanings in relation to my work. This shift in scale and approach is the direct outcome of my theoretical research and reflects a move away from the critique of gendered representations to a more complex cultural negotiation of interpersonal and creative scripts.

In my theoretical research I have sought to move beyond the limitations imposed by psychoanalytic interpretations in relation to gender. Whereas this approach has tended to focus on a more subjective personal expression, narrowly linked to a critique of   gendered representations, the more complex position offered by post modernism acknowledges that women are both culturally encrypted and they are free to reshape cultural codes according to their own desires. These insights have informed the development of my studio practice towards installation as a means of exploring and expanding the interaction between the artist and their audience.

Chapter Outline

In chapter one I examine the origins of idealized romantic love by exploring the collective influences of 'courtly love' evolving from the 11th century and

traditional fairy tales in the 17th century and the historical functions they have fulfilled within Western ideology. I then explore contemporary manifestations of the fairy tale genre and its modern descendents within popular culture, film and popular romance including contemporary critiques which argue that fairytales are part of a dominant ideology that promotes 17th century moral and cultural beliefs.

In chapter two I build on this research by expanding the connection between traditional fairy tales and popular romance by examining its historical origins and context, its underlying cultural meanings and contemporary critiques of the fairy tale genre. I also examine the work of two artists, Natalka Husar and Kara Walker, who have explored the underlying meanings of popular romance in Western society.

In chapter three I examine gendered constructions of femininity in Western art, film and popular culture using a cultural studies and psychoanalytic perspective. This chapter will consider the origin of 'idealized beauty', the objectification of the female image through the concept of the 'gaze' and the development of 'interpersonal scripts.' To illustrate my argument I refer to the work of contemporary and historical artists including Tracey Emin, Cindy Sherman, Georgia O'Keefe and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

In chapter four I discuss the relationship between this theoretical research and studio practice completed as part of the Master of Arts Degree. I first provide an historical context for my work within Australian popular culture informed by the Pop art movement of the 1970s and the development of screen printing as a vehicle of political protest. I then discuss the four major bodies of artwork completed during my Master of Arts Degree: *Cultural Bites, Visual Fiction, Flesh* and *Myth Makers.*

Chapter 1:

Origins of the 'Romance Myth'

Origins of the 'romance myth'

In chapter one, I will discuss the origins of idealized romantic love by exploring the collective influences of 'courtly love' and traditional fairy tales. In this chapter I establish the ancestry of 'courtly love' and traditional fairy tales and the historical functions they have fulfilled within Western ideology. I will then explore contemporary manifestations of the fairy tale genre and its modern descendents within popular culture, film and popular romance. While it has been argued that fairytales are part of a dominant ideology, I show that feminist authors have also subverted the fairy tales genre.

Courtly Love

The Western interpretation of 'idealized love' originated out of what was called 'courtly love' that appeared in 11th century France. Gail Hawkes explains that courtly love or "*fin'amors* means 'a perfected non-consummated love'" (Hawkes, 2004: 72). Courtly love was first seen in the court of William II, Duke of Aquitaine in 1071 and eventually spread to England where William II's granddaughter Marie, commissioned the court chaplain Andreas Cappelanus to write *The Art of Courtly Love* (Hawkes, 2004: 72). There are two main features of 'courtly love', the first being that it must be:

> . . . initiated by men who, though the active partner, were bound by the rules of courtly love to concede most of the power to the adored women. Second, this was not an emotion considered proper for marriage, or between married couples (Hawkes, 2004: 73).

'Courtly love,' because of its 'non-consummated' status, was seen as suitable only for single women and men (including relationships between married women and single men) (Hawkes, 2004: 73). But it was certainly a case of 'adore' but don't touch. It is also important to note that sexual passion was still considered sinful within marriage sanctified by the Church - reflected in the second rule of 'courtly love.' Thus 'courtly love' was seen as a spiritual, 'pure' sexual alternative (Hawkes, 2004: 73) that did not directly dismiss the teachings of the Church exemplified by its 'non-consummated' policy.

From a contemporary perspective the idea of 'courtly love' can be reinterpreted through Michel Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis' - a theory which revolves around what Jane Ussher explains as "social hierarchies" and "structures of power" (such as religion) using sex as a bargaining chip to legitimate their authority (Foucault cited by Ussher 1997: 436). Foucault also believed that cultural 'outlets' such as prostitution and psychiatry evolved because of this process (Sparknotes, 2006).

Based on Foucault's argument I would suggest that 'courtly love' is an example of an 'outlet' which existed prior to the "beginning of an age of repression" (Foucault cited by Ussher, 1997: 183) in the 17th century as a result of the Victorian moral and social structures in place governing sexual relationships influenced by religious beliefs.

Origin of Fairy Tales

Another contributing influence to the myth of 'idealized romance' is traditional fairy tales seen culturally as an innocent and delightful part of childhood. Tales of love have an ancestral history originating in antiquity with stories such as *Samson and Delia* within the bible and continuing through to Greek mythology and the Middle Ages (Ramsdell, 1999: 5). Heide Gottner-Abendroth suggests that within a pagan or non-Christian world, oral folk tales originally evolved within a matriarchal mythology as a means of educating children but these tales "underwent successive stages of 'patriarchalization'" (Gottner-Abendroth cited by Zipes, 1983: 7). Since the Middle Ages the role of the "active" princess has been transformed into the "active" prince while "the goddess [has] become a witch, evil fairy, or stepmother" (Zipes, 1983: 7). In this process "… matriarchal rites, [were] depleted and made benign; the pattern of action which concerned maturation and integration was gradually recast to stress domination and wealth" (Gottner-Abendroth cited by Zipes, 1983: 7).

 It was these folk tales that flourished in villages, verbalising the aspiration of becoming "…a knight in shining armour or a lovely princess" (Zipes, 1983: 8). Many of these tales were also full of brutality that reflected a feudal lifestyle aimed at audiences consisting of both adults and children (Zipes, 1983: 9). In the 17th century these tales made their way into the nurseries of the nobility

retold by wet-nurses and governesses (Zipes, 1983: 9). In the same century oral folk tales were also "purposely appropriated . . . and converted . . . into a type of literary discourse about mores, values and manners so that children would become civilized according to the social code of that time" (Zipes 1983: 3). Jack Zipes explains that this process of re-codification was a prerequisite for folk tales to flourish within the French court of Louis XIV and Parisian salons (Zipes, 1983: 3). John Fiske argues for the necessity of these transformations. "If the cultural commodities or texts do not contain recourses out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected..." (Fiske, 1989: 1). Therefore it was through this process of cultural negotiation or assimilation that folk tales were reinterpreted and later described as 'fairy tales', an English term derived from the French phase *contes de fee* and first used in 1697 (Zipes, 2000: 174-175).

These fairy tales had a universal appeal full of folkloric characters such as "kings, queens, princes, princesses, soldiers, peasants, animals, and supernatural creatures (witches, fairies, elves, dwarves, goblins, giants)" (Zipes, 1988: 7) and many with a happy ending. In the 1690s Charles Perrault was one of the many writers responsible for documenting and reinterpreting folk tales with a focus on the moral education of children (Zipes 1983: 18). Zipes argues that Perrault was "sincere" in his beliefs however he was also "guilty" of imposing strict behavioural standards on children (Zipes 1983:18). One of Perrault's most beloved and commonly recognised reinterpretation is his version of Cinderella which has historic Chinese origins (Zipes, 2000: 95-97). Perrault's version introduced the stepmother, the pumpkin carriage, the mice and the fairy godmother and it is this adaptation that was made popular by Walt Disney in his animated film, *Cinderella* (1950) (Huang, 1999).

In the 17th century increasing numbers of women began to write fairy tales including major authors such as Madame Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy. In his critique of Madame D'Aulnoy's fairy tales, Zipes argues that they all have a similar underlying message: that women ". . .had to obey or else face degradation and ostracism: control your natural inclination and submit to the fate which male social standards decree" (Zipes, 1983: 37) - although he also found some criticism of male behaviour within her work. An example of D'Aulnoy's work is *The Beneficent Frog* where the heroine Princess Moufette prepares to

be eaten by a dragon but is saved by "Prince Moufy, and the dragon. . . turns out to be of noble" (Zipes 1983: 37) birth when his 'bestial' exterior disappears.

Critique of Fairy Tales

More recently traditional fairy tales have been widely critiqued. For many writers the underlining meaning of fairy tales is potentially harmful and a ". . . framework for sexist prescriptions. . ." (Zipes, 1986: xi). In his essay "From Rags to Witches: Stereotypes, Distortion and Antihumanism in Fairy Tales" (1975) Robert Moore writes:

> Females are poor girls or beautiful princesses who will only be rewarded if they demonstrate passivity, obedience, and submissiveness. . . Stepmothers are always evil. . .The best woman is the housewife. . . Beauty is the highest value for women. . . Males should be aggressive and shrewd. . . Money and property are the most desirable goal in life. . . Magic and miracles are the means by which social problems are resolved. . . Fairy tales are implicitly racist because they often equate beauty and virtue with the colour white and ugliness with the colour black" (Moore cited by Zipes, 1986: 6).

