

Flesh Meet Body: An Exploration of the Use of the Grotesque Aesthetic by Contemporary Female Artists

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Abstract

The grotesque as a concept is at the same time both undefinable and specific. When referring to art and aesthetics, it often includes imagery that is composite, strange, disgusting, and even at times demonic. While the aesthetic of the grotesque has changed over the centuries, the modern grotesque is strongly connected to the body, and specifically uses the body as a medium or a subject within the work. Common motifs include composites, medical imagery, religious imagery, and flesh, meat, or blood. This thesis considers how the grotesque aesthetic in contemporary art serves as a rejection of and a counternarrative to traditional depictions of the female body and the white male gaze in the art world. Works analyzed include those by Carolee Schneemann, Jenny Saville, ORLAN, Wangechi Mutu, and Doreen Garner. This paper also examines how their work is a result of an exploration of contrasting Freudian theory with feminist theory in the late 20th century and into the 21st century. Further connections will be made between these works and concepts such as the abject, psychoanalysis, and the semiotics of the female body drawing from the writings of scholars such as Julia Kristeva, and Elizabeth Grosz.

1. Introduction

Grotesque is a word that has many different connotations depending on the particular time period and discipline it is used in. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, author of *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, describes the grotesque as occupying the space “between the known and the unknown.”¹ This paradoxical quality is one aspect that has drawn so many artists to this aesthetic. What is it about the grotesque that makes us so uncomfortable, and at the same time, intrigued? As scholars, we like to categorize objects and ideas and place them within definite limits. When things cannot be categorized, we become uncomfortable or even afraid. “Non-things,” as Harpham calls them, become taboo and since the grotesque inhabits either multiple categories or none of them at all, it becomes the embodiment of the taboo. While some parts of human nature are drawn to order, safety, and familiarity, another part of human nature is drawn to rebellion. We like to feel thrilled, shocked, disgusted, but only in controlled environments, for instance, while reading a book or watching a film.

The grotesque is often associated with things that are horrifying. Examples include Frankenstein’s monster, Medusa, and Werewolves, which are fictions that are thought to embody this concept, but horror is not synonymous with grotesque. The grotesque combines what is alien and what is familiar and while fiction and horror often make use of the grotesque, not all things that incite fear can be considered grotesque. Murder, sexual violence, torture are all things that are scary, but do not fall into the category of the grotesque because they lack this composite element.

Harpman discusses the idea that in Christian art representations of the heavenly or divine are all similar and uniformly ideal, while representations of evil or the damned are individualized.² One can see this exemplified in Martin Schongauer’s *Temptation of St. Anthony* (Fig. 1), where the demons tormenting St. Anthony are depicted as composites of various animals and humanoid figures with animal features.



Figure 1- Martin Schongauer, *Temptation of St. Anthony*, c. 1470, engraving, Metropolitan Museum of Art
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336142>

No two figures in Schongauer's print look the same; for example, one demon appears to be a composite porcupine/fish/elephant creature, while another has frog and dragon-like features. This work is considered one of the most quintessential grotesque pieces from the Renaissance era because of its blending of the familiar and alien that was intended to terrify the viewer. Alternatively, depictions of the Madonna and Child are all uniform, some are almost identical, and it stayed that way for hundreds of years. In Cimabue's *Virgin and Child Enthroned* (Fig. 2) each of the angels' faces are identical, matching Mary's face.



Figure 2- Cimabue, Santa Trinita Maestà, 1286, tempera painting, 12' 8" x 7' 4", Uffizi Gallery
<https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/virgin-and-child-enthroned-and-prophets-santa-trinita-maesta>

This same imagery is repeated by many artists, striving to put forth a universal and ethereal icon that is the opposite of the grotesque.

As much as we like to distance ourselves from the grotesque, the human body is inextricably linked with the concept. Harpham describes the mid-region that the grotesque occupies as "dynamic and unpredictable, [having] a sense of transformation or metamorphosis."³ Our bodies are in a constant state of change, so the parallels between these concepts are evident. Our feelings of disgust surrounding the functions and substances of the human body (i.e. feces, urine, semen, and menstrual blood) are a result of our attempt to distance ourselves from our mortality and the constant corporeal turbulence we experience. Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* illustrates this idea perfectly. Quasimodo is deformed and considered ugly, in other words: grotesque. He is human yet he is separate from the whole and pure body. The people of 15th century Paris fear him because he has human and inhuman features, but this

character invites pity because we can see bits of ourselves in him. Perhaps this is the particular characteristic that terrifies us about the grotesque: the recognition of one's self in the alien other.⁴ This thesis considers how the grotesque aesthetic in contemporary art serves as a rejection of and a counternarrative to traditional depictions of the female body and the white male gaze in the art world, examining how the use of the grotesque by female contemporary artists are a result of an exploration of contrasting Freudian theory with feminist theory in the late 20th century and into the 21st century. Throughout this paper the presence of the alien against the familiar with this particular protest in mind, will become apparent. As art historian Francis Connolly put it "An effective grotesque fixes our attention on an existing boundary, making the contours of the familiar and "normal" visible to us, even as it intermingles with the alien and unexpected. As such, the grotesque turns received ideas, normal expectations and social and artistic conventions against themselves."⁵

