AFTER MUYBRIDGE: BECOMING UNKNOWN

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ABSTRACT

This thesis paper is in support of the exhibition, *After Muybridge: Becoming Unknown,* and examines the material and conceptual approaches to my work with drawing, animation and installation. The paper begins by looking at *figures* (both human and animal) as a central image, and a means through which I explore the relationship between corporeality and subjectivity. It looks specifically at experiences of motherhood, both cultural and autobiographical, and how they might be transcribed/transfigured through the language of drawing and animation. Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies provide a starting point for exploring the animated figure. His representations of Victorian women as domestic labourers are deconstructed through my artwork, and this thesis paper details the processes carried out in the studio over the course of two years. The artworks described here consist of both drawing-based works, created through a process of cutting, collaging and employing traditional and non-traditional drawing and painting materials, and, a video projection of animated drawings. My thesis exhibition brings these sympathetic media together—reimagining the female body and identity, and, creating more porous boundaries between human and animal bodies, domestic and wild spaces, animate and inanimate figures.

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a world bedeviled by a desire to make certain what is uncertain, to know what is unknowable, to turn the flight across the sky into the roast upon the plate.
- Rebecca Solnit

Coherence is mutilation. I want disorder.
- Clarice Lispector

Psychoanalysis gets interesting when it shifts the focus from making us more intelligible to ourselves to helping us become more curious about how strange we really are. And so, I would argue, does art.
- Maggie Nelson

Drawing makes the ineffable visible. It makes possible a kind of knowing that lies outside of language. It accesses that which is both strange to us, but also strangely familiar. It hovers between these two poles and reminds us that meaning cannot be fixed, but is constantly in flux and forever mutating. My work makes connections to the contemporary language of drawing, as well as to the prehistoric language of drawing pictures on the walls of caves and cliff faces. For me, making a mark on the page is a bridge to the past, to those first marks, and a gesture towards the future, towards the discovery of something I don't know yet. My drawings refer directly to the body. I make multiple drawings and collage them together or arrange them in precise configurations or invented miniature worlds. My drawing practice is more akin to filmmaking, in that I am more interested in mobile parts and montage than a single picture. I am constantly experimenting with traditional and non-traditional drawing materials, often combining unlikely, even repellant and unmanageable substances like oil, ink, dishwashing soap, wax and cayenne pepper. Each drawing goes through numerous stages of a process whereby, once it is made, I cut it up into fragments, draw back into it with other materials, juxtapose it with other drawings, test different sequences and arrangements. My open approach to working with these drawings led to experiments with making animations on video. I wanted the animations to capture something of my drawing practice, rather than mimic classical animation techniques. Because I remain compelled by the first drawings in human history, in order to teach myself how to make animations, it made sense to go to the primary source, to the originator of the animated image, Eadweard Muybridge.

Muybridge's project folded into my own and became a part of my work's form and content. My work foregrounds the female figure so it was only natural that I gravitated to his proto-cinematic sequences of Victorian women. Muybridge's still photographs, produced over a century ago, provoked me—they set in motion a range of

conflicted thoughts, emotions, words and drawings. Through both his images, and his role as an image maker, I was compelled to grapple with an enduring set of connected questions in my own work: How can I subvert the analytical gaze and represent women's bodies in a way that imbues them with subjectivity and agency? How can I work with taboo images and bring hidden desires, both delicate and monstrous, to the fore? How can I make the familiar strange or tap the uncanny, in order to see and feel more vividly, freed from some of the constraints of received cultural opinions?

My thesis paper will look at the different facets of my practice over the last two years. I describe some of my first feminist influences—visual artists, poets, filmmakers, theorists—and describe the new meaning they have for me now, as a mother. I will delve briefly into theories of new materialism which resonated with me in thinking about bodies, especially maternal bodies as lively agents, inherently wild, hovering between object and subject. I will then relate, in detail, my experiments with a range of processes, materials and ideas over the course of the last two years. Finally, I will conclude with a description of my exhibition and a sequence of final thoughts on my drawing and animation practice.

MOTHER LOOP: Text for an animation

Walking at the edge of the sea, I am the edge. I am the sea. Or the lone star traveling years too late? Light never gets there on time. Big bang, a bead of sweat. Ash.

I am your mouth.
Your fist.
I am a wave of rage.

I am giving birth to a fistful of fish. To my grandfather's head. To a glass bottle. To the earth's circumference, a fish. I am the fish, a fist unfolding. I am glass, darkness waiting for a beam of light. Too late--I am an old sea witch arrested for being a witch. Too old, living at the edge. For coming. For coming too little? Too late. Too often.

What if I touched you the way the sun is touching moss, the way moss is touching gingko. The way a hurricane touches a trailer park, or a snake touches stone. The way oil touches water.

The summer air snakes up your shirt and touches your nipples. I am touching you the way this cloud touches that cloud. Do clouds touch? I don't know where this cloud starts and the next.

You are a cloud like a bird… gingko, then a wolf, then a plastic bottle. You are a cloud that doesn't have a name, a machine cloud. You are a child who wonders about the passage of time. Where did I put it? You are a child in an old photograph. You are a child who wants to hold time. You are a child touching birds, who wants a cloud in a box. A fish in a plastic bottle. There is a jump in the box, a genie in the bottle. She cleans clouds.

You are a child who will take a photograph of a cloud in the shape of a bird. You are a child who wants to walk the earth.
You are a child who tells you she will walk around the earth and she will need 2 billion 5600 minutes to do it.
You are a child who has a genie in a plastic bottle

You are a mother who separates light from dark, oil from water, yolk from egg. You are a mother who gives mouth to mouth. Hand to hand. Who lives hand to mouth.
You are a mother whose job is to make time stand still. Like sand stuck in an hourglass.
You are a mother whose child wanted to save the world before she was even born. When her head was between your legs, soft as an overripe peach.

You are a mother who is wearing cloud clothing.
You are a mother who says strange things at dinner parties.
You are a mother who lights up the room.

Between your legs is a galaxy of stars.

Along the shoreline there is no such thing as a shoreline. And yet, there is a line. There is always a line. A line that changes everything, and changes.
The line on the map, the length of a pipeline. You are a mother thinking about your child walking the length of a pipeline. You are a child walking to the ends of the earth, to the end of a pipeline.

Oil touches water where sun touches water where clouds are being made by a machine.

You are a mother walking like an old sea witch. You are a child walking.

Between the lines, between the clouds, on the edge, on the edge. (loop back to the beginning)

WRITING/DRAWING THE BODY

The stories and fairytales I read as a child returned to me when I began reading them to my daughter. I wanted her to enjoy them the way I did and still do: to inhabit those magical worlds but I also found myself wanting to deconstruct and parse their messages: the good girl was always submissive and beautiful, but if she stepped away from traditional feminine characteristics she was met with violence and victimization. I was reminded of my first encounter with the poetry of Anne Sexton in my teenage years. Her book *Transformations* rewrote the Grimm's brothers' fairy tales, recasting the female characters, granting them bawdy and confrontational voices. She applied a feminist psychoanalytic reading to these foundational stories, bringing repressed feelings around gender and sexuality to the fore. Sexton offered a way to revisit these patriarchal texts and inject them with new meaning, offering new roles for girls and women. Her work was revelatory for me, and it lay the path for my own work: the idea that you could visit the past and through an act of imagination, deliver it back to the present, the future even, transformed and shot through with a voice that was full of power and vulnerability.