During the 1960s writers also began to alter the underling messages contained within traditional tales by offering a feminist viewpoint. Zipes explains this tactic as "…conceiv[ing] a different view of the world and speak[ing] in a voice that has been customarily silenced" (Zipes, 1986: xi). Already in the late 19th century female authors such as Mary De Morgan, Mrs Molesworth and Evelyn Scharp created subversive fairy tales that addressed feminist issues by portraying strong heroines rebelling against cultural constraints (Zipes, 1986: 13). Working within patriarchal structures they used strategies which Fiske calls "…tactics of the subordinate in making do within and against the system, rather than of opposing it directly . . ." (Fiske, 1989: 11). Contemporary examples of feminist reinterpretations of the classical fairy tale format can also be seen in the work of Catherine Storr. Her fairy tale *Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf* (1955) reverses the storyline of Red Riding Hood by portraying a confident and intelligent girl who manages to easily outwit the wolf (Zipes, 1986:13).

Feminist writers have also critiqued traditional fairy tales such as Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Sleeping Beauty because they promote

the romantic myth of idealized marriage. Karen Rowe sees these types of fairy tales as a vehicle that presents idealized marriage as the only "'real' sexual function [for women] within a patriarchy" (Rowe, 1986: 211) utilised to make ". . . female subordination seem . . . romantically desirable" (Rowe, 1986: 209). Rowe argues that during puberty, young girls may "subliminally respond" to fairy tales as a way of subconsciously seeking comfort through the commonalities they preserve (Rowe, 1986: 212). Rowe is also critical of contemporary 'pulp fiction' which she see as "graphically exploiting the implicit sexuality" (Rowe, 1986: 209) within fairy tales as the reason for their "popularity" and their "pervasive fascination" for adults. Rowe makes the connection between these two genres in her discussion of "domestic fictions" like "The Garlands of Fortune" from *Good Housekeeping* (1974) which she believes to be descended from traditional fairy tales that focus on predictable clichés (Rowe, 1986: 10). For example "She was a girl who didn't believe in luck, let alone miracles, or at least she didn't until that fabulous man came along" (Dowty cited by Rowe, 1986: 210). Other forms of popular culture such as films also promote the idealized romantic myths found within fairy tales. Feminist film critic Kay Stone in her essay "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us" (1975) "compares the original form of the Brother Grimms' fairy tales with the British and American [film translations]" (Zipes, 1986:6). She reveals that films made in these countries required a heroine to be "patient, industrious, calm, beautiful and passive" (Stone cited by Zipes 1986: 7). However there is space for these clichés to be subverted within popular culture. In contemporary films such as "Shrek" (2001) the traditional storyline is subverted by depicting a beautiful heroine who falls in love with an ogre and is eventually transformed into an ogre herself to live 'happy ever after'.

In conclusion we have found that 'courtly love' evolved in the 11th century - arguably as an 'outlet' to explore 'non-consummated' sexuality within a sexually repressive environment monitored by the dominant ideology. Courtly love is the precursor of contemporary 'idealized romance' including the matriarchal folk tales reinterpreted to comply with the dominant patriarchal or feudal culture of the Middle Ages. Fairy tales were once again reinterpreted in the 17th century in accordance with the dominant beliefs of that period to function as an educational resource to impart morality to children. While fairy tales have been widely critiqued we also see that clichés of 'idealized romance' continue to prosper in new formats such as film, popular romance and popular culture. Informed

collectively by capitalism and a patriarchal ideology they fulfil the needs of individuals to make sense of their reality.

Chapter 2:

Popular Romance Fiction

Popular Romance Fiction

In chapter one I examined the evolution of 'idealized love' exploring its origin and function within a contemporary context. In chapter two I will build on this research by expanding the connection between traditional fairy tales and popular romance. I will examine the origin of Popular Romance Fiction, its historical context and underlying cultural meanings and contemporary critiques. Finally I examine the work of two artists, Canadian Natalka Husar and African American Kara Walker, who have both explored the underlying meanings of popular romance in Western culture by appropriating imagery from Popular Romance Fiction.

The History of Contemporary Romance Fiction

Millions of people (mainly women) around the world are captivated by the Popular Romance Fiction aggressively marketed by multi-million dollar industries such as Harlequin who have no concern with literary merit (Faust, 1980: 99). Critic Karen Rowe argues that such popular romance fiction is instrumental in "idealizing marriage within patriarchy by making. . . female subordination seem . . . romantically desirable" (Rowe, 1986: 209). Likewise John Fiske hypothesizes that romance fiction which appeals to the "emotional" as a means to "idealize marriage" evolved in the 19th century to meet the economic demands of society (Fiske, 1989: 116). This cultural appeal to the 'emotional' is seen by Sandra Lee Bartky as modern "anonymous" social power internalising and encroaching on the personal (Bartky, 1988: 79). The persuasiveness of the 'romantic myth' is demonstrated by the research of Julia Woods who found that some women experiencing domestic abuse found it hard to leave because they didn't want to give " up the dream" (Woods cited by Toler, 2001).

Romance fiction in its contemporary form can be defined as works of fiction about love that revolve around the "relationship between two main characters" (Ramsdell, 1999:4). To add body to this literature, writers introduce barriers or "complications and problems" as a test for true love (Ramsdell, 1999: 4). Popular Romance Fiction incorporates two essential components: first, its ability

to emotionally engage the reader and second, to express "*what it feels like to the object of one*" (Radway cited by Ramsdell, 1999: 4) including the mandatary happy ending consisting of marriage or an established committed relationship (Ramsdell, 1999: 4). Otherwise there could be devastating side effects so nicely encapsulated by Cora Kaplan who recalls that when she read Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) at the age of fourteen, "the ending left me in despair and near hysteria. How could the author refuse a happy resolution?" (Kaplan, 1986: 142).

Englishmen Samuel Richardson author of *Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), a tale of a servant girl who initially resists seduction only to eventually end up marrying her seducer, is considered to be one of the first romances that comply with the above definition (Ramsdell, 1999: 5) because it "appealed to the genuine passions of the human heart" (Scott cited by Welsh, 1968: 14). Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) a macabre, supernatural gothic tale is considered to be the first example of a 'Gothic' romance, a new romance genre which later inspired Anne Radcliffe to publish *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) a more romantic and sentimental Gothic tale very popular with young ladies unfortunately viewed as "forbidden" reading during the Regency Period (Ramsdell, 1999: 6) perhaps because young women were seen as "natural innocents", who were easily 'indoctrinated' (Zipes, 1988: 23). Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, was also concerned that such novels could "stir. . . up the erotic and romantic at the expense of the rational, moral and maternal" (Wollstonecraft cited by Kaplan, 1986: 145). In 1814 Walter Scott inspired the birth of another genre called Historical Romance when he anonymously published *Waverley*. Scott remained anonymous for thirteen years (Ramsdell, 1999:117) because he didn't want to tarnish his reputation as a poet (Devlin, 1971: 11-33). As Alexander Welsh explains ". . . the novel was held in low repute when Scott anonymously tested the market for prose fiction in 1814" (Welsh, 1968: 18) because it was basically not seen as contributing any "truthful" or "useful" knowledge" to society (Welsh, 1968: 18).

In the early 19th century a group of women authors referred to as the Domestic Sentimentalists dominated the industry (Ramsdell, 1999:6). Authors such as Catharine Maria and Mary Jane Holmes incorporated gothic, historical and

religious themes within their novels including those set in domestic environments, later described as 'contemporary' (Ramsdell, 1999:6) because they wrote about their society's belief that "women are stronger in the moral, cultural and domestic realms" (Ramsdell, 1999: 52). The Domestic Sentimentalists capitalized on their popularity by publishing weekly stories. Authors such as Laura Jean Libby successfully published her stories from the mid 1880s to the 1920s (Ramsdell, 1999:7) while others such as Lucy Maud Montgomery wrote the *Anne of Green Gables* series beginning in 1908 (Ramsdell, 1999:7).

Ramsdell explains that the harsh realities of life brought on by the Great Depression and World War II in the 1930s and the 1940s activated a 'resurgence' in Historical Romance as readers sought to escape from reality by seeking refuge in historical sagas like Margaret Mitchell*'s Gone With The Wind* (1936) (Ramsdell, 1999: 8). According to Janice Radway, romance novels continue to play this function: reading romances helps women "to escape from the drudgery of servicing their families" (Radway cited by Walkerdine, 1986:195). By contrast the 1950s was a calm and conservative period for the romance industry with a focus on traditional contemporary novels (Ramsdell, 1999: 8) in keeping with the sexual morals of the Cold War decade in America "where; experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children . . . bake bread, . . . how to dress, look, and act more feminie and make marriage exciting"(Drake & Anderson, 1993: 113-114).

