

Sacrificial bodies as corporeal articulations of violence in the work of South African female artists¹

> **Leana van der Merwe**

Part-time lecturer, Department of Visual Arts,
University of Pretoria, South Africa

leana.vandermerwe@up.ac.za

ABSTRACT

1. This article is based on research for the MA Fine Arts dissertation, 'Sacrificial and hunted bodies: ritualistic death and violence in the work of selected South African female artists' at the Department of Visual Arts, University of Pretoria.

2. The South African social context of violence and crime against women has been a recurring theme in both local and international media following the brutal rape and death of Bredasdorp teenager Anene Booysen and the lethal shooting of model Reeve Steenkamp by her boyfriend, Paralympic champion Oscar Pretorius. Police brutality and murder have also come under scrutiny, following the Marikana massacre on 16 August 2012. There has been a public outcry against the high incidence of rape in South African society. South Africa has an extremely high occurrence of domestic violence and rape, which is ranked by Interpol as one of the highest in the world, based on reported rape, even though it is estimated that only 3% of rapes are reported (Britton 2006:146). Rape victims are also getting younger, 41% being twelve and younger in 2004 (Britton 2006:147) and according to Moffat (in Salley 2012:66) at least one in four women will be beaten by her domestic partner.

This article investigates the multiple occurrence of the sacrificial body as a visual device employed by female South African artists against a backdrop of gender-based violence and patriarchal discourse. The theories of René Girard (1972), George Bataille (1962) and Julia Kristeva (1982) are used to scrutinise this phenomenon, specifically with regard to the relationship of sacrifice with suicide, murder and martyrdom. It is shown how the sacrificial device is used by female artists as a feminist intervention through the dismantling of Cartesian dualisms and how visual art actively works as social action in this regard.

Keywords: South African artists, female artists, feminist art, sacrifice, Bataille, Girard violence, murder.

Introduction: A connection between sacrificial death in visual art and societal violence.

The occurrence of rape and violence and a deeply patriarchal ideology in South African culture entrenched by colonialism and apartheid (Britton 2006:146), and conservative religions that still hold strong (Shefer 2010:382), serve as a backdrop for this article.² There are traces of Cartesian dualist thinking in terms of race and gender in South African society, which was established by apartheid and re-enforced by fundamentalist political, social and traditionalist discourse (Chidester 2012:75). These prevailing discourses, as David Chidester (2012:75) explains, permeate the social fabric of South African society through dualist thinking, which keeps binary categories such as male/female, black/white and modern/traditional intact.

Fundamentalist thinking, brought about by these dualisms, opposes modes of thinking and identities deemed to be 'modern', and stifles racial and gender equality, despite the aims of a progressive and democratic constitution. In this article it is argued that South African female artists present the sacrificial in visual art as a device to counteract conditions of oppression and violence which are applicable to women in an unequal and violent society.³ I aim to identify the way dualist thinking is opposed and overturned, through the employment of imagery associated with the sacrificial condition.

According to Julia Kristeva (1982:95), sacrifice operates within a precarious liminal space between the sacred and the taboo and is closely related to religious belief and ritual. Through various religious and cultural rituals women are controlled by society in order to keep immorality and uncontrollable desire at bay (Kristeva 1982:90). The female body has been culturally coded as unclean in patriarchal language because of its apparent 'closeness to nature' and must be transformed to be 'clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic.' The female body can therefore be transformed by way of various rituals, such as sacrifice, through death 'to new significance' (Kristeva 1982:15). Sacrifice, within Kristeva's (1982) understanding, operates in a space where the stability of a society based on binaries of sexual difference is threatened, and is therefore in need of re-establishment through the use of violent rituals. The slippage between opposites such as that of male and female, threatens the social order based on unequal power relations. Sacrifice as a symbolic act and a metaphor therefore re-establishes the system of difference on which the social order of a patriarchal society is built and supposedly brings an end to social antagonism.