2. Historical Significance

The origins of the word grotesque can be traced back to the arabesques adorning the edges of the frescoes of Nero's domus Aurea or "Golden Palace." While Fabullus' famous frescoes were created in the first century A.D, the term grotesque, or coming from a grotto, was not applied to them until their excavation in the Renaissance period, inspiring the likes of Raphael to create similar motifs in the Vatican Loggias.⁶ At the time of their creation, however, they were not widely celebrated. Roman author, Vitruvius wrote the following about these frescos

On the stucco are monsters rather than definite representations taken from definite things. Instead of columns there rise up stalks; instead of gables, striped panels with curled volutes. Candelabra uphold pictured shrines and above the summits of these, clusters of thin stalks rise from their roots in tendrils with Little figures seated upon them at random. Again, slender stalks with heads of men and animals attached to half the body. Such things neither are, nor can be, nor have been...For how can a reed actually sustain a roof,... Yet when people view these falsehoods, they approve rather than condemn.

-Vitruvius *De Architectura*, ca. 27 B.C. ⁷

Vitruvius's critiques of these frescoes are the very characteristics that define the grotesque today: the lack of definability, the absence of rationality, the combination of reality and fiction, composites of human and animal bodies, the presence of the familiar and the alien next to each other. In a time when the quality of a work was based on its likeness to reality, these frescoes were a rejection of the ideal and correct. As Harpham put it "like Vitruvius' judgement this name is a mistake pregnant with truth, for although the designs were never intended to be underground, nor Nero's palace a grotto, the word is perfect...Grotesque, then, gathers into itself suggestions of the underground, of burial, and of secrecy."⁸ This idea of the grotesque as an asylum for the strange and rejected continued throughout the centuries.

The use of the grotesque aesthetic has been used as a visual tool to confront the other and the unknown since the medieval period. The Arnstein Bible, for example, is particularly interesting with its illustration of the "Monstrous Races," sketches of composite humanoid bodies placed next to geographical maps and charts attempting to organize the world and its inhabitants in a cosmological context. As scholar Alexa Wright noted "This particular set of drawings may represent one individuals meditation on the order of things, but they also reflect a widespread historical understanding of the body of the human monster as a site for cultural interrogation of the boundaries between nature and culture, human and animal, human and not-human."⁹ It is evident how the grotesque has historically and effectively been used to convey the other or foreign body as something to be feared and hated, as this concept of the "Monstrous Races" is often considered a precursor to racism. In the 17th and 18th centuries, teratology continued to adopt this aesthetic as cabinets of curiosities and pseudo-scientific depictions of monsters and the monstrous human body rose in popularity both in scientific communities and in the art world. The aesthetic of the grotesque was effective in this discipline with its focus on the body and its interest in the abnormal in an attempt to rationalize and categorize. With the rise of teratology came a rise in medical objectification, using "monster" as a medical term to describe someone with bodily malformation or abnormality, and removing their humanity by viewing them as a subject to be studied and examined.¹⁰ As scholar Elizabeth Grosz put it "The perverse pleasure of voyeurism and identification is counterbalanced by horror at the blurring of identities (sexual, corporeal, personal) that witness our chaotic and insecure identities."¹¹ This kind of voyeurism gave rise to an interest in the grotesque during the Enlightenment.

3. Theoretical Considerations

It is worth exploring the theoretical concepts that help to form the meaning of the grotesque as a concept and as an aesthetic. One can not consider the grotesque without also considering the abject. In Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* the abject is described as the place "where meaning collapses."¹² As previously discussed, the grotesque also embodies this unidentifiable quality. Kristeva explores this idea further, writing "it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order."¹³ While many artworks that are thought to embody the grotesque aesthetic include elements that may be thought of as disgusting or sick, it is not these elements that make the work grotesque. Kristeva considers the mother child relationship in her essay in terms of Freud's Oedipus complex, establishing the feminine and maternal as abject, considering how the mother's interaction with the child is one centered around the body. The first interaction with the child being that of a "primal mapping of the body"¹⁴ where the child learns "the shape of the body, the clean and unclean, the proper and improper"¹⁵ Within this theory, the feminine body is established as other and unwhole as one considers the concept of castration anxiety in Freudian psychoanalysis¹⁶. Examining maternity through this Freudian lens allows one to see the implicit connections between the feminine body and its processes (menstruation and childbirth) and the grotesque which is the embodiment of the composite, the other, and the taboo. Thus, the relationship between the feminine and the grotesque as an exploration of otherness and identity is evident.

One important aspect of the abject, and thus the grotesque, is the presence of the body and its separateness from the mind. The motif of bodily waste present in the abject object and the grotesque is significant because it reminds us of the inevitability of death and acts as a symbol of all that is "whole and proper"¹⁷. Kristeva notes "the corpse, seen without God and outside science is the utmost of abjection."¹⁸ Considering again this Freudian perspective, bodily waste as a feature of the grotesque may "invoke pleasure in breaking the taboo on filth- sometimes described as a pleasure in perversity-and a pleasure in returning to that time when the mother-child relationship was marked by an untrammeled pleasure in "playing" with the body and its wastes"¹⁹. A common feature of the grotesque aesthetic is the separation of individual (often sexualized) body parts from life by putting them in the context of meat/flesh rather than part of a living person. As theorist Elizabeth Grosz put it "The body is the most peculiar "thing," for it is never quite reducible to being merely a thing; nor does it ever quite manage to rise above the status of thing. Thus, it is both a thing and a nothing, an object, but an object which somehow contains or coexists with an interiority, an object able to take itself and others as subjects, a unique kind of object not reducible to other objects"²⁰ This quote is comparable to Harpham's definition of the grotesque as a non-thing, further relating the abject to the grotesque.