Manufacturers also became conscious of the potential for an adolescent market - later referred to as Young Adult - through the work of authors such as Betty Cavanna who wrote "light high school or early career romances" (Ramsdell, 1999:8). However in the 1960s a new demand was created for Gay Romance influenced by the gay rights and the sexual revolution (Ramsdell, 1999: 9) sparking a boom time for the romance fiction industry with the creation of two erotic romance genres; Sensual Historical inspired in 1972 by Kathleen Woodiwiss' *The Flame and the Flower,* and the Sweet/Savage Historical created in 1974 by Rosemary Rogers, *Sweet Savage Love* (Ramsdell, 1999: 9). These genres acted as a focal point highlighting the erotic and sexual function of romance fiction as female pornography. As Beatrice Faust explains "[It is] the genuine pornography of women. It thus fulfils a very simple function of providing

titillation and escape. . . . The taboo on touch is breaking down and so is the taboo on women's sexual assertiveness" (Faust, 1980: 154). An alternative view proposed by Jane Ussher maintains that these genres also contain misogynistic

tendencies which are similar to male pornography where "men punish and control women through sex" (Ussher, 1997: 47). For example in *Gone With the Wind* "Rhett Butler puts Scarlett in her place, and gains her admiration, by raping her – an act which she enjoys" (Ussher, 1997: 47). Beatrice Faust hypothesizes that "fantasised rape" functions to remove women's "primal guilt" in sexual pleasure thus also acting as a cultural non-responsibility clause (Faust, 1980: 150) thus allowing women to use fantasy as a tool of internal resistance against the cultural roles they assume. Angela McRobbie further argues that fantasy is not just a tool but should be seen as an "intimate . . . strategy of resistance or opposition. . . that cannot be totally colonised" (McRobbie cited by Fiske, 1989: 124).

In the 1980s manufacturers introduced categories for contemporary romance (Ramsdell, 1999: 10). This genre reflected the changing cultural roles of women by portraying them as independent heroines in control of their destiny and sexuality with titles such as *Ecstasy* and *Temptation* mainly written by "women for women" and designed to provide readers with a wider range of choices (Ramsdell, 1999: 10). Many readers found this fiction empowering. For example Radway's research "found a . . . romance reader whose reading empowered her to the extent that she felt better able to resist the patriarchal demands made upon her by her marriage" (Radway cited by Zipes, 1989: 10). Influenced by cultural change the romance industry expanded and diversified further in the 1990s to include genres such as Ethnic or Multicultural Romances and Alternative Reality (Ramsdell, 1999:11). "Genreblending" that is, cross matching and mixing of established genres was also a major force in this decade (Ramsdell, 1999:11). The romance fiction industry has also been affected by new technology which has allowed it to explore new formats for romance fiction through audio, video, television (Ramsdell, 1999:11) and e-romances accessible online (Brown,1999).

Romance fiction has, since its earliest days, been seen as a 'low' form of literature with its readers often stereotyped as "undereducated, uninformed,

frustrated housewives" (Ramsdell, 1999:18) an assumption proven wrong by Carol Thurstom's survey of 600 readers undertaken in 1983 and successive studies by other researchers (Ramsdell, 1999:18). Since the 1970s, to counteract these stereotypes, many writers of romances have became more

pro-active through the creation of web sites and the establishment of organisations such as the Romance Writers of America established in 1979 to advocate on behalf of writers and readers of romance (Ramsdell, 1999:13). In addition periodicals such as *Romantic Times* and *Rendezvous* keep writers and readers up-to-date with industry news (Ramsdell, 1999:14) - a movement that has contributed toward popular romance fiction gaining academic acknowledgement in 1990s influenced by Janice Radway's book *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984) and *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance* (1992) edited by Jayne Ann Krenz (Ramsdell, 1999:14).

Artists Utilising Romance Fiction

Artists have also addressed the various conflicting and underlying meanings of popular romance fiction by appropriating imagery from this literature. Natalka Husar is a Canadian painter of Ukrainian decent who uses her work to draw attention to the "dynamic between dislocation and empowerment" of post-Soviet female immigrants (Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, 2002).
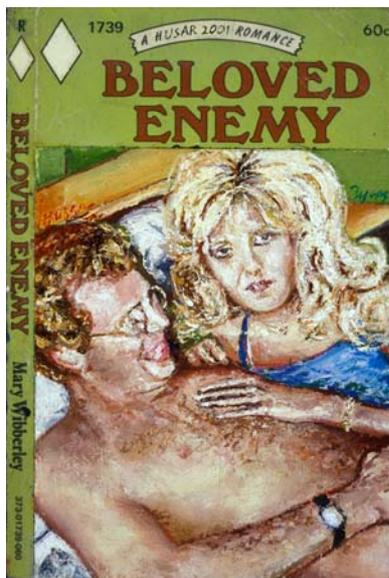

Plate 1. Natalka Husar, *Beloved Enemy,* 1999: oil on book cover, (17 x 11cm).

For example, in *Beloved Enemy* (1999) she exposes the seedy side of post-Soviet female immigration; women forced by circumstance to assume the role of prostitute for economic survival. In *Beloved Enemy* Husar depicts a middle-aged man lying beside an overly made up young woman on the "vintage" cover of a Harlequin romance novel (Laurence 2004). In so doing she directly contrasts the myth of idealized romance and the lived reality of these women. By retaining the original title of the romance novel, *Beloved Enemy* (Siew 2005) Husar also reiterates the cultural bind faced by these women who assume a sexual script for the 'enemy' as a means of gaining financial independence. Not surprisingly Husar's 2002 exhibition *Blond with Dark Roots* gained notoriety when Harlequin issued Husar a letter stating that her use of Harlequin covers (Siew 2005) breached the copyright act - even though Husar argued that it was not her intent to criticize romance novels or their publishers (Greenhill 2005).

Kara Walker, an African American artist, explores American history in relation to race and sexuality by creating almost life-sized wall installations composed of hand-cut silhouetted figures to address confronting narratives which she calls "inner plantations" (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [accessed 3/11/2006]). Working in a postmodern context Walker makes use of visual resources from popular culture such as black memorabilia, slave narratives and pulp paperback romances such as Harlequin romances and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* as a very accessible site of cultural entry creating scenes reflective of the "bad novel that is set in the South, with all of the dripping Spanish moss and illicit desires and politics. . . that come with history and blackness" (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [accessed 3/11/2006]).

Walker's work is controversial because it has been seen as complicit by "embrac[ing] and perpetuat[ing] derogatory stereotypes and taboos" (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [accessed 3/11/2006]). This is a major issue confronting gender representations which I deal with in great detail in the following chapters. In the first instance however, we must examine more closely the aims and intent of the artist's work. For example in her wall installation *Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On)* (2000) Walker is concerned with a historical narrative consisting of near life sized, black-silhouetted figures situated in a staged environment created through coloured light projections. This installation depicts an horrific scene where a "plantation

owner propositions a naked slave behind a tree and a woman with a tiny baby on her head escape a lynching while a group of people eagerly torture a victim" (Guggenheim Museum, [accessed 3/11/2006]). Although clinical in style, Walker thinks of her figures as ". . . phantom-like. They're fantasies. They don't represent anything real; it's just the end result of so many fabrications of a fabricated identity" (Art: 21 [3/11/2006]). What Walker is referring to here are the cultural and sexual 'myths' contained in historical novels like Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* set in the Antebellum South of the 19th century.

Plate 2**.** Kara Walker*, Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On),* 2000: cut paper silhouettes and light projections on wall, installation view, (site-specific dimensions).

In this chapter I have examined the close connection between traditional fairy tales and romance fiction and the underling persuasiveness of the 'romance myth' both positive and negative. I have shown that romance fiction provides its readers with an emotional appeal that offers a temporary escape from the realities of life as means of empowerment (or disempowerment) and more recently as a form of female erotica. Most particularly my research highlights the recurring fascination with Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* - suggestive of the emotional attachment for the main characters felt by readers who are unable to accept that Rhett and Scarlett will not live 'happily ever after'. Like

Kaplan, I too was devastated by the novel's tragic conclusion, although this has now been reversed in *Scarlett,* the sequel to *Gone With the Wind* written in 1991 by Alexandra Ripley. Finally my examination of the work by two women artists Husar and Walker, highlights the universality of the powerful underlining cultural meanings attached to popular romance.

Chapter 3:

The Feminine Myth

The Feminine Myth

In the previous chapter I explored the origin of the 'idealized romance' including the history, appeal and varied functions of Popular Romance Fiction in order to understand its complicity with the 'romantic' myth. In chapter three I build on this research to examine gendered constructions of femininity in Western art, film and popular culture. I draw upon a cultural studies and psychoanalytic perspective to examine the construction of gender representations, the origin of 'idealized beauty, the objectification of the female image through the concept of the 'gaze' and the construction of 'interpersonal scripts.' To illustrate my argument I examine the work of contemporary and historical artists including Tracey Emin, Cindy Sherman, Georga O'Keefe and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Culturally Inscripted Femininity

Within cultural studies the term 'script' is often used as a metaphor to identify specific roles that we create as we reinterpret dominant cultural codes. In this chapter I will attempt to explain the journey that is culturally imposed on young women in terms of a 'feminine script'.