Shortly after I read Sexton, I read the work of Helene Cixous, amongst other French feminists, and the theory of *écriture féminine*. Helene Cixous was a scholar writing in the first person; she invoked the language of the political manifesto, calling women to disrupt the phallologecentrism of language, to inscribe their bodies into speech and text. In *The Laugh of the Medusa,* she states that a "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies because their sexual pleasure has been repressed and denied expression" (Cixous 1954). She described the body as a liberation vehicle. If women could break away from the patriarchal prison house of language, redefining their subjectivities through writing, they could properly claim the freedom they had been denied. Women could rewrite the logical sentences of normative science by following the rhythms and bodily experiences of pleasure.

Both of these authors were groundbreaking in the way that they wrote about motherhood. For Cixous, motherhood was a worthy and necessary subject, a catalyst, not a hindrance to writing. For Sexton, motherhood was a vexed institution that she chafed against and refigured in the surreal landscape of poetry and myth. I circled back to both writers when I was in the thick of motherhood myself, pregnant then lactating, alone, trying to make a record of this new, anarchic experience. I was trying to make a map, locate myself in unfamiliar territory. I was trying to create a visual language that could foreground the body, this new maternal body, and in doing so bring a shape, however temporary, to an unwieldy self. What happens to language and writing in the face of the anarchic body—

does language have to remain mute about experiences it cannot contain? Poets continue to demonstrate to us that words can be liberated from intelligibility. For me, drawing was the most direct means I had at hand. It was improvisatory, immediate and it could cut, momentarily, into the flow of time. Prior to becoming a mother I travelled, I was on the move or I lived rurally in cabins. I was not domestic by any stretch of imagination. Once I became a mother, I spent most of my time in the confines of my home. While drawing I started to use materials in the kitchen: oil, bleach, soap, baking soda, whatever was at hand, mixing them with India ink, watercolour and charcoal. This appealed to me in the way that I felt I was using the materials of my life to make an image, the way blood or animal fat was used to make a handprint in a cave, or the way a contemporary artist like Jane Antoni uses the vernacular materials associated with woman's lives, their bodies, their labour. I wanted to bring my artist life and my mother life together on a material level. The desire to fuse these disparate identities is something that I enact in the materials and in the process of my drawings. By cutting the drawings up, I engage in the reparative act of fusing them together—creating a new, but still ever-shifting, strange, and strangely familiar identity.

DOMESTIC TROUBLES

The Victorian era in which Eadweard Muybridge was making his photographs was, historically speaking, one of the most socially repressive for women. Muybridge's representations were reflective of his time—the women either performed the banal gestures of domestic labour, sweeping, climbing stairs, hauling water, making beds, or they were cast as titillating entertainers, undressing, dancing and showering with each other. I was interested in the "hysteria" that lay beneath their surface—an inevitable product of their repression.

I started to draw the bodies of the women, one after the other, mapping their contours and in doing so I immediately wanted to liberate them, to render them anew. To make the borders of their bodies porous and mutable, to make their bodies communicate and conjoin. By introducing water, ink and oil, the bodies start to merge and then dematerialize. Once the animations are complete, I cut the figures out, fragment their bodies, so that they can never be made whole again. While Muybridge represented women in socially proscribed roles, my women are bent on destroying their previous roles and finally themselves, subject to an extreme ability to shapeshift and transform, to violate their own boundaries and become dangerous.

I was not working entirely counter to Muybridge's versions of the women he photographed. In many ways I was inspired by the strangeness of his work, the sense that the figures were at once held together by a temporal unity and, at the same time, coming apart. This strangeness comes from the figures and their familiar gestures that have been removed entirely from their context, from the tension between performance and naturalism, and the oscillation between human and animal subjects. Muybridge approached the making of the images as neither scientist, technician nor conventional photographer. He was committed to the process, as Rebecca Solnit describes in her book, *River of Shadows*:

> We call a graceful, harmonious work "composed" and Muybridge's work is "decomposed" or "discomposed"—things are coming apart and you see the seams of reality, of time in them. He's interested in process. He's ok with things, a lot of things, other photographers then were not so excited about, like the way that water looks very strange when you photograph it in a slow exposure... I think he liked things when they were coming apart, when they were strange. (Solnit 61)

It is this coming apart, this making strange that inspired me to work with the Muybridge figures and push their contradictions to the brink, to invent something new.

The first moving images of women in the late 19th century showed them sweeping, making beds, and carrying out the domestic duties of the time. A hundred years later, Chantal Akerman made *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), a film

that was hailed by New York critics as the first masterpiece of the feminine in the history of cinema. Her film examines the domestic routines of a single mother, Jeanne, over three days. We see her washing and cooking potatoes, looking for a lost button, taking a bath—all in real time. Ackerman wanted to use long unedited takes, and bring full attention to a woman's unacknowledged domestic life. The film included everything that was normally left out in the movies and transformed the ordinary into something subtly fluctuating and anxiety-inducing. As film critic B. Ruby Rich said "never before was the materiality of woman's time in the home rendered so viscerally... She invents a new language capable of transmitting truths previously unspoken" (Wakeman 4).

The work of Chantal Akerman had a big impact on me in my 20s—hers was one of the first avant-garde films that spoke directly to my own experience. I watched *Jeanne Dielman* again two years ago, shortly after Akerman died. It was more disturbing to watch now that I was a single mother, bound by the daily rituals of domestic life, trying to make ends meet. I noticed a tenderness in the way the film was shot; Akerman maintains respectful distance throughout the film and seems to be saying all of this counts, all the banal details and minutiae of a mother's life. It all matters and needs to be witnessed.

I cannot help drawing the Muybridge figures, the prototype of the feminine in cinema, and filtering them through Akerman's films. Muybridge was speeding up time, and Akerman was making time achingly real and slow. They both, in a sense, declared that women's domestic lives were the stuff of art. Whereas Muybridge was more interested in women as an object of his photographic experiments, Ackerman wanted to respect the demands and rituals of domestic life and, at the same time, reveal their ruinous effect. Jeanne Dielman is a prostitute, discreetly having sex with men in her bedroom when her son is at school. Beneath the surface of the deliberately slow rhythms, claustrophobic interiors and banal routines is a growing sense of anxiety and frustration which leads to a violent act, the quietly executed stabbing of her client.

In my drawings, I depict female bodies in domestic tableaus. I make explicit what lies beneath the surface of the ordinary. I show what happens when the repressed impulses and desires erupt in domestic spaces. The drawings point to violence but also to something beautiful and liberatory.

VITAL SIGNS/ MATERIALITIES

If my art practice is rooted in the female subjectivities created by Sexton, Cixous and Akerman, it is also responding more directly to my recent reading of philosopher Jane Bennett's work. Bennett delves deeper into the multitudinous connections between bodies and subjectivities. Noting Michel Foucault's assertion that subjectivity is a construction, separate from the body, Bennett proposes that bodies are unruly, ever-changing vital materials that can't be separated from concepts like "self" and "thinking." This resonated for me, in particular with my experience of pregnancy and childbirth, when I felt my body asserting itself in ways that felt, at times, alien and strange. At other times, I felt the feral aspect of my body was wholly aligned with a deeper sense of self, one that lay beyond strictures of social expectation and civility. My drawings reflect these very personal experiences and incorporate Bennett's idea that our bodies are lively assemblages, entangled with other materials and affects; they cannot be known except in relation to the ever-changing state of "thingness" or thing power that surrounds and intersects with them. She states that our apprehension of the phenomenological world and our place in it occurs across a lateral field of relationships.