The assumption of Cartesian dualism, or the separation of the mind and the physical body, is crucial to understanding the contemporary grotesque aesthetic. In much of western philosophy, one's mind houses one's intellect, the ability to think critically, determine right from wrong, reason and argue. It is the part that holds one's memories and identity; it's who they are. The body, on the other hand, houses the physical, the primal. It acts on instinct and is often in direct opposition to the mind. This dualism is relevant to the discussion of the grotesque because the body is so closely tied to this concept and aesthetic.²¹ Many modern feminist theorists, including Grosz, have turned away from Cartesian dualism in favor of Spinoza's monism or the oneness of body and mind; viewing the body as "series of processes of becoming," because dualism has such gendered connotations.²² The qualities associated with the mind: intellect and reason are thought of as masculine, while the qualities associated with the body: sexuality, fragility, emotion are thought of as feminine. This paradigm is particularly evident in western art as images rely on visual symbolism to convey ideas. Nowhere is this more apparent than in religious art. Cartesian dualism is a widely accepted way of thinking of the human experience, perhaps because religion supports and relies on it to explain concepts such as the spirit, sin, and afterlife. Thus, the grotesque aesthetic has been used in Christian art to provide a counter to the divine. As Kristeva put it "The abject determines the sacred."²³ This relates to the aforementioned idea of the presence of familiarity and reality against, and sometimes combined with, the alien and absurd. The visual characteristics of the divine- being uniform and identifiable, and the grotesque- being unidentifiable and composite, reiterate this concept.

Equally relevant is Freud's concept of primal repression which is based on the existence of one's conscious and unconscious mind in opposition. The Id, which houses one's most primal desires and impulses and often is tied most closely with the body, juxtaposed against the superego which houses one's taught morals and concepts of perfection. The act of repressing one's Id is known as primal repression. According to Freud "Among these wishful impulses derived from infancy, which can neither be destroyed nor inhibited, there are some whose fulfilment would be a contradiction of the purposive ideas of secondary thinking. The fulfilment of these wishes would no longer generate an effect of pleasure but of unpleasure; and it is precisely this transformation of affect which constitutes the essence of what we term repression."²⁴ It is the lack of primal repression that leads to deviance or a "return of the repressed"²⁵

and as Kristeva noted “The abject would thus be the “object” of primal repression.”²⁶ The importance of the body as part of the abject and its use as a motif of the grotesque aesthetic stems from the notion that the physical and the sexual are inherently animal and primitive. The Freudian concept of co-presence, which is when two things that are intended to be kept separate are fused together, occurs when the unconscious permeates the conscious resulting in a feeling of repulsion and shame.²⁷ One can make conspicuous connections between Co-presence and the abject and the grotesque, particularly its composite nature. Co-presence similarly supports the idea that sex and fetish are also considered part of the grotesque. Again, relating to the idea of the taboo and the human desire to rebel.

4. The Grotesque in Performance art

Carolee Schneemann was an American artist, who began her career as a painter of the abstract expressionist style, but abandoned it early on for performance and installation art. She associated with some of the greatest artists and thinkers of the time including Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, George Brecht and Robert Morris. She began working in what she called “kinetic theater.”²⁸ While she is most well known for these performances, she has explored collage, assemblage, film, and photograph. By the mid 1960s, Schneemann had established herself as performance artist concerned with challenging taboos and embracing feminist perspectives with works such as *Meat Joy* and her film *Fuses*. Through the 1970s, she collaborated with Fluxus, Performance and Happenings artists, continuing her exploration of the body as the medium of the work and considering feminist concepts with works such as *Up To And Including Her Limits* and perhaps her most well known work- *Interior scroll*. Schneemann is celebrated as a pioneer of feminist art and her handling of the body through her performances, filmmaking, and photography has been praised for decades as revolutionary.

Carolee Schneemann’s *Meat Joy* (Fig. 3) was a performance piece originally put on in Paris, then in New York in 1964 which involved eight participants, including Schneemann, naked, covered in paint and other materials.



Figure 3- Carolee Schneemann, Still from *Meat Joy*, 1964, Paris

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/feminist-performance-artist-carolee-schneemann-dies-79-180971680/>

They crawled and rolled around, engaging with each other and raw fish and poultry in a number of ways. This work is only documented in photographs and in a series of video clips from both performances, put together by Schneemann to convey, as best as possible, the experience of the work. When asked about this iconic work in an interview with *Hyperallergic*, Schneemann noted “My room was directly above a fragrant fish market and I hung a recorder out my window to capture all the cries of the vendors. This would become part of the soundtrack for the performance. The visceral erotic aspect to the work relates to lived experience, and many find disturbing what should be delicious and splendid.”²⁹ She goes on to describe the piece as “an erotic rite — excessive, indulgent, a celebration of flesh as material: raw fish, chicken, sausages, wet paint … shifting and turning among tenderness, wildness, precision, abandon; qualities that could at any moment be sensual, comic, joyous, repellent.”³⁰ The final list of adjectives makes evident the connection between this work and the grotesque as it highlights contradictory experiences.