Babies learn what is expected of them through looking and hearing the gestures, voice and facial expressions of others. One such lesson is the construct of gendered identity. Griselda Pollock explains that this process occurs through a number of steps the first being the introduction of ". . . an Other, a 'father' figure, an authority who can intervene and delimit the mother-child relation" (Pollock, 1988: 148). This is followed by the 'imaginary phase' where the child realizes they are separate from their mother via the mirror image but still identify with her. This leads to what Sigmund Freud has called the 'Oedipal' phase where the child is required to delineate between a masculine or feminine subject. However as Pollock points out, gender in a patriarchal society revolves around the father who acts as a signifier of gender difference. The father is seen as masculine and a signifier of the phallus thereby becoming a reference point for comparison and in a position of power implied by his possession of the symbolic phallus (Pollock, 1988: 148).

In growth to adulthood children are introduced to dominant ideologies that broaden their cultural and social education. Proof of this gender construction is found in traditional fairy tales used historically to educate children. One continuous theme that runs through this genre is the depiction of passive feminine power acquired through 'idealized beauty' culturally seen to enable the 'happy every after myth'.

As girls grow to maturity they are bombarded with multiple encrypted roles of femininity and 'idealized beauty' played out and displayed in soap operas, music, videos, women's magazines, films, fairy tales etc whose origins can be linked to traditional Western art practices such as European religious and secular paintings from the Renaissance that depict the Madonna, honouring mother with child (Ussher, 1997: 106). Thus the Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli in *The Birth of Venus* (1478) (Plate 3) portrays an archetypal vision of idealized female beauty placed within a mythical environment passively available to a patriarchal gaze, sanitized and devoid of hair – indicating availability (Berger, 1972: 55).

Plate 3. Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1478: tempera on canvas,
(1.77 x 2.74m)

Idealized images of domestic harmony continued into the 19th century as seen in George Elighar Hick's paintings *Women's Mission* (1863) and *Woman's*

Mission: Companion of Manhood (1863) (Plate 4) where women are depicted in the socially acceptable roles of wife, mother and daughter (Ussher, 1997: 106). As Lynda Nead comments "'woman' is offered as a unified and coherent category through the fulfilment of her domestic duties and mission" (Nead cited by Ussher, 1997: 107).

Plate 4. George Elighar Hick, *Woman's Mission: Companion of Manhood* (1863) Oil on canvas, (76.2 x 64.1 cm)

During the mid 19th century, Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti immortalised idealized feminine beauty by creating passive portraits of women as "beautiful object to-be-looked-at" (Pollock, 1988: 147). Pollock argues that ". . . this regime of representation has naturalized woman as image, beautiful to look at [and] defined by her 'looks'" (Pollock, 1988: 121). Rossetti's repetitive and stylistic female portraits - generally commissioned by industrialists and businessmen (Pollock, 1988: 124) – were described by his brother William Michael Rossetti as "[f]emale heads with floral attributes" (Pollock, 1988: 124) and Pollock draws our attention to the similarities between the airbrushed, images of women within contemporary advertising and Rossetti's portraits of women (Pollock, 1988: 122). There are evident similarities between Rossetti's paintings *Monna Vanna* (1866) (Plate 5) and *Lady Lilith* (1868) (Plate 6) and the cover art of the romance novel *Heart of the Flame* (1982) (Plate 7) in the use of flowers as a signifier of beauty (in terms of their physical proximity to the representations of the heroine), in the smooth style of painting and in the

composition that focuses on the female form represented unconstructively for the spectator's gaze. However the Rossetti images portray women as femme fatales: alone, dangerous, provocative while in the cover for *Heart of the Flame* the woman is pictured embracing a man – placed in the dominant position.

Plate 5. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Monna Vanna*, 1866: oil on canvas, (86.6 x 85cm)

Plate 6. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, 1868: oil on canvas, (93.7 x 80cm)
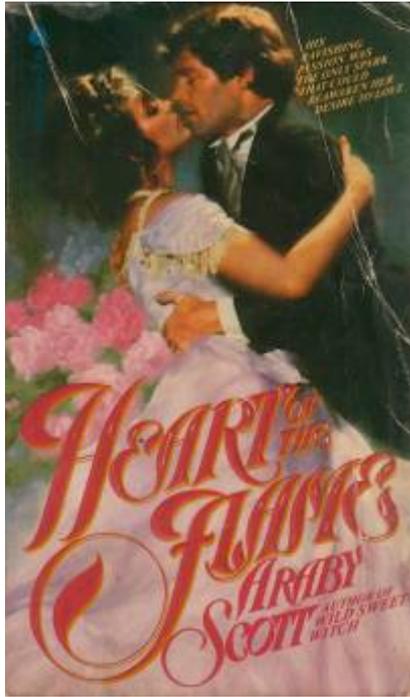
Plate 7. Artist Unknown, *Heart of the Flame*, 1982: (10.5 x 17.5cm) book cover.

From art to film the idealized myth of women continues to be worshipped through the " . . air-brushed fantasies of sublime perfection frozen in photographic stills and magnified and exalted in their projection on to the cinema screen" (Ussher, 1997: 108). Facilitated through Hollywood actresses such as Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot (and including the centuries old myth of the domesticated Madonna), these images continued to be reinterpreted and glorified in 1950s 'sugar films' depicted by actresses such as Doris Day (Ussher, 1997: 109). Fulfilling an unconscious masculine desire for objectification (or sexual control) these images result in the fragmentation of women as 'object' by representing them in segments (such as breasts and lips) thereby fetishizing them (Pollock, 1988: 117). Pollock argues that this process of objectification is connected to the pre- Oedipal phase [involving]. . .scopophilia, love of looking" (Pollock, 1988: 148).

Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1975) uses psychoanalysis to analyse the unconscious process of female objectification through the 'male gaze' by examining scopophilia as a ". . . component instinct of sexuality [according to Freud] associated [with seeing] . . . other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Freud cited by Mulvey, 1989: 16), Mulvey argues that film uses women ". . . as erotic object[s] for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object[s] for the spectator. . ." (Mulvey, 1989: 19). However there are critics of Mulvey's theory of

the gaze. As Anne D'Alleva points out, audiences "occupy multiple viewing positions" because of "sexual orientation, class, or race" (D'Alleva, 2005: 108). It might also be pointed that Mulvey's analysis does not allow for feminine desire: for example a gay woman may also receive pleasure through looking at a woman (D'Alleva, 2005: 108). The question remains however, if these socially and culturally constructed ideals are so powerful and are reinforced by society, then how is it possible for women to undermine these stereotypes?

Italian Marxist and cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci developed the theory of "spontaneous consent" (Gramsci cited by D'Alleva, 2005: 50) to explain how marginalized groups become active "participants [within] exploitative capitalist systems" (Gramsci cited by D'Alleva, 2005: 50) via the use of ideology - without the necessity of physical intimidation or violence - because "often a political and ideological consensus is negotiated between dominant and subordinate groups" (Gramsci cited by D'Alleva, 2005: 50). William Simon and John Gagnon writing in *Sexual Culture, Society and Sexuality* (2003) refer to this process on an individual basis as the creation of "interpersonal scripts" (Simon & Gagnon, 1999: 29), a selective process of absorption and reinterpretation in which we collectively become 'makers' of culture. Similarly cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that ". . . people, via processes of encoding and decoding, shape culture, and that institutions, such as the church, the state, etc. encode certain ideas in mass media, which audiences then decode" (Hall cited by D'Alleva, 2005: 77).

Clearly Hall's theory is informed by the ideas of Michel Foucault who suggested that modern institutions such as hospitals, prisons, the military and educational institutions enforce 'disciplinary power' through knowledge to create 'docile bodies'. However Foucault also argues that power cannot survive without resistance because people "are themselves agents of this system of power - the idea of their responsibility for 'consciousness' and discourse forms part of the system" (Foucault cited by Cook, 1993: 113). Sandra Lee Bartky has pointed out that Foucault fails to acknowledge that the cultural experiences of men and women are both similar and different. She suggests that Foucault overlooks the cultural ". . . subjection that engender the feminine body. . . " (Bartky, 1988: 64) arguing that women are dominated by a form of 'internalised' (Bartky, 1988: 77) discipline which is "subjected and practiced" (Bartky, 1988: 75). In seeking to obtain an 'idealized femininity' through diet, exercise, fashion and make-up

women experience self-imposed shame and punishment through the inability to conform (Bartky, 1988: 77). Thus it seems that the cultural experience of women is particularly strong and continues to reinforce the cycle of self-discipline. As Ussher argues "Becoming 'woman' is something women *do* rather than something women *are. . ."* (Ussher, 1997: 444).

Therefore women are culturally encrypted via dominant ideological disciplines both physical and internal. Historically seen as a 'subordinate' populus, women practice a process of 'ideological consensus' in the creation of their 'interpersonal scripts' informed by their individual needs.

Female Masquerade

Writing in 1929 psychoanalyst Joan Rivers explored the notion of femininity as a masquerade to describe the adopted roles women wear as a 'mask' to divert reprisals that might result from challenging patriarchal restraints (Rivers cited by Ussher, 1997: 464). In the following section I briefly examine the ideas and artwork of three women artists: Georgia O'Keefe, Cindy Sherman and Tracey Emin to explore the conscious and unconscious cultural meanings conveyed through their artwork.