Bennett creates a case for "thing power materialism" with the intention of establishing an ethics of ecology. In other words, if we cultivate a connection to all material, human and non-human elements, if we are susceptible to their affects and dispositions, it becomes impossible to exist within and maintain hierarchies in which humans are at the top and animals, vegetables, minerals, and human-made objects exist merely to be dominated and controlled at will. Bennett hopes that an enhanced receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us will enable wiser, more ethical interventions. She sees the seed of thing power in Thoreau's idea of "the Wild" as other, as a not-quite human force that has the potential to alter us if we cultivate attunement, receptivity, and an open perceptual framing. Bennett takes from Thoreau the discipline of "looking always at what is to be seen", and to be "surprised by what one sees" (Jane Bennett 32).

How can we be attuned to the "other" in a way that is empathetic yet ethical in our acknowledgment of difference, of gaps that can't be bridged? This is a question that Elissa Yukiko Weichbrodt attempts to answer in looking at the work of artists like Janine Antoni and Kiki Smith. She also argues that the body is more than a contested site through which we can examine how political and social ideologies are enacted. The body is not simply a sign or a metaphor, but a vital force of its own, one which produces affect and is not subordinate to, but on par with intellect. Weichbrodt looks at the way a viewer responds empathetically to the artworks of Antoni and Smith,

both of whom deploy a visceral, affective language that speaks directly to the body. Smith's evocation of the abject is one way of unsettling the viewer's boundaries by putting what is private and taboo on display. Her life-sized sculptures use wax, and urine-coloured stains; her drawings of internal organs literally turn the body inside out. Antoni uses everyday, household materials like mascara, lard, soap and lipstick to make her work. She uses her teeth to chisel blocks of chocolate and lard. The affect of her work is undeniable; the viewer has to contend with their own strong visceral responses to break down boundaries—disturbance, repulsion, fear.

While I was pregnant the boundary of public and private opened up in a way that was liberating and unsettling for me. There was this new acknowledgement of my body in public space—strangers felt they could ask me personal questions: how far along was I? Was I having a boy or a girl? Was it my first? Some even took the liberty of touching my pregnant belly. There was also a confusing sense of being made small, reduced to this one function, the maternal function, while other parts of my identity were slowly fading into the background. I felt, like many new mothers and mothers-to-be, caught in the schism of having special status, on the one hand, and feeling dismissed on the other or "disqualified for being too closely tied to the female animal" (MacDonnell 52). Once my baby was born, there was a feeling that I had to contain my body in public space, keep all the flesh and fluids under wraps. A guy drove by and called me a whore when I was openly breastfeeding my baby on bench outside an ice cream store. A woman I met in a mother's group used something called a "modesty shawl" to breastfeed. Could this really be motherhood in the 21st Century?

THE MOTHER OF CULTURAL MOTHERS

As an artist, I feel most connected to a long lineage of second-wave feminist artists from the 60s and 70s. Nancy Spero, Carolee Schneeman and Kiki Smith, to name a few, but the artist I feel the most enduring affinity with is Louise Bourgeois. When I was 15 years old my grandmother asked me if I had seen Bourgeois' work. I had made a little book of drawings and I'm guessing that she saw something in my rendering of the body that brought Bourgeois to mind. It wasn't until years later that I caught a glimpse of her work again, while reading a Lucy Lippard book in university, which featured a Bourgeois drawing on the cover: it was entitled *Femme Maison*. The woman is standing tall and upright, strong, but at the same time, there is a sense that she might be suffocating. Home was a safe enclosure and home was as also a trap. Bourgeois made this in the 1940s when she had three children and was struggling to continue making art.

A few years later, my grandmother gave me *Deconstruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father* (1998) for my birthday, and it became a very important book for me—it was filled with Bourgeois' own writing about her art, her childhood, and familial trauma. Bourgeois writes that her impulse for making work comes from wanting to control and impose order on things—her history, her relationships, her anxieties and desires—but she recognizes, in a way that prefigures the ideas of philosopher like Jane Bennett, that she cannot control her processes or her materials, and that often the work she finishes feels at odds with her intentions.

Bourgeois describes her process in concrete terms. She works repeatedly with a singular image like *Femme Maison*, for instance, and over time it changes: tiny windows start to appear, the house begins to open up to the world. Bourgeois mentions this as though she were surprised, as if windows appeared of their own volition, again summoning the idea that the artist is not entirely in control of the process. She is also preoccupied with changing the formal arrangements of her work to create new relationships, or confrontations. By giving her work what she calls "a minimum base of immobility" (Bourgeois 106), she frees it from ever being fixed to one entry point or meaning.

I relate strongly to Bourgeois' methods and processes, the repetition, and the sense that there is a complicated tension between control and freedom, the idea that our intentions can swerve in surprising ways or be entirely thwarted. For me, this is when art-making gets interesting and feels alive, when I get myself out of the way and submit to what Bourgeois might call magic, drama, or strangeness. Ultimately for Bourgeois, the "core of the original impulse" is difficult to describe; it is to be found in the work itself. She has said that she has "three frames of reference… my mother and father… my own experience… and the frame of reference of my children. The three

are stuck together" (Bourgeois 106). With the birth of her children, Bourgeois felt a profound sense of gratitude but was overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy. She relived the birth experience in her art again and again, especially in the last ten years of her life. It makes a kind of poetic sense that, as she approached death, she would feel compelled to return to the primal imagery of birth and try to create a language, to make sense of an experience that is at once a fecund wound and a profound awakening to life.

DRAWING ON ORDINARY MOMENTS: LIFE AND DEATH

Dec. 17, 2007

B. is burning up. She has a fever of 103. I hold her in my arms and her body starts to shake uncontrollably, then goes completely limp. I think she has died, but she comes back to life, like a doll whose battery momentarily short-circuits. I think I can see the heat around her body, like an infra-red picture, a wavering field of red and blue. I bolt out the door into the winter night, in an effort to cool her down. I am wearing a slip, standing on snow-covered porch. I don't know what to do or where to go. I can no longer gauge the temperature of skin or air. I go back inside the house, grab a wool blanket, wrap it around my shoulders, around B. and then I start walking, drifting down the street in a kind of fugue state. A car slows alongside me and a man cranes his neck to take a look, decides I'm not turning tricks and then drives on. I am afraid to go to the hospital for fear that the doctors will declare me an unfit mother and apprehend B. Vulnerability is its own terror.

May 20, 2017.

I am washing the glass shelf for the fridge and as I move to put it back, I slip on the dripping suds and fall hard on the shelf. It shatters. My head whiplashes back and I black out for a moment. When I come to, there is blood splattered all over the floor, blood running down my face and chest. I have shards and splinters of glass in my neck. B. hears the crash and races down the stairs. She shrieks when she sees me; she asks if I'm going to die. No, I say, I'm not going to die, though I am so stunned that I don't know that for sure. But I am conscious enough to assure her that everything is OK. I tell myself that I am still captain of the lifeboat. That even in this wrecked state, I am her lifeboat.

My drawings emerge from these narratives, diary entries, and many more like them. I am interested in how the wavering psychological intensities and bodily intensities, from the mundane to the horrific, might play themselves out—in the space of a frame or a wall. I deliberately fragment the drawings, cut them into pieces, collage them and juxtapose them to test out different narrative possibilities. I want to include a multiplicity of stories, of bodies and voices that collide and cross-pollinate. A sense that they could be snatched momentarily from the flux of life, held together and then released. Like a frame of film, each drawing is a fragment in a "river of phenomenon" (Birnbaum 1998).