The movement and attention on the body as a medium in this work furthermore speaks to the connection between the grotesque and physicality/sexuality. The presence of multiple bodies, meat, and paint combined with the implied sexual activity of rubbing is evidence of the influence of Freudian concepts in Schneemann’s work and shows an attempt to make the viewer uncomfortable by combining the familiar human body with what they think of as primal

and taboo. Kristeva's definition of the abject as lacking "identity, system, order" is particularly applicable to this work. In the chaos of the performance, one loses their ability to identify performers as individuals; human bodies become just as much meat as the raw fish and poultry surrounding them. The aforementioned concept of Cartesian dualism becomes particularly important here. The performers bodies are separated from their mind and the performance becomes a moving composite as lines between human and animal become blurred.

Like Schneemann, French artist ORLAN has spent her career using her body to create an ongoing composite. She has become internationally renowned for her performances, sculptures, photographs, and videos using scientific and medical techniques like surgery and biogenetics to create poignant, grotesque, and often humorous works³¹. ORLAN's series of surgery performances called *La réincarnation de Sainte-Orlan* began with an exhibition titled *Imaginary Generic: Successful Operations* (1990) which outlined her plans, through a series of digital renderings, to transform her appearance to what she considered the epitome of western beauty, borrowing the chin of Sandro Botticelli's Venus in *The Birth of Venus*, the nose of François Pascal Simon Gérard's Psyche in *Le premier baisser de l'amour à Psyche*, the eyes of Diana in the anonymous school-of-Fontainebleau sculpture *Diane Chasseresse*, the lips of Gustave Moreau's Europa in *L'enlèvement d'Europe*, and the brow of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (Fig. 4).



Figure 4- Orlan, Orlan in front of digital rendering from *Imaginary Generic: Successful Operations*, 1990, New York
http://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/courses/fa/htm/fa_ck_orlan_1.htm

ORLAN explained why she chose these specific characteristics saying "I constructed my self-portrait by mixing... representations of goddesses from Greek mythology: chosen not for the canons of beauty they are supposed to represent, but for their histories...These representations of feminine personages have served as an inspiration to me and are there deep beneath my work in a symbolic manner. In this way, their images can resurface in works that I produce, with regard to their histories."³² This quote alludes to the significance of the composite nature of this work, thinking about this performance as a composite of minds and intellectual qualities represented through a physical composite of body parts. This perspective is connected to the aforementioned concept of mind/body dualism and its presence in the grotesque.

The first of the surgeries, titled *Art Charnel*, was performed two months after this initial exhibition. This performance took place in a room decorated with plastic flowers and a photo of ORLAN as Botticelli's Venus among other props. After the surgery, the fat was stored in resin reliquaries modeled after the ORLAN's arms and legs, drawing on the symbolism and mysticism of the Catholic tradition. The second surgery was performed just days later. During this performance, ORLAN read excerpts from the works of two well known French Philosophers and Theorists: Lemoine-Luccioni's *La robe* and Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. These texts are particularly significant to ORLAN's work as they both discuss the female body in relation to the abject and the grotesque. As she read, a cosmetic surgeon transformed her chin into one modeled after Botticelli's Venus. The third operation was performed later that year. ORLAN was unconscious as the surgeon performed liposuction on the legs and ankles and worked on the face and eyelids. The operating room was decorated with the correspondence between ORLAN and the surgeons who refused to participate in the performance as well as a video of the previous surgery projected onto the operating table. The fourth surgery, entitled *Opération réussie* (Successful Operation) (Fig. 5), the surgeon transformed ORLAN's lips into those of Moreau's Europa. The surgery was performed in gaudy silver costumes amongst bowls overflowing with fruits and lobsters and a larger-than-life image of ORLAN draped in white, suggesting opulence, decadence, and beauty.



Figure 5 - Orlan, Still from 4th Surgery-Performance *Successful Surgery*, 1991, New York
<http://www.orlan.eu/works/performance-2/>

ORLAN had one breast exposed during the surgery, ushering back to the Christian Madonna and child icon. As scholar Jill O'brien noted, "The images that she created of herself as Saint Orlan emphasized the profanity of the sacred—the female image split into Madonna and whore."³³ This juxtaposition is important when considering ORLAN's work in the context of the grotesque, particularly when one considers feminist theory and the semiotics of the female body as representing one of these two archetypes. The imagery of the feminine body either representing the chastity and purity of Mary or the sin and temptation of the seductress Eve. The presence of Christian imagery and language throughout this series of works is significant as it offers a unique juxtaposition of framing a grotesque performance in the context of the divine. Her language surrounding her work is particularly important- referring to herself as Sainte Orlan and titles such as *Omnipresence* and the *Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* suggesting her divinity.

The Fifth operation, entitled *The Cloak of Harlequin*, was performed in jester costume. The fat taken during the liposuction of the thighs and feet were then again turned into reliquaries that were placed in glass with an engraved text by French philosopher Michel Serres. One quote from this text is especially significant in understanding the layered meaning of the performance.