Georgia O'Keefe, an early 20th century American painter is an interesting example of a professional artist of this period who actively refuted the culturally assumed meanings attached to femininity in particular and the seemingly symbiotic connection between women and floral imagery (discussed earlier in this chapter). In the critical response to her artwork, her realistic paintings of open, enlarged flowers such as *Black Iris III* (1926) (Plate 8) were read as inseparable from her gender (Ussher, 1997: 138). For example, Paul Rosenfield writing in 1912, interpreted O'Keefe's painting as a metaphor for female genitalia (Ussher, 1997: 138). O'Keefe rejected this form of criticism because she felt that her gender was being held in higher esteem than her skill as artist (Ussher, 1997: 138). This critique was unfortunately enhanced by her husband, the art dealer and photographer Alfred Stieglitz who managed and presented her public profile through a ". . . male observer's sexualised notion of what a 'real' woman and her art would be like" (Broude & Garrard, 1994: 13). Nevertheless O'Keefe's objections to this critique did not prevent feminist artists and writers in the 1970s

from embracing O'Keefe as an early feminist who provided a "framework for . . . imagery that would reverse the loathing and devaluation of female anatomy in patriarchal culture" (Broude & Garrard, 1994: 23). These writers believed that O'Keefe created a 'female gaze' (Ussher, 1997: 138) by utilizing autobiographical/biographical metaphors. Many women artists were similarly inspired by the American artist Judy Chicago to produce artwork using autobiographical themes that speak through the feminine experience (Wilding, 1994: 32) utilizing collective "consciousness-raising" to ". . . discover the commonality of [their] experiences as woman, and to analyse how [they] had been conditioned and formed on the basis of [their] gender" (Wilding, 1994: 35). This movement inspired the feminist slogan, "the personal is the political" (Wilding, 1994: 35) and the 'cunt' imagery of Faith Wilding's *Flesh Petals* (1970) (Plate 9) a graphite drawing of female genitalia (Wilding, 1994: 34) and feminist theorisation in relation to "central core imagery" instigated by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro between 1971 and 1972 (Wilding, 1994: 35).

Plate 8. Georgia O'Keefe, *Black Iris III*, 1926: oil on canvas, (91.4 X 76.2cm)
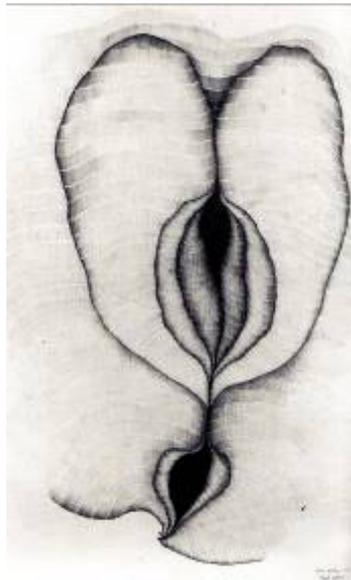
Plate 9. Faith Wilding, *Flesh Petals*, 1970: graphite drawing, (86.4x 61cm)

The American photographer Cindy Sherman, an art student in the early 1970s represents one of the new wave of women artists generally informed by the 1970s feminist movement including both performance and Pop art (Danoff, 1984: 193). Sherman's work was influenced by a middle class American upbringing watching movies, television and playing 'dress up' (Danoff, 1984: 193). In the 1970s Sherman watched hours of subtitled European films and at the same time expanded her collection of female fashions from the 1950s and 1960s that she held in "some affection" due to her childhood recollections (Danoff, 1984: 194). Collectively these influences inspired Sherman to create her *Untitled Film Stills* series, approximately 70 black and white photographs produced between 1977 and 1980. In this series Sherman reinterprets cinematic myths such as the clinical beauty of Alfred Hitchcock's heroines. In the process Sherman creates photographs that look like original film stills but are, in fact, what Jean Baudrillard would call ". . . explor[ing] the simulacrum, the copy without an original" (Baudrillard cited by D'Alleva, 2005: 154). Arguably Cindy Sherman is concerned with theorisation of the 'male gaze'. In 1975 Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking research argued that films "rehearse th[e] structure of the male gaze. . . voyeuristic[ally] constructing the women in endless representations of her vulnerability and his control" (Mulvey cited by Bryson, 1993: 52). However in the process of recreating stereotypical female roles assisted by make-up, costume and cinematic techniques, Sherman

disguises her own subjectivity by assuming a role as 'object'. The sheer volume of her work exposes the many feminine 'masquerades' that women enact as in her portrayal of the Hitchcock actress by Grace Kelly in *# 23* (Plate 10), 'the wife' in *# 3* (Plate 11) and 'the sexually available women' in *# 34* (Plate 12).

Plate 10. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills # 23,* 1978: black & white photograph, (20.3 x 25.4cm)

Plate 11. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills # 3,* 1977: black & white photograph, (20.3 x 25.4cm)

Plate 12. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills # 34,* 1979: black & white photograph, (20.3 x 25.4cm)

Writing in 1929 psychoanalyst Joan Rivers explored the notion of femininity as a masquerade to describe the adopted roles women wear as a 'mask' to divert reprisals that might result from challenging patriarchal constraints (Rivers cited by Ussher, 1997: 464). Sherman's use of cultural masquerade or 'mask' may also account for why her work is broadly accepted within the community ". . . enjoyed by both the general public and specialized students of contemporary art. . . " (Danoff, 1984:193). Sherman has stated that she ". . . like[d] the idea that people who don't know anything about art can look at [her art] and appreciate it without having to know the history of photography and painting" (Sherman cited by Danoff, 1984: 195). This suggests that Sherman is concerned with the cultural accessibility of her work generated by its original creative influences and would acknowledge that her work might be seen as both a reinterpretation and a critique of stereotypical female roles.

Another female artist whose work is also greatly influenced by her childhood is Tracey Emin, one of the new breed of British artists to obtain both celebrity and artistic status due to the brutal honesty of her work and, at times, her outrageous public behaviour (McGrath [accessed 17/10/07]). Emin grew up in Margate UK in a disadvantaged environment that included sexual abuse (Betterton 2001:29). Her art education in the early 1980s was varied and

included fashion, printing and painting (Betterton, 2001: 35-37). Emin has gained renown for her ability to interpret the private as public by utilizing her work as a process of empowerment through the incorporation of personal memorabilia within her art including working with mediums such as video, printmaking, diaries, installation, sculptures and textiles throughout the 1990's. An example of Emin's direct communicative approach to art-making is *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995) (Plate 13), an installation consisting of a small blue tent completely appliquéd inside with the names of all the people she had ever slept with (including relatives, sexual partners and two aborted foetuses). Some critics have seen this work as an example of " 'in-yer-face' female sexuality" (Betterton, 2001: 33). However this work can also be seen as relying on a combination of techniques to refer to the "intimacy of sleep" (Betterton 2001: 34): within an enclosed, controlled environment Emin attempts to recreate a voyeuristic experience by requiring the spectator to peer into the tent but at the same time the installation disrupts the power of the gaze (Betterton 2001:34).

Plate 13. Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, 1995: appliqué tent, mattress and light, (122 x 245 x 215cm)

A great deal of Emin's works appears to be informed by the autobiographical work of feminist artists in the 1970s under the slogan 'the personal is the political,' a consciousness raising movement designed to collectively "…discover the commonality of experiences as women, and to analyse how [they] had been

conditioned and formed on the basis of [their] gender" (Wilding, 1994: 35). This movement included Pattern and Decoration artists such as Miriam Schapiro who ". . . embraced the decorative and ornamental. . ." (Broude, 1994: 208) found in traditional female crafts such as quilting formerly seen as 'low art' and not historically recognized by patriarchal art traditions. However Rosemary Betterton points out that Emin has rejected these comparisons (Betterton, 2001: 34) although there is evidence to suggest that Emin was exposed to contemporary feminist work in the 1980s as part of the London art scene: in the installations created by the feminist art group FENIX in London (Betterton, 2001: 34) and the rapid growth and availability of feminist publications in this era together with her arts education at Maidstone College of Arts and the Royal College of Art – an era which Emin recalls as "the worst two years of her life" (Betterton 2001:36). Thus Emin's attitude would seem to suggest that by the end of the twentieth century "The personal is not always political, and the autobiographical voice in women's art does not guarantee a feminist politics" (Betterton, 2001: 37).

In conclusion I have found that there are many cultural influences both seen and unseen that collectively inform the evolution of 'idealized femininity' through a patriarchal ideology, dominant disciplinary knowledges and internalized disciplines. While many artists have been critiqued by feminist theory, feminism itself can be seen as another form of 'disciplinary' power via knowledge. Nevertheless cultural theorists argue that as individuals we negotiate cultural influences as a means of creating our own 'interpersonal scripts' facilitating the selection of cultural information so that we become 'makers' of our own ideology. Whereas the artwork of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the critical response to Georgia O'Keefe highlights 'traditional' readings of the feminine, the work of the contemporary photographer Cindy Sherman reveals the multiplicity of roles that are presented to women via popular culture. And in her autobiographical work, Tracey Emin's journey of identity challenges these 'traditional feminine scripts' through the creation of an interpersonal script expressive of her personal reality.