Positioning the drawings I make around on the wall, in open arrangements of image clusters and constellations resonates with (and quite plausibly comes from) my background in filmmaking. When I first started making films almost three decades ago, I was cutting up 16mm and 8mm filmstrips, hanging them up, moving them around, picking them up off the floor, splicing and taping them back together again. It was a very physically satisfying method of arrangement. The transition into digital editing allowed for more fluid approaches to storytelling, but it meant losing the material, tactile relationship to the image, and also to time (10 seconds could be measured by stretching a strip of super 8 film arm-to-arm). My new experiments in animation merge the two practices of drawing

and filmmaking. I have a tactile, material relationship to the images, but I can use digital technology to manipulate them and work experimentally with narrative, rhythm and pacing, sound and music.

I am committed to the process of transformation and look for a means to show that process. Animation was a way to make this concrete, I could film the in-between, the transitions themselves could become the subject of the work. Instead of exhibiting "finished" drawings, I could show how these artifacts were always on the way to their own end, immolating themselves, sliding off their own surfaces, coming apart.

During the animation work there is always a sense of surprise, the pictures begin to move by themselves, sometimes in uncomfortable directions. There are different layers of process—the processes I put the drawing through, the different animation passes. I review them on the edit timeline and then apply new manipulations and adjustments in the edit. Change speeds and colours. I take a painterly approach to the image in post-production as well as production. I welcome the lack of preciousness with the drawings, things are fast and loose, the pictures slip away. I cannot get too ponderous or controlled while working. The pictures are hurtling towards their own destruction.

Perhaps what I like most about making the animations is the transition from the material object to the immateriality of projected light, from the permanency of a drawing object to the ephemerality of an image moving through time on the screen. Exhibiting the drawings and the animations together creates a dialogue between the two.

IN/COMPLETION: A PORTFOLIO

1. MOTHER BABY MONKEY

In my earlier work from 2000-2007, I focused on the adolescent body as both a real and allegorical site in which to explore relationships between subjectivity and sexuality. In the early phase of adolescence, girls become aware of how their body is being seen and how it *should* look according to mainstream cultural standards of beauty. They are experimenting with more complex performances of their bodies on a social stage. And they are responding to the strangeness of physical transformations with a combination of wonder, repulsion, excitement and fear.

I started to explore the maternal body in a similar vein. This is the only drawing I brought to my studio at York. The figure is a reimagining of a drawing by Rodin called *Standing Female Nude* (1905-1908). Coincidentally, Muybridge's photographs of women, particularly the pictures where they are walking away from the camera and looking back at the photographer, was the inspiration for Rodin's drawing.

There are very few images of the maternal body in contemporary art. Mary Kelly's work mined the psychoanalytic dimensions of the maternal experience, representing indexical traces of the body. I wanted to represent the maternal body in a way that felt more embodied and true to my own experience. But there is a prevailing sense that motherhood and art-making are separate pursuits. As photographer Annie MacDonell notes: "In a discipline so intent on dissecting and charting the human experience on all levels, why is this one particular human experience too broad or boring or vulgar to warrant our attention?" (Sandals 22).

At the time that I made this drawing I was reading Maggie Nelson, who speculates that pregnancy is "inherently queer, insofar as it profoundly alters one's 'normal' state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body" (Nelson 50).

I wanted my MFA work to probe the gap between intimacy and alienation, to see what kinds of meanings might emerge, whether beautiful, monstrous, subversive, humorous or infused with wonder.

Figure 1a. Heather Frise, Mother Baby Monkey, coloured pencil, chalk pastel, charcoal on paper, 11" x 17", 2016.

2. MOVING PARTS

I wanted to continue working with the figure but in a way that was more immediate and spontaneous (see figures 2a, 2b). I made a number of ink drawings that referenced the body; they were done intuitively, without looking at books or photographs. I proceeded to cut them up into squares, discrete frames, and then moved them around on the wall to create quasi-narratives, sequences of gestures. I eventually settled on the form of a filmstrip that would hang vertically on a wall. You can see here that there are three drawings stacked together vertically. I continued the experiment by dipping the pictures in wax, giving the fragile and delicate drawings a new heft and dimension. Making them more object-like. The first image (of three) shows a figure of a standing woman. There's a hand between her legs. Is it her hand or does it belong to someone else? Is it her body, or does it belong to someone else? There's a necessary ambiguity at work. I'm interested in the erotic force of the body and the tension between that and the body's vulnerability, the body as opening and aperture.

How do frames come together, what kinds of meaning are produced by differing juxtapositions? What sort of materials are necessary, and what kinds of material contradictions are productive? I am not satisfied with making a single painting or drawing. After a drawing is finished, I have to transform it, turn it into something else. There is a sense of restlessness in my drawings, simultaneous images that don't quite cohere or come to rest. They look improvised; they could be hung or framed in different ways in order to produce different affects or meanings. I continued to play with montage and juxtaposition (see figures 2c, 2d, 2e) referencing the Jean Cocteau film *Beauty and the Beast* (1945). I projected the movie on the wall and traced the figures, superimposing Belle over a drawing of the Beast, blurring distinctions between the two. I built up marks and lines, selectively tracing elements from each frame. I used coloured pencil, collage and spray paint to make these drawings.