[W]hat could the common freak, that ambidextrous, mestizo hermaphrodite, now show us beneath his skin? Of course: his flesh and blood. Science refers to organs, functions, cells and molecules, ultimately admitting that, in the end, lab people never talk about "life" any more; indeed, science never even refers to "flesh," which precisely entails a mixture in a specific site of the body, a here and now of muscle and blood, of skin and hair, of bones and nerves, and various functions. "Flesh" recombines" what specialized science dissects³⁴

This text speaks on the idea of medical objectification which is rooted in the acceptance of cartesian dualism and the separation of individual body parts from life. Orlan's allusion to the historical idea of surgical theater is present here, offering an interesting discussion on our fascination with the body in this medical context. The sixth operation was liposuction on the face and belly, performed in an operating room decorated with three skulls, perhaps used as a symbol of the inevitability of death combined with the symbolism associated with the number three as a holy number in Christianity. The seventh surgery titled *Omnipresence* (Fig. 6) is the most well known of the surgery performances and resulted in the most dramatic of the transformation.



Figure 6- Orlan, Stille from th Surgery-Performance *Omnipresence*, 1993, New York
<http://www.orlan.eu/works/photo-2/>

This performance was broadcasted live in fifteen galleries internationally, as Orlan underwent intense facial surgery while staying completely conscious and answering questions from audience members as they were beamed in from the various exhibition locations. This surgery performance stands out from the six previous performance pieces as it was the first one to be performed live rather than recorded and encouraged interaction from the viewer. *Omnipresence* allowed Orlan to “reclaim the female body from its passive status in Western art history, actively turning hers, as the art object itself, into a ‘site of public debate’”³⁵ This is the quality of the grotesque that is so appealing in contemporary art, especially for women artists- it is an aesthetic that allows for an exploration of the body as an art subject or medium, but one controlled by the subject itself.

ORLAN’s work holds so many nuances that add to its significance and impact on the viewer. She is not only creating a composite with her own body, but a composite of imagery and connotations formed in the props used in the operating room, the texts she reads, and the language she uses when referring to her work. There are endless layers of meaning to this collection of performances, one of these being the grotesque. Orlan makes use of the grotesque to offer a discussion on vanity and standards of beauty and taste in the art world and cosmetics, but also a discussion of the semiotics of the female body and feminist theory. As art historian Jill O’Bryan put it,

Throughout all of Orlan’s work this balancing act exists: on one hand, there is the banality of narcissism—the artist is desperate to be recognized as such; her body and face are the sole objets d’art. On the other hand, the artist’s body performs an iconic political critique by troping male-made, and male-scaled, Western art and art history. This dichotomy has appeared before in the work of artists scrambling through the nexus between individuality and societal / art historical molds that shape “woman’s body.”³⁶

ORLAN offers her body as a subject of discussion on these paradigms, inviting the viewer to consider the body in this nuanced way.

5. The Grotesque and the Racialized Body

Doreen Garner is a young, contemporary artist whose work is relevant to discussions on the gendered/racialized body and the grotesque. She was born in Philadelphia in 1986. Upon graduation, she got a BFA in glass at Tyler School of Art at Temple University and continued to get an MFA in glass at Rhode Island School of Design. She went on to develop her uniquely grotesque style and creates works using a variety of mediums. While Garner is most well-known for her sculptures, she also creates performance/video works and is a trained tattoo artist. Her work has been exhibited

at a number of renowned museums and galleries around the world, forcing viewers to confront biases and privileges in overt and often uncomfortable ways.³⁷

Doreen Garner's *Neo (Plasm)* (Fig. 7) was made in 2015 and is a teardrop shaped, multimedia sculpture that is intended to be hung from the ceiling.



Figure 7- Doreen Garner, *Neo (Plasm)*, 2015, multimedia sculpture, 24"x24"x36", Brooklyn NY
<http://www.doreengarner.com/abjection/eo10e6m8ueglrsal7n9z2ctgj2h4om>

It is around two feet by two feet by three feet at its largest points. It consists of a wide range of materials including glass, polyester fiber, Swarovski crystals, condoms, hair weave, pearls, glitter, polyurethane, urethane plastic, beads, petroleum jelly, hair ballies, zip ties, and epoxy putty. These materials are used to form a composite mass of natural forms with differing textures. The most common colors present in this work are red, black, yellow, brown, pink, and white. There are bits of shiny metallic material that instantly catch the eye of the viewer. Some of the materials are held back with sheets of clear plastic, allowing the viewer to see the miscellany within. The contents within the plastic are densely packed and ambiguous, urging the viewer to take a closer look. Outside the plastic pockets are circular, decorative patterns created using a collection of beads, pearls, and crystals that are reminiscent of nipples. These breast-like forms are surrounded by a web of more multicolored pearls, crystals, hair, and other objects. Sharp, black objects protrude from the hanging mass, that is otherwise made up of curvilinear shapes. The work is lit directly from the front, casting a shadow on the wall behind.

Garner's use of the grotesque aesthetic in *Neo (Plasm)* is incredibly apparent and effective, due to the composite nature of the mass. Harphams definition of the grotesque as a "non-thing" is applicable here, as there are no clear and identifiable elements of this work, only hints of familiarity. The use of synthetic materials making up curvilinear and natural looking forms contribute to the grotesque-ness of this work, confounding the viewer further. The likeness to specific, sexualized parts of the female body are significant in this work because it speaks to the objectification of that body, again separating the body parts from life and playing into the aforementioned dualism idea. Garner's use of sexualized body imagery doesn't erase the objectification of the feminine body, but allows her to control the way in which those body parts are objectified, urging the viewer to confront the connotation and visual baggage that exists in their own psyche.