Chapter 4:

Reflections of Creative Context

Reflections of Creative Context

In the exegesis I have examined the evolution of 'idealized romance' and the contemporary context and discourse of Popular Romance Fiction together with gender constructions of 'femininity' in Western society. I have also examined the work of several contemporary women artists who have sought to intervene in these encrypted feminine scripts through various strategies. I first examined the work of Natalka Husar and Kara Walker who appropriate romance fiction imagery as the basis for wider cultural critiques. I then examined the work of Cindy Sherman whose photographs both emulate and critique the stereotypes promoted by films. In the work of British artist Tracey Emin this intervention is grounded in autobiographical material. In this chapter I will discuss the studio practice research in which I have been involved during my Master of Arts Degree in relation to this theoretical research.

I first trace the historical context of my work within Australian popular culture informed by the Pop Art movement of the 1970s and the development of screen printing as an important vehicle for political protest. I then examine the projects in which I have been involved during the two years of my Master of Arts Degree. In this research I build upon an earlier teenage fascination with historical romance fiction to create digitally manipulated images that are then screen printed onto paper. In the first year I used realism to ironically critique the feminine stereotypes promoted by Western ideology. In the second year my work became more personal and autobiographical as I began to explore sexual fantasies. Initially my aim was to avoid the limitations imposed by psychoanalytic interpretations and the explicit nature of personal narratives. Engaging in this process of internal negotiation has enabled me to express myself on a more spiritual and emotional level. In conjunction with a more abstract style which has allowed a greater degree of ambiguity, these new developments have allowed a more individual and personalised connection to the audience. Visually these developments are reflected in a range of screen printed imagery from traditional prints and digital photographs to wall installations.

Biographical Context

I was born in the 1970s, a decade of social unrest both internationally and within Australia where alternative lifestyles evolved - vastly different from the post-war conservatism of the 1950s - influenced by Vietnam War protests, feminism, gay rights, Aboriginal land rights and the emergence of popular culture into mainstream society.

In an international context postmodernism emerged through movements like Pop Art which first came to the fore in England and America. Pop Art openly rebelled against the traditional cultural hierarchies sustained through art institutions and modernism. Artists working in this style rejected these elitist ideals by actively incorporating within their artwork everyday and commercial imagery such as ". . . comics, picnic tables, men's trousers, celebrities, shower curtains, refrigerators, cake, lollies. . . "(Livinstone, 1985: 13). Pop artists appropriated these images from advertising and popular culture using collages, pastiche and assemblages to create a style of art that was much more readable and accessible to the general pubic as mutual participants of a Western consumer society **(**Livinstone, 1985: 12). For example Richard Hamilton created the collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956) as a poster and catalogue image for the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* (1956) held in London (Foster, Krauss, Bois & Buchloh, 2004: 388-389). As a teenager I was attracted to this fantasy image because of its irreverence, its use of collage and the appropriation of images from 'everyday' sources such as advertising, magazines, comics etc (Foster, Krauss, Bois & Buchloh, 2004: 445-447). Other Pop artists like Andy Warhol incorporated commercial processes like screen printing ideally suited for the reproduction of imagery in multiples - especially those taken directly from newspapers - like images of celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe. The diptych *Marilyn Monroe's Lips* (1962) comprises eighty-four nearly identical prints of Marilyn's teeth and smiling lips (Ratcliff, 1983: 29). By contrast the painter Roy Litchenstein reproduced images taken from comics and commercial art in a flat graphic style that incorporated the Ben Day Dots used in the printing industry to create graduations of colour (Hendrickson, 2000: 41). For example *Girl with Ball* (1961) is an image that has been reinterpreted using a detail from an advertisement found in the *New York Times* (Hendrickson, 2000: 41).

I became interested in the Pop Art movement because I grew up in a household influenced by my father's career as a commercial screen printer. I was very interested in way screen printing could be translated into an art form that incorporated imagery I could relate to. Surrounded by the local surf culture on the central east coast I was particularly interested in the graphic imagery printed onto the distinctive clothing worn by this community produced by Australian companies such as Mambo and Hot Tuna.

By the 1990s I was specializing in screen printed repeat fabric lengths that explored favourite family memories in the tradition of Mambo. I was especially attracted to Mambo's screen printed fabrics and how they used the visual arts as a means to flaunt their irreverence for authority both cultural and moral - albeit in masculine codes (Mambo 2006). The Mambo style is typified by Reg Mombassa who has worked with Mambo since 1986. An example of Mombassa's work is the poster *Mambo Faith: Australian Jesus at the Football* indicating Mombassa's skill in 'taking the piss out of' dominant ideologies such as religion by combining it with the popular working class sport of football (Mambo 2006).

Within the local arts sector establishments like the Tin Sheds Art Workshop at Sydney University in 1968 evolved in response to an intellectual shift within arts education incorporating a cooperative of artists, historians and architects (Kenyon, 1995: 11). The Tin Sheds inspired the establishment of other community arts organisations such as Megalo Access Arts in 1980, a community access printmaking facility established in Canberra (Kenyon, 1995: 51). Individuals like Colin Little who established the Earthworks Poster Company in 1971 at the Tin Sheds (Kenyon, 1995: 37) later become one of the founding members of Megalo International Screenprint Collective (subsequently renamed Megalo Access Arts) (Kenyon, 1995: 51) where I worked.

By 1996 I was producing screen printed fabric lengths which humorously explored gender constructs by incorporating images of male sports figures within stereotypical feminine floral patterns. In 2004 I held a solo exhibition *Where is she?* comprising large screen prints on paper. This exhibition represented the culmination of course work undertaken at Canberra School of Art and signalled a major new direction in my work by actively drawing upon

autobiographical material and using the visual codes taken from popular romance and traditional fairy tales as a metaphor for Western myths. In particular I focused on the romantic 'happy ever after' myth represented in both Popular Romance Fiction and fairy tales.

The Studio Practice Projects

In the first year of my Master of Arts Degree at Charles Darwin University I produced a series of screen prints that built on my existing interest in Romance Fiction and fairy tales. This series of screen prints used realism to create a pastiche of images drawn from traditional fairy tales to critique gender constructs including the Western myth of romance. This first series of work entitled *Cultural Bites* (2005) consisted of five small images and a large diptych. These prints, comprised of images appropriated and manipulated from popular culture, were aimed at questioning and subverting traditional gender stereotypes by creating new fairy tales and new myths by association. An example of this series is *Little Knight* (2005) (Plate 14) where I have dramatically reduced the scale of the knight to belittle the mythological power of the mighty 'Prince Charming'. In the larger diptych *Pretty Boy, Pretty Boy…Sing Pretty Boy* (2005) (Plate 15), I moved away from my earlier style based in graphic poster techniques to explore a multi-layered style using a darker monotone palette to create a menacing dream-like environment with multiple meanings. My work at this stage was similar to that of Cindy Sherman (discussed in chapter three) through the exploration of traditional gender constructs and appropriated cultural texts with embedded meanings. However while Sherman however uses self-portraits to create an awareness of the roles women play within society, I was engaged in a critique of gender constructions.

Plate 14. Linda Rice, *Cultural Bites: Little Knight*, 2005: Screen print on straw board with acrylic and base (25 x 38cm).
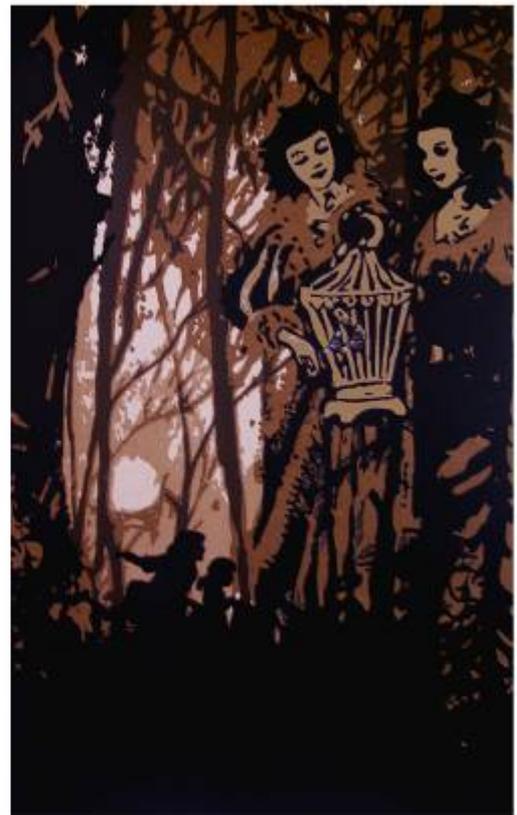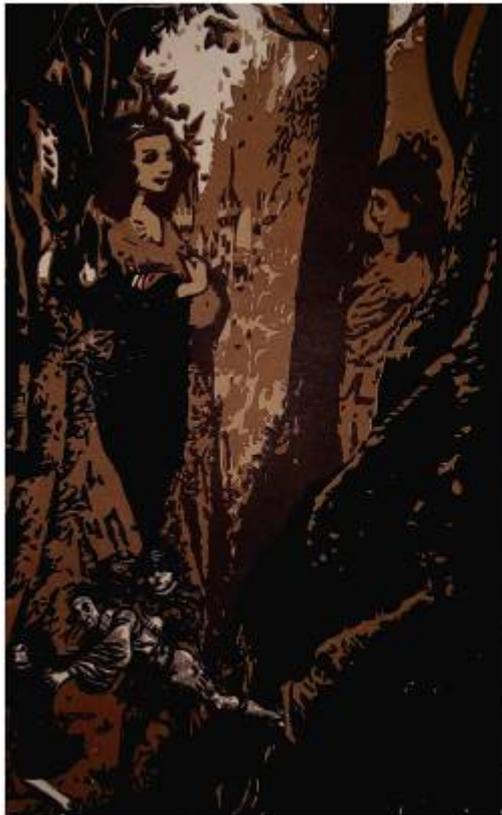

Plate 15. Linda Rice, *Pretty Boy, Pretty Boy…Sing Pretty Boy,* 2005: screen prints on straw board with acrylic and base, (47 x 75cm) x 2.