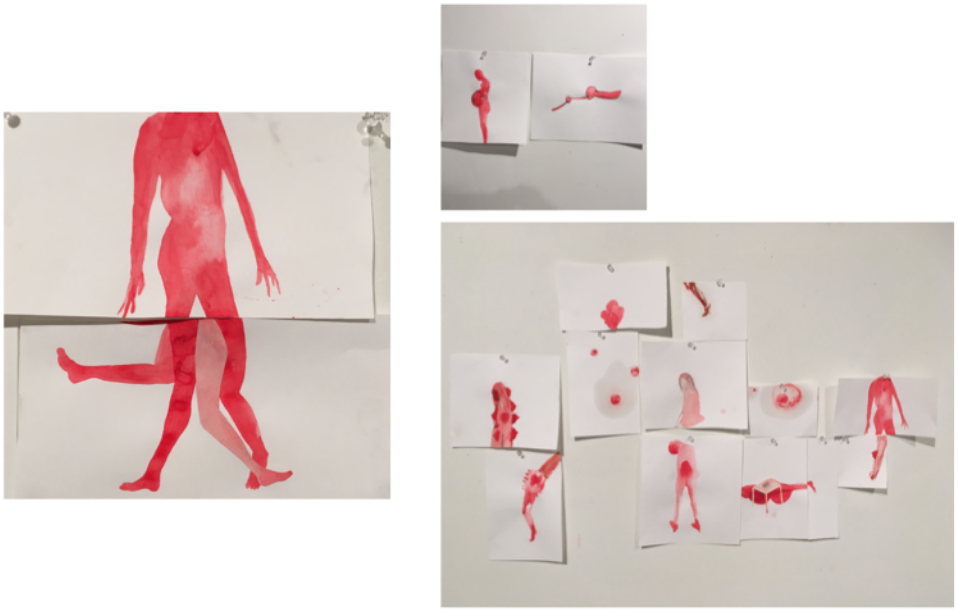


Figure 2a. Heather Frise, Studio Tests, ink on paper, 8" x 10", 2016

Figure 2b. Heather Frise, Studio Tests, ink on paper, 8" x 10", 2016

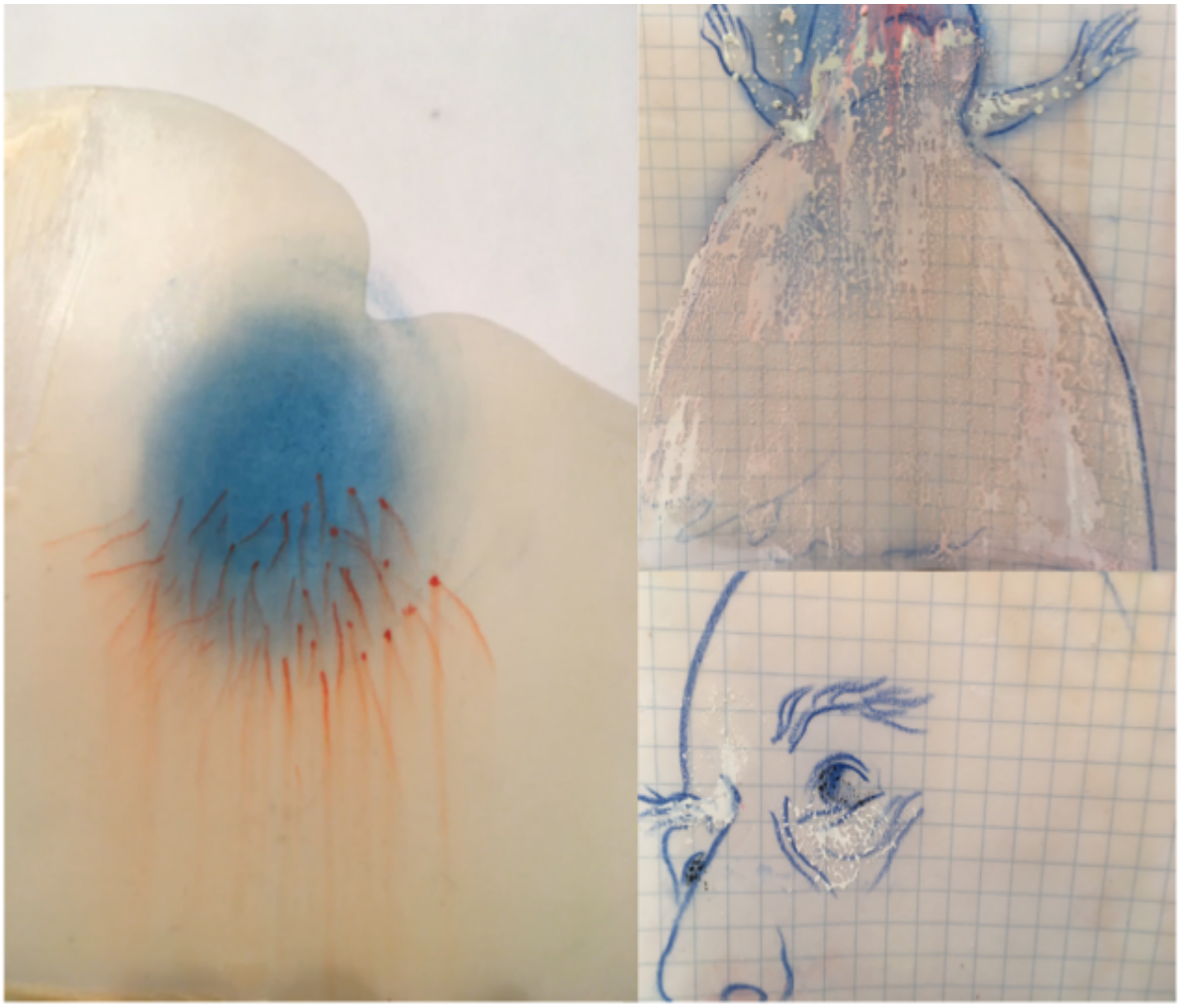
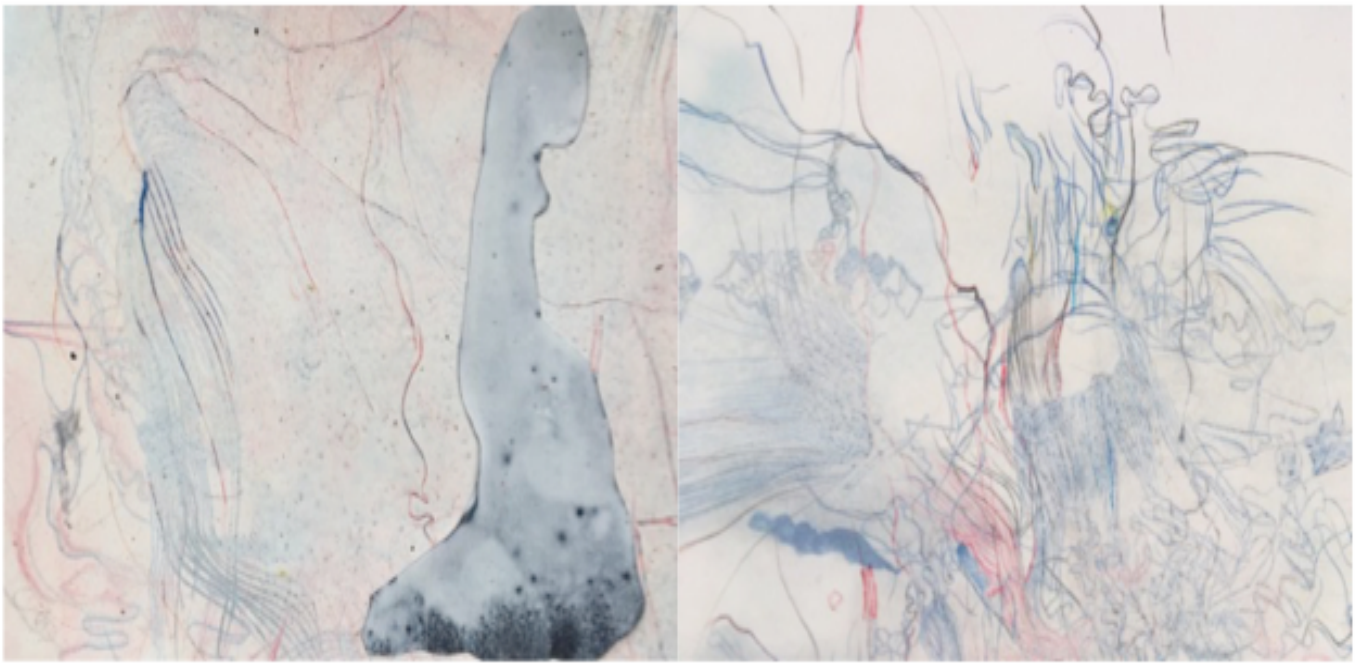


Figure 2c. Heather Frise, Studio Tests, wax, ink, coloured pencil on graph paper.



paint, chalk, collaged Xerox paper, 36" x 48", 2016

Figure 2e. Heather Frise, Studio Tests, La Belle et La Bete (detail), coloured pencil, linseed oil, spray paint, chalk, collaged Xerox paper, 36" x 48", 2016

3. COLLISIONS

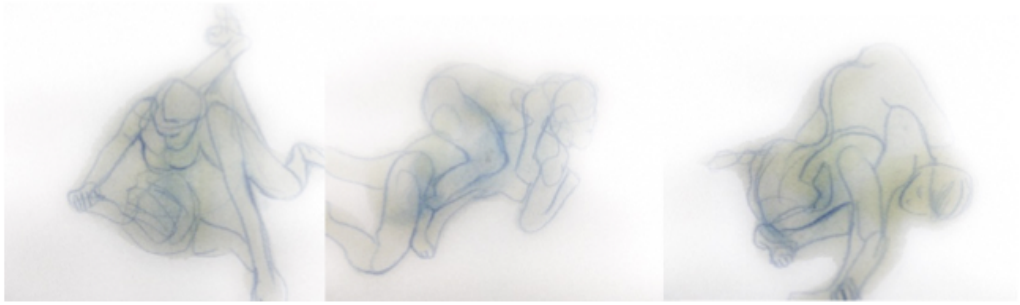
Violence is always present in my work. Whenever a woman walks down the street it is a conundrum: she claims the right to be in that public space and to behave however she chooses, but at the same time she makes herself vulnerable to sexual harassment or assault. Certain spaces are less threatening than others, but sexual violence is, potentially, lurking at every turn. As soon as I start drawing the female body these tensions comes into play. The idea that the body is both vulnerable and powerful, a site of social and political organization and a site of active resistance. The body is subject to violence, and also expresses itself in violent ways; erotics contain violence, and of course pregnancy is a violent process. The disfiguring of the body, the way the body splits in two to birth a child.