One of the most notable exhibitions of Garner's career thus far was the 2017 installation entitled *White Man on a Pedestal*. This show was a collection of works centered around the story of Dr. J. Marion Sims. Known as the father of modern Gynecology, Sims was one of the most decorated American surgeons of his time. His career was built on his development of vesicovaginal fistula repair, however he was only able to make such advances by operating on female slaves. These women underwent surgery after surgery without anesthesia, despite the fact that it was widely used by surgeons by this time. One of the fourteen slaves Sims operated on named Anarcha endured thirty attempted repairs before the first successful surgery was reported³⁸. J. Marion Sims and his discoveries continued to be widely celebrated until the civil rights movement and it was not until recently that his representation in the science community and the monuments dedicated to him were put under debate. Garner's exhibition made use of the grotesque aesthetic and the body to leave a lasting impression on the viewer. When interviewed about this exhibition Garner commented

“I try to create a traumatic experience. I want the Audience to walk away feeling like they can’t unsee what they just saw, something that is burned in and lasts, and you can never get rid of it.”³⁹ Garner’s handling of the body is what makes these works so effective in creating this intended response and so evidently grotesque.

Doreen Garner’s *Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting* (Fig. 8) is a multi-media sculpture that was part of the *White Man on a Pedestal* exhibition.



Figure 8- Doreen Garner, *Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting*, 2017, multimedia sculpture, 8'x8'x8',
Brooklyn NY
<http://www.doreengarner.com/present>

It consists of a number of representations of composite and severed human body parts that hang from an eight by eight foot metal frame that was attached to the ceiling of the exhibition space. These forms are hung at different heights using metal hooks that may remind the viewer of hanging slabs of meat at a butcher’s shop and are hung at a few feet above the floor, but not at such a height that the viewer could walk underneath. Garner makes use of silicone to mimic the look and texture of human flesh. She uses insulation foam, glass beads, and fiberglass insulation to represent the organs, muscle and fat underneath the skin which further emphasises the look of hanging meat. This underside of the hanging pieces has a lot of variety in texture and color, which urges the viewer to take a closer look. The “skin” varies in color, but none of the pieces are intended to represent white skin. Silicone Representations of hands, breasts, torsos, buttocks, and legs form these sculptures, but no faces are displayed. The “skin” is pulled, wrinkled, and folded as it is sewn to other pieces of “skin” to create the composite masses. Across the surface of all the hanging pieces are hundreds of tiny steel pins protruding from the silicone. These pins do not obscure the material underneath, but they change the texture of the sculpture. Lights attached to the metal support framing illuminate the sculpture from above.

Garner is able to speak on issues related to bodily autonomy, race, and gender in a very nuanced and effective way through her sculptures. In an interview Garner said “Sculpting trauma means creating a work that no one will be able to forget. I want to convey these Black women’s experiences and traumas to viewers, to create a lasting impression.”⁴⁰ Garner makes use of the grotesque aesthetic because it helps achieve this particular, intended response from the viewer. The composite nature of the hanging masses is the most evidently grotesque feature of this work and the viewer is immediately disoriented and confused upon viewing these hanging forms. They cannot categorize them because they are made up parts that do not go together. Garner knows that these forms will produce a feeling of disgust in the viewer, which will force them to consider the body, especially marginalized bodies. The use of the meat hooks and sense of display speaks to the idea of the male gaze and the objectification of black female bodies. When the viewer first encounters this work, these forms are immediately identified as dehumanized masses. Yet, upon further investigation one realizes that these are not, in fact, representations of meat, but representations of human body parts. The clean stainless steel frame and fluorescent light bulbs are reminiscent of a sterile, almost medical environment speaking to the medical objectification of black bodies, a motif that is present throughout Garner’s body of work. Medical imagery lends itself to the discussion of the grotesque as it combines the motif of the body as grotesque, within the rational, intellectual context of science. This juxtaposition is particularly effective from a feminist perspective because it makes evident the objectification present in medical circles, which is different but equally as damaging as sexual objectification.

Purge (Fig. 9), another noteworthy piece from the *White man on a pedestal* exhibition was a performance piece in which Garner, along with other black women performers, conducted a vesicovaginal fistula repair on silicone skin cast of J. Marion Sims body based on the bronze statue that was formerly displayed in central park.



Figure 9- Doreen Garner, Still from *Purge*, 2017, Performance, Brooklyn NY
<https://art21.org/gallery/doreen-garner-artwork-survey/#13>

Sage burned on stainless steel tables holding surgical instruments, gauze, and bottles of alcohol for sterilization as the performers, clad in white aprons, carefully cut into the silicone mold. An endoscope camera was inserted into the cast and the video was projected onto the wall behind the performers to allow the audience to see every step in the procedure. Harsh white light lit the surgical table in the otherwise dark room highlighting the white aprons as they were slowly stained throughout the performance with fake blood from the silicone body. When the surgery was complete, the performers lifted the silicone skin cast in unison and placed it in a wooden casket-like box and exited the space.