Kristeva's (1982) view of sacrifice is echoed in the work of René Girard (1972) and George Bataille (1962). Girard (1972:49) contends that any disruption of hierarchies within a given society gives way to a loss of identity and thus leads to violence, a situation which he frames as the 'sacrificial crises.' Sacrificial solutions in this regard are used to 'establish identity and mutual relationships' in a community; the use of a surrogate body in sacrificial rituals often takes the shape of an innocent animal, which is offered instead of a 'guilty' human (Girard 1972:4). This apparently protects a society against violence being vented amidst its people. Girard (1972:124) also explores the function of sacrifice, namely to bring an end to antagonism and create a sense of unity between people or between people and their deity. He contends that violent sacrifice historically occurs in primitive societies where a functioning or effective judicial system does not exist to protect its communities against the escalation of violence (Girard 1972:16).

3. Violence, within the scope of this article is referred to in terms of David Chidester's (2012:55) understanding thereof, which does not only refer to physical harm, but includes the scarring of one's humanity and unintentional harm brought about by unethical behaviour or discourse.

A review of South African female artists' work of roughly the past ten years shows a plethora of images concerned with the sacrificial body, which this article contextualises within contemporary art theory and South African social conditions. Through a discussion of a selection of South African female artists' work it is shown how this condition of violence is demonstrated through images of the sacrificial body and how feminist concerns are explored through the visual language of sacrifice. It is shown how the destabilising of binaries operates as a feminist intervention, reaffirming feminine identity through a challenge to patriarchal power structures and the ensuing violence directed at women.

Sacrificial death and violence

The sacred, according to Chidester (2012:5), can be described as both transcendental and social, as 'an otherness transcending the ordinary world', constantly being mediated between binaries such as the personal and the public or the individual and the collective. Sacrifice operates in a space where binaries are contested and seemingly opposing notions, if not kept separate, could possibly be espoused. The espousal of binaries in this regard offers a challenge to social hierarchies and preponderant power structures, which sacrifice seeks to avert. Chidester (2012:5) remarks how the sacred in a specifically South African *milieu* mixes aspects of 'the modern and the traditional, the local and the global, in a South African political economy of the sacred.'

4. The term "traditional" is a politically loaded one and deserves more interrogation within the theme of South African art and culture. It is not, however, within the scope of this article to do so and thus it is used in the same way as by Kristeva (1982), Bataille (1962) and Girard (1972). These authors describe both "traditional" and "primitive" societies in a simplistic and possibly problematic way, especially within an anti-Cartesian project that aims to destabilise "othering". It is not the intention of this article to set up hierarchies based on these differences, but rather to point out and challenge specific sociological perspectives and their historical and current prevalence.

5. This ritual is also performed in conjunction with a celebration of the 'first crops of the season' (Chidester 2012:181).

Girard (1972:1) describes all violence as sacrificial in one way or another. Societies aspire to suppress violence and vengeance against perpetrators of violence within the community through sacrificial rituals (Girard 1972:14-15). In modern societies the criminal and judicial system has in many cases removed the need for sacrificial rites to fulfil this purpose. In many so-called traditional societies, however, some sacrificial rites are still adhered to in spite of the existence of modern public law enforcement systems to deal with possible outbreaks of violence or a challenge to social order.⁴ An example of this is *Ukweshwama*, a yearly ritual performed by Zulu royalty in South Africa, in which a possible challenge to the Zulu king is symbolically played out through the violent sacrifice and torture of a young bull.⁵ It is believed that should this custom not be adhered to, the king would lose his power and could even be killed (Chidester 2012:180). The establishment of hierarchy and thus the protection of relational subordination is what is at stake in this regard, protecting the traditionalist social cohesion within the group. According to Brian Luke (2004:18), animal sacrifice communicates threatening intentions regarding subordinate groups or persons,

such as in the case of *Ukweshwama*, where the young bull stands in the place of a young man who challenges the king. Sacrificial rites are normally enforced by men. According to Luke (2004:18), men, through sacrificial rites, demonstrate their ability to kill and their ability to decide over the life or death of subordinates.