In the second year of my degree my work became increasingly autobiographical as I began to explore the possibility of using my work as a means of personal empowerment in response to the inherent contradictions between the sexual revolution of the 1970s and the Western myth of Popular Romance. Initially I reconnected with my earlier interest in autobiographical themes by exploring my emotional attachment to romance fiction. This work responded to the feminist artists of the 1970's (discussed in chapter three). Inspired by the slogan "the personal is the political" (Wilding, 1994: 35) these artists explored the cultural influences that informed gender identity and the many commonalities in the experiences of women. In the course of my research I began to increasingly focus on the work of more contemporary artists such as Cindy Sherman and Tracy Emin. In her photographic work Cindy Sherman explores the culturally coded roles that women assume. In one sense the images she projects in the *Untitled Film Stills* series (Plates 10-11) are autobiographical but in fact Sherman disguises her personal identity in the way that the female body is used as a manikin that is dressed and presented in various staged settings. In contrast Tracy Emin has adopted an entirely different approach creating autobiographical work that is confronting, honest and direct personally explicating a confessional style that speaks solely of her personal experiences (see Plate 13).

The work created in the second year of my degree builds on and expands the autobiographical approach explored by these women artists. Whilst I was interested in exploring autobiography, I wanted to avoid the confessional extremes utilized by Emin and I wanted to move beyond earlier critiques of romance fiction by exploring Sherman's devices for cloaking and masking meaning. In the work created during my second year I continued to draw upon imagery from Popular Romance Fiction in conjunction with transparent layering and manipulation as a means of exploring personal sexual fantasies. During the course of the year my work became increasingly abstract and ambiguous as I sought to create work that explored a more complicated and contested reading for autobiography through imagery that was fluid, organic and sensory yet contained within the structure of the grid.

In the first series of three artworks entitled *Visual Fiction: Series 1* (Plate 16), I created six small, realistic images drawn from the covers of historical romance covers. This series used a circular format reminiscent of the peepholes associated with male pornography and the voyeurism of erotic peepshows. This format had the additional advantage of allowing me to retain the anonymity of the female characters by not revealing their faces. The intent of this series was to create erotic representations of romance fiction characters that proclaimed pride in female sexuality and gave visual expression to these fantasies. The series reinterprets romance fiction positively as a form of female pornography by representing the female characters on the covers of romance novels in a position of dominance, in control of their sexual encounters and unafraid to express their sexuality directly. To make these fictional scenes ambiguously suggestive of female masturbation and oral sex I chose to retain the essence of my resource material and the soft and smooth surface of the original images.
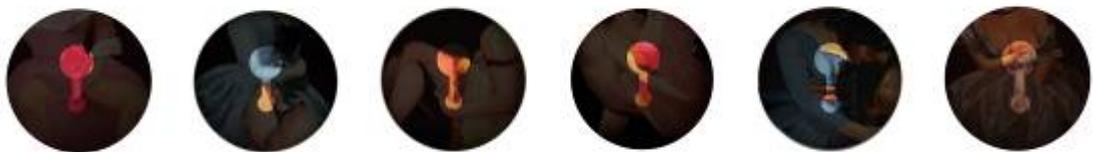

Plate 16. Linda Rice, *Visual Fiction*: *Series 1* (digital recreation), 2006: CMYK Screen prints on paper with acrylic and base, (10cm in diameter) x 6.

I am aware that in contemporary theorising of gender representations such images might be seen as complicit with a 'male gaze.' Laura Mulvey's critique of the male gaze (discussed in chapter three) specifically refers to Peeping Toms as individuals who objectify women (Mulvey, 1989: 16). However my analysis of Cindy Sherman demonstrates that she is aware that her self-portraits based on feminine stereotypes may generate a range of meanings from various audiences. The dilemma confronted by many women artists is highlighted in Rebecca Fortnum's essay "Seeing and Feeling." "How can one make work that represents or originates in experience whilst attempting to be responsible for an audience's engagement with the work. ..?" (Fortnum, 2004: 139) - a question that is magnified when contextualised within contemporary feminist theory. To the extent that knowledge is, in Foucault's terms, a 'disciplinary power' (Foucault

cited by Cook, 1993: 112) both creating power and legitimizing that power, Fortnum's question is ultimately about the female artist negotiating their own creative scripts informed by dominant culture. Thus my own work might be seen as creating a 'female gaze' that deconstructs phallocentric images and reclaims or reframes the representations of women found on the covers of romance novels like *Heart of the Flame.* To enhance the 'female gaze' I have also superimposed a transparent layer with a keyhole cut into it – an opening, still tantalizing and inviting that also signifies the necessity of the female viewer to fill in the gaps surrounding this erotic image. In this way I assume that audiences for my work will react similarly to readers of erotic romance fiction who create mental fantasies based on a combination of fictional clues and their individual life experiences. I have also screened these images with a transparent screen printed layer as a way of acknowledging (and protecting) the personal world of the artist within the wider public space of the art gallery.

In *Visual Fiction: Series 2,* (Plate 17) I am directly building on the knowledge of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* by creating a long wall installation of twelve small screen printed images. I am aware that this series might be critiqued as complicit with a 'male gaze' because they portray women as available, fetishized and idealized – an interpretation enhanced by the framing of the central image. However I would argue that, like Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills,* this work reveals both the clichés of 'idealized femininity' and acts as a reminder to the audience that we are complicit in the longevity of these myths. Like Sherman I want this work to be appreciated by a broader public outside the professional art world as an expression of my ambiguous fascination for romance fiction.

To enhance the thematic reading of this work I have also digitally widened the mouths of these women to highlight women's idealised and objectified persona within Western cultural codes and to signify their availability. I have also used the same circular format for all these images to denote both these readings and the commonality of their cultural experiences.

Plate 17. Linda Rice, *Visual Fiction*: *Series 2* (detail, digital recreation), 2006: CMYK screen prints on paper with acrylic and base, wall installation (0.12 x 2.5m).

The following work, *Visual Fiction: Series 3* (Plates18) evolved from the same theoretical background as *Visual Fiction: Series 1* where I have retained the circular format as a tool to focus the eye. This work comprises five, hand-sized screen printed images, suggestive of sexual encounters (or narratives) within a sensual world of ambiguous 'visual fantasy'. Within this work I became more focused on avoiding psychoanalysis interpretations and began experimenting more with imagery that could arouse the essence of sensual touch, so lacking in my own life without a literal interpretation. In these works I have superimposed organic half-tone dots similar to the hand-painted Ben Day dots used by Roy Lichtenstein including detailed processes which incorporate the effect of blurring as a screening mechanism which also invites new meanings.

Plate 18. Linda Rice, *Visual Fiction*: *Series 3,* (digital recreation), 2006: CMYK Screen prints on paper with acrylics & base, (18.5cm in diameter) x 5.

The second body of work entitled *Myth Makers* (Plates 19 & 20) consists of two series each comprising three screen printed images and a series of digital photographs taken from printed images. Like the photographs of Cindy Sherman I hope that the screen printed images work to convey a documentary quality, documenting cultural myths of sexuality myths rather than 'feminine myths'. Thus the screen printed images 'look like' visual records of sexual experiences and the digital photographs from these prints articulate the process of documentation and as a form of simulacra. My aim is that the imagery will be neutralised through the process of repetition and create naturalised myths, similar to the creation of "idealized romance and femininity".
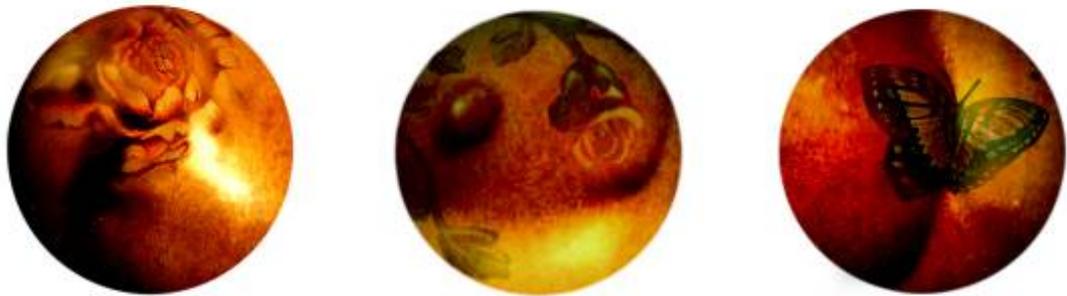

Plate 19. Linda Rice, *Myth Makers: Series 1-Screen prints*, (digital recreation), 2006: CMYK screen prints on paper with acrylics & base, (18.5cm in diameter) x 3.