Like her sculptures, Garner's *Purge* performance makes use of the body as a motif of the grotesque, but in an entirely different way. Like Orlan, Garner plays into the idea of surgical theater and medical objectification, this time commenting on the racialized connotations of this objectification. In an interview Garner commented that "When you think about ways that black people have been used in this country, it does just come down to the body. Extra hands to do tasks, people to take out your anger and frustration on, people to do experiments on, just disposable bodies."⁴¹ This quote poignantly elucidates why the use of the body is so effective in modern grotesque aesthetic as a form of protest for the marginalized.

6. The Importance of Material/Medium in the Grotesque Aesthetic

Within the contemporary grotesque, material is often used to accentuate the composite or corporeal nature of a work. Jenny Saville is a Cambridge, UK born contemporary artist who has been appointed a Royal Academician from the Royal Academy of the Arts in London. She was part of the iconic 1990s artist group Young British Artist, and is well known for her skillfully rendered large scale nudes. She got her BFA from Glasgow School of Art and also spent some time at the University of Cincinnati. Her most significant exhibitions include *Young British Artists III*, Saatchi Gallery, London (1994), *Contemporary British Art '96*, Museum of Kalmar, Stockholm (1996) and perhaps the most notable: *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, Royal Academy of Arts, London (1997).⁴² This show was one of the most controversial and groundbreaking exhibitions of the time, featuring Throughout Saville's career she has been working towards reviving what was an almost dead genre: the female nude. She has adapted this kind of work for the modern audience and today her work demands the steepest prices among living female artists and she is considered one of the greatest painters of our time.⁴³

Jenny Saville's *Hybrid* (Fig. 10), featured in the 1997 *Sensation* exhibition, is a nine by seven foot oil painting.



Figure 10- Jenny Saville, *Hybrid*, 1997, oil on canvas, 108"x84" , Saatchi Gallery
<https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/jennysaville>

It is a depiction of a composite female nude using six segments from different bodies put together to create one whole nude. Where one segment ends and another begins is clearly differentiated by varying skin tone and body types. The segments are geometric shapes that contrast with the general curvilinear forms of the nude bodies. All the segments depict Caucasian bodies, but the skin tones range from a yellow-beige to pink to an almost greenish brown to a bluish purple. There is a white background across all the segments, but it ranges from cooler white in the top sections to a warmer white at the bottom. Within each section there is also a lot of variation in color which makes the body parts look more volumetric and fleshy. The painting begins at the shoulders, so there is no depiction of a head or face. It is evident that the segments depict bodies at different ages. The bottom section shows a wrinkly, reddish pink hand that matches the bluish spider veins on the hip. This contrasts with the top section that features a round breast and smooth, youthful skin. The segments do not line up perfectly because the bodies are so different. This is particularly evident since the left and right breast fall at different heights on the painting. The left shoulder does not line up with the left arm and the left hip does not line up with the rest of the hip. On the right side this inconsistency is less obvious. What is interesting, however, is that the right hand seems to go beyond the segment it is assigned to. The fingertips continue from one segment into the next without changing color or shape. Another interesting aspect of this hand is that there is a ring on the middle finger. Since the ring is not on the ring finger, one can infer that it is not intended to be a wedding band. If the viewer takes a closer look, they can see that the lines that separate the sections are fuzzy and irregular and bits of paint have smeared from one intended segment to the next. This adds to the almost pixelated look that the work has.

Material and process play a particularly important role in this work as grotesque. As Scholar Maria Joscelyne Castaneda described, "Saville pieces body parts together through the viscosity of paint equated with flesh, which is both materially dense and malleable. Interested in flesh more than creating a realistic portrayal of the female body, Saville treats the body as a site of sensations."⁴⁴ This focus on sensations is significant as it separates the subject from humanity, into simply body and flesh, playing into the dualism associated with the grotesque. The thickness of the paint and the way it is applied gives the work a tactile property further contributing to its grotesque nature because it underlines the sensational fleshiness of the composite body. This work is unique because its composite nature is not obvious at first glance. Casenda noted

Cropped at the legs or arms, and at times missing their heads, Saville's fragmented bodies may be all-encompassing in scale, but they are never seen as a whole. Fragmenting the body may relate to her artistic process: she photographs parts of the model's bodies instead of working in the studio directly from the model. Her documentary material, thus, is already the body in bits and pieces ... The enlarged partial body both intensifies scale, suggesting an infinite body that cannot be contained, and estranges the body, keeping it from ever being known in its entirety.⁴⁵

The use of the grotesque aesthetic in Saville's work is effective as a rejection of the previous conventions of the female nude. There is no attempt to depict a body that is whole or pure, it is simply a presentation of flesh in a very

confrontational way. There is no hint of sexuality, beauty, or even identity. It is a non-thing, a collection of body parts separated from life. In presenting the body in this way, Saville is able to reclaim the subject from its previous status as an object of titillation.