The most famous example in the Bible of animal substitution for potential human victims is the Jewish Passover as described in Exodus 12. This is illustrated in a work by Wilma Cruise (Figure 1), entitled *Woman with sheep*. The sculpture shows a female form carrying a sacrificial lamb on her shoulders, a red cross marked on her breast. This work references a biblical narrative in which Moses told Israelite families to make a cross on the doors of their houses in the blood of a sacrificed beast to avoid the killing of their first born sons when God's Angel of Death passed over their houses (Exodus 12:21-30).

6. Elizabeth Grosz's (1994:187; 2008; 2011) definition of corporeal feminism differs from earlier strands of feminism, such as egalitarian and social constructivist feminism (e.g., De Beauvoir, Firestone, Wollstonecraft, Mitchell, Kristeva, Barrett and Chodorow) in that she asserts that the body is both a product of history and culture and that the borders thereof are permeable and change with time through interaction with various forces and other bodies. She describes different approaches to the body, which strive toward a conception of the body as 'lived' (Grosz 1994:18), meaningful, active and as a site of construction of identity and desire. Grosz (1994:19) asserts that for women to establish 'autonomous modes of self-understanding' and create positions that challenge patriarchal heteronormativity, individual female bodies and their specifics need to be understood, embraced and articulated, thus creating a fluid understanding of the complexities that constitute subjectivity. The dismantling of Cartesian dualisms is imperative in this regard (Grosz 1994, 2008, 2011).

7. Bataille (1962:90) compares the sexual penetration of a woman to the killing of a sacrificial animal, where both are described as an act that robs the victim of their identity as a separate being. The transgression of the skin barrier in this regard reveals the fleshy nature of our being and the proximity of our urges and desires to that of animal life and being (Bataille 1962:91).

The woman in this work is armless and mouthless, as is the case with many of Cruise's figures. Cruise (2010:138) explains her commitment to armless, mouthless figures as articulating 'a sense of muteness' and 'a silence, an existential pause', which she wants to convey. This illustrates their inability to communicate effectively through language and acknowledges the corporeal aspects of language: Without hands to gesture and a mouth from which sound emanates, language is useless and even destabilising. In this manner she challenges Cartesian dualism, which puts nature (the body) directly opposite culture (the mind) and thus positions language and thought as superior to bodily functions (Cruise 2010:139). This correlates with the anti-Cartesian project of corporeal feminist thought by highlighting the importance of bodily awareness for human agency.⁶

The implied inability of the female subject to communicate effectively complicates her position as a sacrificer. When human agency is removed, together with her inability to speak, she is left no choice in the necessity of offering her sacrifice to a (male) deity who threatens to kill her children if she should not comply. The red of the bloodied cross is echoed in the redness of the eyes and the female sex organ. The focus on the eyes may point to the elevated importance put on 'seeing' within a Cartesian understanding of existence. The blood between the woman's legs points to female bodily functions, which also links the sacrificial with the maternal. The sacrificial in this instance is also linked to sexuality and the erotic as indicated by Bataille (1962:89), where the sexual act is on par with a violent sacrificial death.⁷

Luke (2004:18) notes how sacrificial 'malice' is normally redirected towards animals in order to veer the father's violence away from his children, as in the Passover, where God would pass over the homes that bore the red crosses derived from



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Wilma Cruise, *Woman with sheep*, 2004/5. Ceramic on metal base, 1600mm.