How can a body speak? In many ways my drawings are connected to dance, to the language of the body. I use my whole body, as Deborah Hay, the celebrated American choreographer/dancer noted, "the whole body at once is the teacher" (Hay 193). I want my drawings to transmit an affect that is felt in the body as a pulse, a throb, a tingling nausea, a buzzing in the teeth. I want them to invite the viewer to come closer, to touch. There is a tension and balance between the two modes. The large-scale projections of the animations in the installation are at the same scale as a human body, fostering a direct relationship between viewer and image. They meet "eye to eye." The scale of the drawings, the texture of the paper and the disorderly arrangements, produce an affect that is at once unsettling and intimate.

I began making blind contour drawings of two women wrestlers from a YouTube video. I paused the video at various points and began drawing, then play the video for a few more seconds, and draw some more. The drawings were loose, some lines implied, and they were made quickly. There's an ambiguity about whether the women are engaged in a combative or sexual act. The positions of top and bottom are constantly in flux. Intermittently a facial expression is rendered, but for the most part the focus is on the bodies in motion, the gesture, the intertwining of limbs.

I wanted to bring together these two duets, the police are a social-political action of brute oppression and state-sanctioned force, the other is a staged expression of combativeness in which there are rules and techniques of touching. It's about looking. Do these violent acts produce terror, anxiety or longing? My body moves through a spectrum of complex responses. Drawn together, these two sets of pictures create a dialogue that invites the viewer to question their own responses and positions.

Figure 3a. Heather Frise, Animation Stills, ink, marker, charcoal on paper, 2017



4. AFTERBIRTH/AFTERIMAGE

I used tracing paper on which to draw sequences of women sitting down in chairs, climbing ladders, jumping off stairs. I experimented with layering them one on top of the other. I would then photograph them using a light box to create the illusion of motion. I began to cut the figures up, shifting the different parts around, recombining them with other figures. I saw this process as being closely aligned with the poet Dodi Bellamy and her cut-up working method:

> I'm thinking… that no matter how much you may want to get past pre-programmed existence, it's impossible for your mind to really think in new ways. So the literal cutting of texts forces your mind in new directions, allowing you to transcend the false logic that we live in. The cut-up reveals the truth behind the crap that's being fed to us. The illogic behind the logic. (Bellamy 16)

Figure 4a. Heather Frise, Afterbirth Stills, marker, chalk pastel on tracing paper, 2017

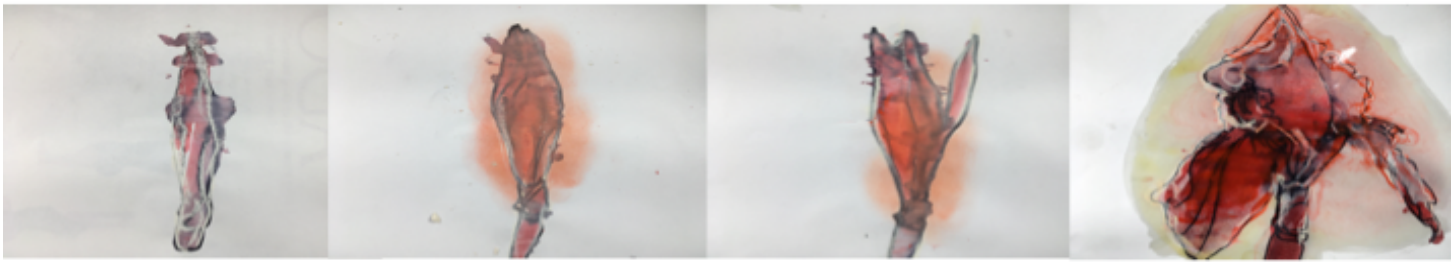


Figure 4b. Heather Frise, Afterbirth Stills, gouache, chalk pastel on tracing paper, 2017

5. SHAMELESS CONFESSION

This is an animation set to the poem "What Tree Am I Waiting" by American poet Eileen Myles. It is composed of over two thousand drawings on 8 x 10 printer and tracing paper. I loved the rush of Eileen's images, they were fast and slippery, a feeling that everything's in motion. They felt in sync with the way I make my drawings, they all rush one into another. She gives voice to a female subjectivity that is marginalized in dominant culture, and she builds her subject detail by detail, always returning to the feelings in the body, the frame of this body, and her queer sexuality. The poem is about a relationship and an inevitable hurt, but it's also about the hurt of an entire country.

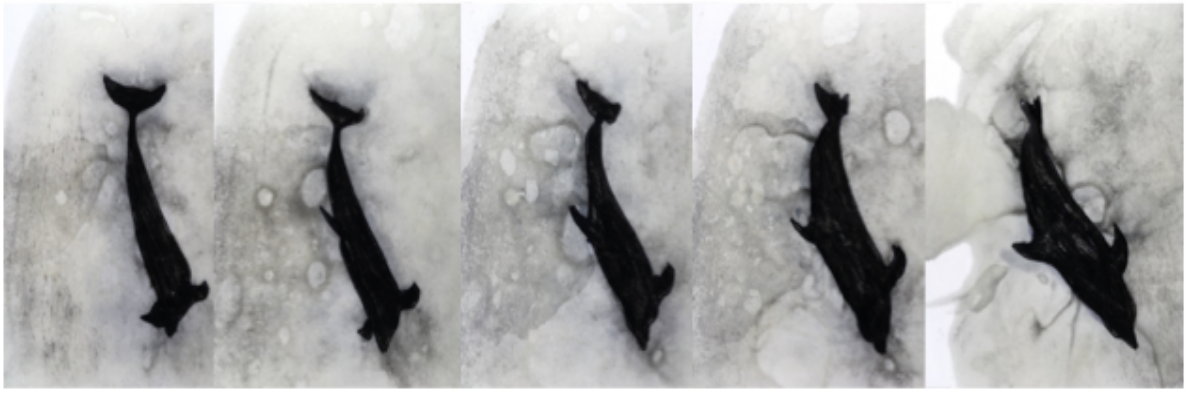
I'll take a train
already I know
it will hurt
this is the hurt country
I came here
to hold the hurt like a bird
like a tree
traffic has rings
we watch it whirl around
damaging our night
great continents hold
the feelings and the ages
what is mine
going blind
great masses of them
not going home
the country drew a line
because of memory
one said
I feel my heart race ahead
in eternity there is this ache
there is this wakefulness (Myles 62)

There's no period at the end of the poem because it's not over, it just goes on and on. The "hurt country" is the poet but also the country she lives in. Both are "going blind," and trying to draw lines "because of memory," to keep the same hurts from repeating, but they repeat anyway. And then incredibly, at the very end, when she finds herself at the bottom with no escape, she discovers eternity, an ache in eternity, and this brings her to "wakefulness" or what Buddhists sometimes name as "awakening"—waking up to what is actually happening here and now. It's a poem about immanent transcendence, not flying above it all, but being grounded in the materiality of this body, this moment, and becoming attuned to its flickering changes.