Plate 20. Linda Rice, *Myth Makers: Series 2-Screen prints,* (digital recreation), 2006: CMYK Screen prints on paper with acrylics & base, (18.5cm in diameter) x 3.

The third and final project entitled *Flesh* (Plate 21) is a large 2 x 3m wall installation comprising a grid of ninety-one, hand-size 'flesh buttons' intended to give the illusion of various body textures. My aim is that these 'flesh buttons' will create the illusion of a blanket of physical flesh that may be intimidating and visually assaulting rather than passive and objectified. This approach, incorporating a grid structure, differs from the series I utilised in my previous work. In this instance I selectively build on the long history of grid structures within the visual art of the early 20th century. Artists such as Piet Mondrian used grid formations to symbolise the "modernist ambition within the visual arts . . . [to express] its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse" (Krauss, 1985: 9), through its ability to represent the present and completely distance modern art from preceding traditions. In using the grid it is not my intention to completely distance myself from previous traditions- from a postmodernist perceptive this would be impossible. Rather I wish to build on the modernist use of the grid to suggest "a world beyond the frame" (Krauss, 1985:18). For example in the work of English Op artist Bridget Riley she incorporates grid-like structures of kinetic black dots with tonal variations to create an illusion of movement. In *Pause* (1964), for example, the optical illusions she creates are visually interactive demanding the engagement of the audience to induce a sensory response initiated through geometric design and colour. However Riley is rarely, if ever, seen as a feminist artist and there is no element of personal autobiography in her work.

In *Flesh* I build on my interest in Riley's work to actively involve the viewer by visually enveloping them within a sensory experience. In one sense the grid structure makes reference to the 'internalised disciplinary powers' theorized by Sandra Lee Bartkly (discussed in chapter three). In her writing Bartkly refers both to the disciplinary powers internalised by women –as for example in their desire to obtain an 'idealized femininity' through a regime of self-imposed cosmetic discipline - and the power of women to resist and subvert these culturally encrypted codes. Additionally the scale of the work makes symbolic reference to the array of idealized figurative imagery that we are exposed to via the mass media. I hope that the work will prove visually hypnotic and that the seductive elements of the illusionary three-dimensional 'flesh buttons' (or breasts) will become increasingly apparent to the viewer - almost desiring to be

lovingly caressed. Hopefully the erotic beauty and sexuality of the female body will erupt out of the confining structure by means of the sensual quality

conveyed by the 'flesh buttons.' Through this engagement I hope that the work will speak of our complicity with gender constraints and our power to resist and subvert
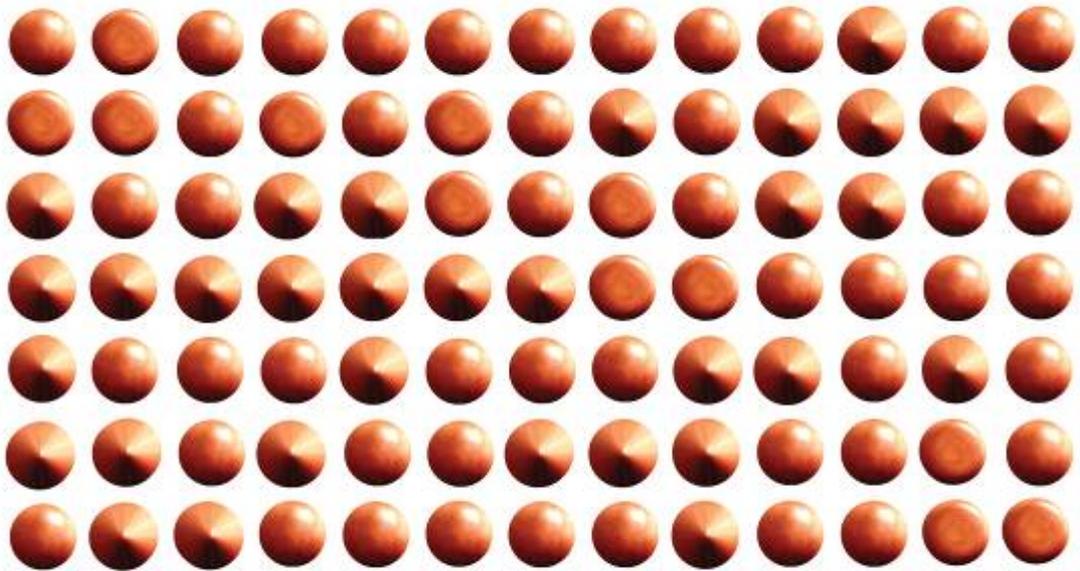

Plate 21. Linda Rice, *Flesh,* (digital recreation) 2006: CMYK Screen print on paper with acrylics & base, wall installation, (2 x 3m).

In this chapter, I found that my creative script is very much a product of my cultural environment, parental influences and personal history. With an interest in work that rebels or questions dominant ideology. I have continued this tradition in my Master of Arts Degree by first challenging 'feminine' stereotypes then by reinterpreting these myths and exploring sexual fantasies informed by the knowledge of female artists in the creation of a 'female gaze' and my fascination for the erotic function of romance fiction.

Conclusion:

The title of my research project, *Ambiguous Love* embodies the powerful forces encapsulated through ideological and cultural knowledges. In the Introduction I stated that it was not my intent to critique Popular Romance Fiction because I still retain a fascination and emotional attachment to it. Rather my aim has been to reclaim meaning and value for Romance Fiction: drawing upon autobiographical themes has enabled me to reflect back on my life and negotiate my own 'interpersonal script.'

In chapter one I established that 'courtly love' evolved from the 11th century as a reaction to a sexually repressive ideology and that contemporary 'idealized romance' is a descendant of it. The evolution of traditional fairy tales from the 17th century demonstrates the power of dominant cultural beliefs to shape cultural texts as well as providing a medium for 'subordinant' classes to make sense of their reality through the traditions transmitted to contemporary fairy tales and popular romance.

In chapter two I discussed the emotional connection that occurs in readers of Romance Fiction centering on the myth of 'idealized' marriage encapsulated in children's fairy tales and subsequently transferred to Romance Fiction. My research also established that the primary appeal of Romance Fiction lies in its function as a pleasurable escape from the harsh realities of life, including its attraction as a form of female pornography (also critiqued as abusive to women) in the late 1970's and 1980s. This evidence demonstrated the necessity of the Romance Fiction industry to continually change and reflect cultural shifts (similar to the cultural reinterpretation of fairy tales) to fulfil the capitalist drive for economic return. This chapter concluded by looking at the artwork of Natalka Husar and Kara Walker who, like myself, recognise the magnitude and complexity of multiple meanings underlying Romance Fiction.

In chapter three I discussed the historic origins of 'idealized beauty' and culturally gendered inscription. Drawing upon cultural studies and

psychoanalytic perspectives I examined the link between traditional representations of women within 'high' art and the feminine stereotypes of contemporary popular culture. I then discussed the evolution of an 'interpersonal script' as a major feat of cultural negotiation overshadowed by internally incorporated 'self-discipline'. This is seen as an essential mechanism required to maintain our culturally appropriated persona or 'feminine masquerades'. Informed by this research my discussion on Georgia O'Keefe, Cindy Sherman and Tracey Emin highlighted the multiple meanings for their work.

On reflection I see that four critical issues have emerged from my research: first, that the dominant ideology plays a major role in the evolution of sexual morals and cultural texts; second, that as 'makers' or authors of ideology we speak from social and historical positions informed by the dominant ideology; third, that as women, historically located within a subordinate position in Western culture, we have used and will continue to use texts to make meaning of our social position; and fourth, that female artists as creators of cultural text are collectively informed by the above issues and must culturally and creatively negotiate them.

In chapter four I examined the studio research undertaken over the two years of the Master of Arts Degree. First I located the origins of my studio practice within a broader historical context of the Pop Art and developments in screen printing in the 1970s and early creative influences from my personal background.

Over the duration of the Master of Arts Degree my work shifted from screen prints ironically critiquing male stereotypes and 'idealized romance' to the exploration of personal narratives. In that process I came to understand that my fascination with Romance Fiction inscribed a culturally acquired shame because its feminine pornography exemplified a 'female gaze'. Informed by the research undertaken in this exegesis my work became more overtly autobiographic and moved toward a more abstract and deliberately ambiguous style in the form of artworks capable of sustaining multiple meanings. These works depict mysteriously erotic images which invite the viewer to bring to the reading of the artwork their own cultural interpretations in the same way that readers mentally create a fictional fantasy in the process of reading romance fiction.

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