Courtesy of the artist and Circa gallery (Cruise 2010:141).

animal sacrifice. In Cruise's sculpture, it is the silent female subject who makes the sacrifice, naked and eyes downcast, the sacrificial lamb limp and almost shapeless, echoing the white body of the female. The woman, in this instance, becomes the perpetrator of violence as well as the victim of violence, or threat of violence, enforced by a patriarchal god. The binaries of victim and criminal are thus collapsed within the body of the female, where the female suffers together with the sacrificed proxy. In this manner the human/animal divide also becomes blurred as the woman and the lamb are both sacrificed.

Female sacrificial bodies in the work of Zanele Muholi

Women are, according to Girard (1972:12) rarely seen in many 'primitive' and 'traditional' societies, as acceptable sacrificial victims as they are not seen as fully-fledged members of their respective societies, or are given limited rights and agency. Girard (1972:13) explains this in terms of the woman's precarious position as both a daughter in her father's family and a 'possession' of her husband, which might complicate her position as a sacrificial victim, prompting one of the two families to revenge if she were to be offered as a sacrifice by the other.

Despite the historical social taboo of using women as sacrificial substitutes, depictions of sacrificial female bodies are abundantly present in the work of South African female artists. Zanele Muholi, for example, uses her own body in a ritualistic way, in performance, video and photographic works. In the photographic work, *I'm just doing my job* (Figure 2), she is pictured, lying naked on a table with animal intestines spread over her body. Two persons, one male, one female are eating the intestines laid out on her body. The work refers to a news story in which a renowned black businessman, Kenny Kunene, celebrated his fortieth birthday in October 2010 with a party where guests were served sushi from the bodies of models, who were lying on tables for this purpose. When asked about the event, one of the models apparently answered '[I] was only doing my job' (Muholi 2010).

A conceptual link is made to the sacred in this work through the reference to the eating of intestines, which could refer to *muti* being offered to the patrons attending the sacrifice.⁸ In African traditional religion, *muti* is often offered as a dual remedy together with the sacrifice of an animal (Chidester 2012:195). This practice was made popular by a well-known healer, Khotso Sethuntsa (1898-1979), known as 'the millionaire medicine man' during the mid-twentieth century. He promised his clients material wealth and power through their making a blood sacrifice and the ingestion of *muti*. Even some Christians on occasion consulted with traditional

8. *Muti* is the Zulu word for traditional African medicine, containing ingredients such as roots, herbs and seawater and animal and even human parts. *Muti* made from human body parts is considered to be the most powerful, but is very scarcely used in South Africa, although *muti* murders do occur from time to time (Labuschagne 2004:193).



FIGURE **Nº 2**



Zanele Muholi, *I'm just doing my job*, 2010. C-print, 45,5cm x 60cm.

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healers such as Sethuntsa, amongst them Afrikaner nationalist leader HF Verwoerd (1901-1966), who is said to have visited Sethuntsa on various occasions (Chidester 2012:195). The intermixing of traditional and Christian religions and the intermixing of modern and secular practice is what Chidester (2012) describes as a 'wild religion' in South Africa, which he suggests to be directly linked to the high levels of societal violence. He describes how the sexual conduct of politicians, such as President Jacob Zuma, as well as celebrities such as Kunene, contributes to this hybrid 'wild religion' which has been 'mixed into sexuality, sovereignty and economy ... messy anomalous or monstrous, a hybrid of order and chaos' (Chidester 2011:4).

In Muholi's image binaries of the modern versus the secular are invoked through the juxtaposition of the patrons in full, modern dress contrasted by the semi-naked body of the sacrificial victim. The practice of offering a blood sacrifice to attain power and money, as practised by Sethuntsa, also comes to mind, especially in relation to businessman Kenny Kunene, who is presumed in this work.