It was Eileen's reading of the poem, the musicality and intimacy of her voice, that compelled me to make images that flowed with the words and the cadence of her voice.

The American poet and public thinker Maggie Nelson speaks of Eileen as a mentor who provided her with a way to think about the personal in public, "how to continue violating my own privacy in my work, an art which has always come naturally to me, for better or for worse—without the antiquated baggage of the 'confessional.' That doesn't mean there's no shame in the project. It means there's a productive dialectic between one's bravado and audacity, on the one hand, and a startling—indeed shameless—exploration of powerlessness and shame, on the other" (Nelson 2).

The animation I made was flawed because the language of the poem is complex and the way it's delivered is quick and fluid, so the animated images overloaded the experience. The image sequences needed to be spare, instead of rushing forward like the images in the poem. Perhaps they could have been more abstract, to contrast with the concreteness of the poem's imagery. This was a test and I learned what not to do. The rhythm needed to be more varied, alternately moving alongside and against the rhythm of the poem.



6. POISON

I was interested in a look that is also a looking back, a confrontation and reckoning. I chose a particular pose that was repeated in the Muybridge studies; they are shot from behind and turn back to look at the camera. In each instance, the woman's vulnerability is underlined. To be seen from behind, to allow someone to see what you can't see, and mostly when you can't see them at all, is a very vulnerable position. But this vulnerability is newly complicated by their looking. I chose a number of different women who assumed that pose, and drew them using cayenne pepper mixed with dishwashing soap, vegetable oil, vinegar and some salt. I wanted to work with unruly, viscous materials that were difficult to control. I was thinking quite specifically about an experience I had living in Montréal. I was walking home at night at two in the morning, a young woman, alone, and I kept looking over my shoulder. A man in a camel-coloured coat was behind me. He ended up breaking into my apartment and pinning me down on the floor but luckily the upstairs tenant scared him away. The next day my neighbor asked me why I wasn't carrying pepper spray. The materials I used for this animation draw from this personal experience. Each figure is granted a new androgyny, freed from the burden of having to represent or carry the burden of a single gender. Each figure is material and fleshy, yet untouchable.

Figure 6a. Heather Frise, Speaking of Poison, oil, cayenne pepper on paper, 2017

Figure 6b. Heather Frise, Speaking of Poison, oil, cayenne pepper on paper, 2017

7. PROCESSION

I'm interested in the remnants of the animation process. What is left after I have subjected the drawings to a number of material processes and transformations? I made a number of drawings of faces using charcoal powder, dishwashing soap, salt and water and then photographed them as they dematerialized. The cheap bond paper was at risk of tearing and deteriorating; the image risked disappearing altogether. I took the portraits that survived the process, rinsed them in the bathtub, cut them out, mounted them on white vellum and hung them using black carpet tacks so that they floated an inch from the wall. The faces all looked like they had endured something horrific and yet there was something surprisingly angelic and unearthly about them too.

I used this same process in drawing the Muybridge women. I cut the figures out, and recombined them, collaging them with plants and animals' parts—a kind of metaphorical Frankenstein project. I also introduced observational drawings from my own domestic life: chairs, tables, glasses, plates, milk cartons, bottles of vinegar and oil (the very materials I use to make my drawings). I want my images to defamiliarize the familiar, without completely eschewing recognizability. I want the images to hover on that edge. In making the ordinary strange, a more intimate encounter, a stronger receptivity to affect, becomes possible. I'm especially interested in inventing images that make the natural world bloom back into focus, in a way that allows for deeper connection to nature, not as a thing "over there" but as an integral and intersecting part of our lives and sense of self.

Figure 7a. Heather Frise, Procession, mixed media on paper, 2017

Figure 7b. Heather Frise, Procession, mixed media on paper, 2017

8. EXHIBITION

My Thesis exhibition, *After Muybridge: Becoming Unknown*, in the Special Projects Gallery at York University in May of 2018, brings together a number of different experiments with ideas, materials and processes, centered around drawing and animation. The animation is projected on the north wall of the gallery. It is scaled to be human-sized so that the figures in the animation will relate directly to the body of the viewer. The animations are short and repetitious—humans, animal and plants take form and dematerialize, or metamorphose. Between each animated sequence there is an interval of black with a minimalist, ambient soundscape. The soundscapes vary—sometimes they are sounds of dreaming animals, a slowed-down sound of a tree falling, a child singing, a gas stove lighting. Occasionally a line from a poem, a fragment of conversation or dialogue from a film can be heard. The intention is that during these intervals, when the screen is black and the sound fills the gallery, the viewer will turn her attention to the drawings. The drawings are mounted in two different ways. There is a set of three 11" x 15" shadow boxes on the wall opposite the projection. These present like domestic dioramas in which Muybridge bodies cavort and collide on a kitchen table. The table is a stage on which a domestic life is performed, a narrative moment enacted. The bodies are intersected by and fused with plants, animals and household detritus. It is a menagerie that threatens to upset domestic order.

On the remaining two walls, large prints of the drawings are cut out and mounted directly on the gallery wall. The drawings, made originally for the animations, are cut out and placed in various configurations, similar to the shadow boxes, but there will be a sense of sprawl between the clusters, drawings that connect one to the other. The drawings are meant to free the Muybridge bodies from the linearity of sequences or the stillness of the shadow box tableaus.

Then, the sound stops, there is silence, a signal for the viewer to turn their attention to the screen where another animation appears. Sometimes the movement is barely perceptible while other times bodies, animals and objects move in a pixilated frenzy. Everything appears from and dissolves into black, like the black of the night sky or the inside of an eyelid. The images might appear like cave paintings because I use the palette of cave paintings: reds, ochres, carbon, black and bone white, with the addition of blue.

Figure 8a. Heather Frise, Trust the Trouble, mixed media collage, 11" x 15", 2018

Figure 8b. Heather Frise, Trust the Trouble, mixed media collage, 11" x 15", 2018