Like Saville, Wangechi Mutu's material and process is what makes her work so transparently grotesque. Mutu is a contemporary, Kenyan-born artist who works in a variety of media including collage, video, and sculpture. Her work explores many different themes including femininity, identity, and the lines between fiction and truth. One can see the influences of her interest in the historical, social and political experiences on the African continent, which makes her work so significant in the increasingly globalized art world. Wangechi Mutu moved to Wales at seventeen to study at an international school. After graduation she moved to the United States and got a BFA from The Cooper Union, then an MFA from Yale. Her work has been exhibited at renowned galleries and museums, including San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Tate Modern in London, Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels, the Studio Museum in Harlem in New York, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.⁴⁶ Wangechi Mutu's *Fibroid Tumors of the Uterus* is part of a twelve -work series of mixed media collages titled *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* (Fig. 11) created in 2006.



Figure 11- Wangechi Mutu, *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* (12 works), 2006, multimedia collage, Saatchi Gallery

https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/wangechi_mutu_histology_of_the_different_usa_today.htm

The first layer of the collage is a torn page from a medical compendium with a scientific diagram of a uterus and the composition is centered on this page. At the top of the journal page is the title "Fibroid Tumor of the Uterus." Below that, in all caps and in bold font, is the name "(Cruveilhier)". In the left corner is "Sect. 1" in a curvy italicized font and in the right corner is "Tab. XXXI." The inclusion of these page headers reminds the viewer that the artist is using pages from a real medical compendium and emphasizes the scientific/academic aesthetic.

Below the headers is a black and white diagram of the aforementioned uterine tumor. The representation of this tumor consists of round corporeal shapes and curvilinear lines. In the left upper corner of the diagram is a heart-shaped form that is split into two bean-like shapes that are filled in with branching vessel-like shading. Surrounding the heart-shaped form is darker shading that makes it look more volumetric. Another, smaller heart-shaped form fills the top right corner of the composition. This form has yellow and brown shading that is absent in the form on the left, however, like the form on the left it is split into two round shapes. The base of the form leads into a narrow tube-like form that continues down into the center of the composition. Splitting the two top forms is what appears to be pieces of ripped, black paper, spaced about an inch apart that cascade diagonally across the composition, from the top left to the bottom right, in a c-shaped curve. This line guides the eye down to a third heart shaped form with less shading detail. Surrounding this shape are other vein and tube-like shapes from the medical diagram, shaded to show depth. The three aforementioned forms, along with the line of ripped pieces curve around the focal point of the work, which is an abstracted representation of a human face. The majority of the rest of the diagram is covered with collaged images from different magazines or books. What appears to be an upside-down image of aviator sunglasses are indications that this is a representation of a face. On top of the image of sunglasses are two miss-matched eyes. The eye on the left is partially open while the right eye is closed and has an eyebrow included. Both eyes read as feminine due to the makeup on the lashes and eyelids. Between these two eyes is an image of what appears to be a woman's bent leg with a strappy shoe and painted toenails, that indicates the nose of this composite face. Right below the leg is a cut-out

image of a mouth with pursed lips, which lies right above a shaded round form from the original medical journal diagram. This round form is reminiscent of a chin, adding to the facial connotations.

This work could be interpreted in a number of ways. One theme that is evident throughout the entire series is the imagery of women's bodies being transformed into grotesque and composite in figures. The use of a medical compendium on Uterine Tumors further connects to the idea of the grotesque because these tumors are both natural and unnatural. They are foreign growths that are often unseen and unknown. As Mutu stated in an interview "So these pictures of heads and faces are really about trying to locate myself within this imposed idea of being alien, from another place, coming out of this desire to find myself and find ways to describe me, a foreign national, a female from upcountry but transplanted."⁴⁷ It furthers the idea of an alien and malignant growths by personifying the forms on these diagrams. These personifications are not animal or human, but something in between, which is why this work so perfectly exemplifies the grotesque. Like Doreen Garner and ORLAN, Wangechi Mutu uses medical imagery, making use of the connection between the human body and the grotesque. This series explores the connection between the feminine body and the grotesque by using imagery of female reproductive organs, again separating specific feminine body parts from life, playing into the gendered concept of cartesian dualism, and making use of the medical imagery motif present in the grotesque. Mutu's use of the collage is particularly effective because it is an art form that lends itself to conveying layered connotations and meanings, while also being inherently composite.

7. Conclusion

After considering the contemporary grotesque in combination with feminist theory, one can see why contemporary artists would make use of this aesthetic. Even from its origins in Nero's palace, the grotesque has been a haven for the outsider, a space where the alien and absurd are explored and celebrated. It is apparent why this aesthetic has been adopted by those trying to discuss issues of gender and race. As Connolly put it "The grotesque's focus on the body and its processes brings both comic relief and a sense of empathy in a cybernetic age. And perhaps the most compelling quality of the grotesque is its transformative character. In a time when existing paradigms appear shopworn, more obfuscating than revealing, the grotesque's urge to turn the world upside down and to play among the boundaries is infectious."⁴⁸ The connotations of the grotesque allow for contemporary female artists to reclaim the body from the objectified status that it has held in art history, while also rejecting standards of beauty and the paradigms surrounding sexuality and physicality. It allows for an embrace of the alien and the marginalized, and at the same time it offers nuanced discussions on concepts of identity, death, and the gendered/racialized body. Through the grotesque, the artist and sometimes the viewer, are able to take ownership of the body and in the process of making themselves or their audience vulnerable, disgusted, or uncomfortable they are challenging the forces that marginalized them and objectified them, taking back the autonomy that was stolen from them.

8. Endnotes

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