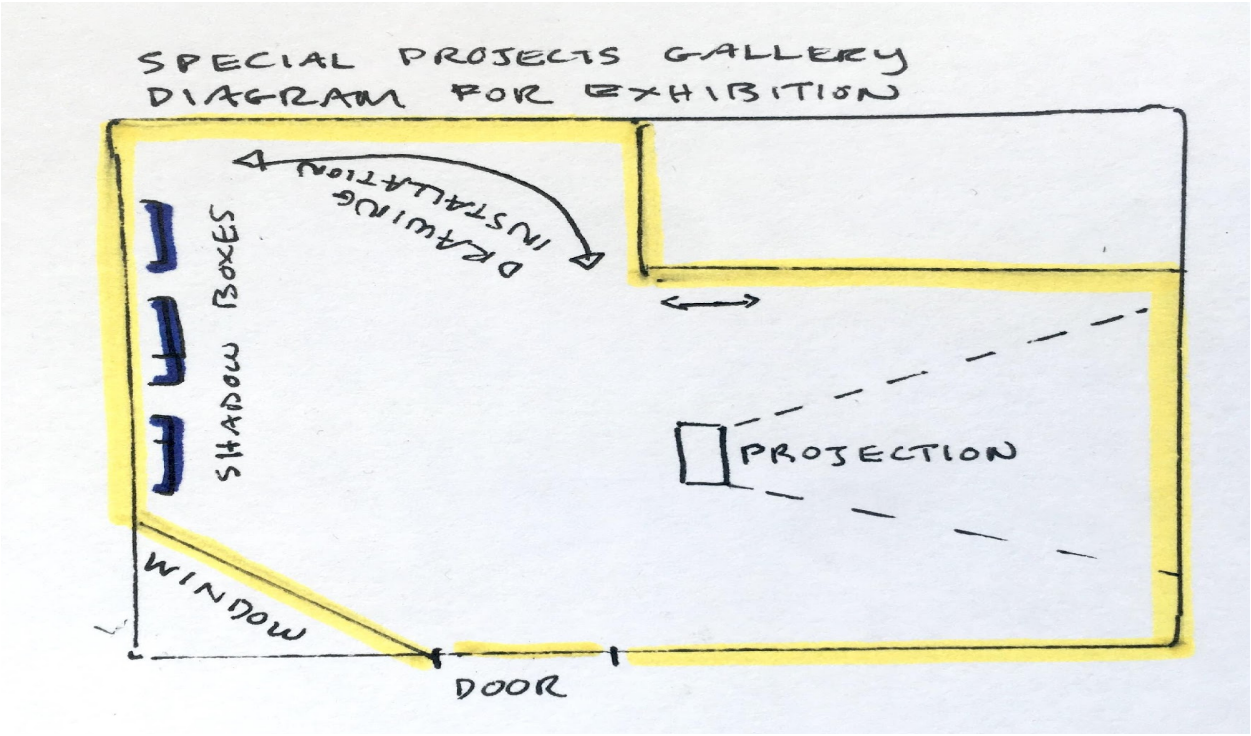


Figure 8c. Heather Frise, Diagram of Becoming Unknown Exhibition in Gales Gallery

Figure 9a. Heather Frise, Becoming Unknown, mixed media installation detail, 2018

Figure 9b. Heather Frise, Becoming Unknown, animation projection detail, 2018

TEN CLOSING THOUGHTS

1. Emma Dexter, in her essay, "To draw is to be human," writes about the primacy of drawing and how we use it to "denote ourselves… in an expanded field…. as part of our interrelation to our physical environment. We literally draw in and on the material world" (Dexter 2005). When I watch my daughter breathe on the car window and draw in the condensation with her finger, I immediately remember doing the same thing as a child, performing this same gesture over and over. The simple act encapsulates everything that continues to fascinate me about drawing today: the purity of making an image with my hand, my breath, and a sheet of glass; the ephemerality of the mark, its magic appearance and disappearance, the fact that it cannot be fixed in time and must be repeated over and over if it is to be sustained in any way. The mark is made on a surface that is at once public, visible to the outside world, yet also private, made on a surface that encloses and defines a private space; an interplay of what is made visible via transparent marks and that which is made ghostly by the surrounding translucency of condensed breath.

2. Drawing is a kind of world-making. The invention of a utopian vision. A fabulation. Ideally, drawing does not dutifully recreate memory, but suggests possibilities, alternative modes of being and perceiving that contain seeds of change, the disruption of power structures.

3. I am less interested in creating pictorial spaces than I am in creating a sense that something is being conjured out of a black hole, a void. Drawing is wresting something momentarily from the flow of images. Drawings cluster together in such a way as to suggest something akin to how thought, emotion and sensation materialize—in sudden leaps, sharp turns, uncanny associations. Less static, completed and closed, drawing is that sense of movement through provisional narratives, and temporary configurations.

4. Drawing is that sense of an image *passing through* the frame, not fixed or anchored inside it. This way of working with drawing points to an awareness that we cannot grasp the wholeness of the world, but only infinitesimally small parts of it. The world is too vast, complex, and unknowable. Everything is material, our bodies are material, like the table and the squirrel outside. We are not discrete, closed-off entities, but rather always already a part of a complex ecology of interrelationships. We can only know one fleeting moment, we can only know ourselves for a brief flash before it disappears.

5. The more I drew and redrew the Muybridge photos, the more I became fascinated with the singularity of each figure; their anonymity fell away. I could rescue them from generalization and draw them with a somatic subjectivity that was in direct relationship with the materials, objects and bodies of everyday life to create something new. To instigate a transformation that bristled with new meaning. Muybridge became a prism through which to think about my own preoccupations with the body and subjectivity. Over time, the work became increasingly autobiographical: I was digesting the work of Muybridge and filtering it through my own experience as a mother in domestic space.

6. My work mines a multitude of tensions: between the containment of private, domestic life and the freedom of the public sphere; between the freedom of being in public sphere and the lack of safety that comes with it; between being a virtuous mother and being a mother driven to break the rules.

7. Drawing offers a way to work through the contradictions and tensions that preoccupy and, at times, paralyze me. Drawing not only stirs thought into action, but it makes intelligible a maelstrom of mental, emotional and bodily activity that might otherwise be unintelligible. It is a way to give my full attention to things in my external surroundings, and also to tap into an interior world, a conduit from one to the other. It allows me to focus on small details, the poignancy of the overlooked, and the detritus of daily life. Drawing enables attentiveness to things, a means to slow down time, to empathize, to notice the vitality of all things, animate and inanimate. A table, a child, a carton of milk, a rat, a vine. How might these seemingly disparate objects constitute an idea of the self? We are not singular selves; our subjectivities are distributed, made in collaboration with other vital materials and affects. As Jane Bennett says "…where subjectivity ends and begins is too often bound up with fantasies of human uniqueness in the eyes of God, of escape from materiality, or mastery of nature: and even where it is not, it remains an apoetic or quixotic endeavor" (Jane Bennett 2).

8. How can a drawing of a body generate affective intensity and in doing so predispose a viewer to an intimacy with their own bodies and those of others. How can the image of a body, and the bodily reality it represents, increase our ability to feel for, or with, another body, especially when it's a body that is outside of our own reality or lived experience? Drawings of bodies can summon a felt visuality—a representation of the body can connect to the body of the spectator and open channels of empathetic awareness. Visual culture is saturated with images of bodies, we are inundated at every level, and yet these images cause disconnection from, not intimacy with, our own bodies.

How might the experience of a hand-drawn image help us to reconnect to our own bodily life. How might drawing open a pathway so that the viewer can alter and be altered by an image?

9. To work towards taboo, as Anne Sexton does in her writing. To do in drawing what Dodie Bellamy does in her poems, leaning towards a writing that "subverts sexual bragging, a writing that champions the vulnerable, the fractured, the disenfranchised, the sexually fucked-up" (Higgs 2014). To work towards the "live wire of feeling."

10. Fiction, poetry, theory, personal anecdote, bodily sensation, the minutiae of everyday life, the use of everyday materials, all feed into and constitute my drawing practice. It is a practice that I hope is at once "irreducible" and yet "translatable." I want my work to get close to this point of discomfort, to carry or transmit something close to "the charge" Bellamy talks about. What is the "charge" exactly? It is something felt, a sensation that lives in the body, a subtle, tingling nausea or a tsunamic rush. Perhaps it's what happens when we venture away from received social and cultural norms, when we act in defiance of the binary structures that order, separate and divide mind from body, public from private, self from other. The "charge" is what I wait for in my own work, it not something that can be forced or willed, it needs to happen in an encounter, a relationship with the work. It should feel like magic when it happens, when it is felt. It's what makes the work alive and, ultimately, it's what makes me want to make-work at all! It's the charge that can come from making the simplest mark on the page. It's what happens when the thing I am making feels alive with an intensity and a power all its own, strange and vulnerable, something old, something new, and, if I'm lucky, something that touches upon the unknown.

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