The liver, which is placed prominently on the women's breasts, is being eaten by the two sacrificers. This could possibly refer to the Greek myth of Prometheus, who was punished by Zeus for giving fire to humans, thus enabling them to make animal sacrifices through the use of fire. Prometheus was tied to a rock and an eagle came to eat his liver every day. The liver, which grew back every night, was believed in ancient Greece to be the seat of human emotions. Fat taken from the liver brings good luck and is a common ingredient used in *muti*. The breasts, in *muti* practice, contain fat which is considered especially 'lucky' and is used whenever one wants to attract women to one's business (Labuschagne 2004:197). By placing the liver on the woman's breasts, therefore, a transaction is signified where the body of the female is the means used to obtain wealth, power and status, at the cost of said body and person.

Muholi shows herself as a passive victim, given over to a ritual she has no control over. Once again the agency of the female subject has been stripped away, a theme that is reiterated in the title: *I'm just doing my job*. The model who is being 'sacrificed' has no choice in the actions involving her body: She is merely doing what she is being paid for. Her status as a human being with agency is brought into question as she is dehumanised and objectified as a mere transactional object in the ritual being portrayed.

Murder, sacrifice and the beautiful dead in the work of Kathryn Smith and Sharlene Khan

Sacrifice, death and murder are understood by Bataille (1962) and Girard (1972) to be intimately linked. Girard (1972:201) notes how Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was the first to describe all ritualistic practices in terms of their connection to murder and to identify the subsequent proscriptions to prevent such murders. Sacrifice aims to protect the social order through ritualised, permissible forms of murder, be the victims animal or human. Girard (1972:97) describes sacrificial rites in terms of 'collective murder', where the violence that follows the transgression of taboos is thwarted through legitimate, cooperative killing of a scapegoat. Brian Smith and Wendy Doniger (1989:189) also explain sacrifice in terms of its relation to suicide and murder, emphasising the proximity of these offenses to the sacrificial act. The only difference between sacrifice and a murderous crime, it seems, is a reversal or a confusion of the roles of sacrifice, sacrificed or victim and the deity to whom the sacrificial offering is made.⁹ This confusion of roles is made apparent in the work of Kathryn Smith.

Smith, who won the Standard Bank Young artist of the year award in 2004, is interested in 'the vexing relation between art, violence and death' (Richards 2004:10).

9. Bataille (1962:81) notes how sacrifice differs from murder only in that sacrificial rites are not forbidden according to taboo, but represents a permitted form of murder. The victim is seen as 'sacred', owing to its status as being a sacrificial victim, through coming into proximity to the deity. Girard (in Smith & Doniger 1989:192) explains that sacrifice represents a form of 'murder' which has been 'directed into proper channels.' The substitution of a guilty human or group of humans with an innocent animal, collapses deity and sacrificed being, thus bringing the sacrificer closer to the deity.



FIGURE N° 3



Kathryn Smith, *Jack in Johannesburg* (and elsewhere): after a public performance, 2003. Production still. Pigment on cotton rag, 76cm x 150cm. Edition of 6 + AP.

Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Her work interrogates the metaphor of art as forensic practise as she probes themes such as wounding and murder with a specific focus on serial killers. In a performance work entitled *Jack in Johannesburg* (Figure 3), Smith draws parallels between the violent predatory killings of Jack the Ripper and a violent Johannesburg, through the narrative of a possible connection between acclaimed British painter, Walter Sickert (1860-1942) and the unsolved murders by Jack the Ripper.

The site-specific public performance was conducted in the Johannesburg Art Gallery and filmed and edited into a video work and printed stills. The edited version of the performance shows footage of Smith lying on a bed, half covered with sheets, reminiscent of popular depictions of Ripper victims, as well as some of Sickert's paintings of nudes. A man is tattooing the words: 'Never look for unicorns until you run out of ponies' on her arm. The screen behind her shows various images of Ripper murder victims and Victorian images and paintings by Sickert. A voice-over containing the thoughts and conversations of what one assumes to be Sickert can be heard interspersed with music and sounds of the city. Smith seems to echo Patricia Cornwell's notion that Sickert was the Jack the Ripper.¹⁰ Sickert's identification with the Ripper is described by Colin Richards (2004:17) in terms of the parallel between the 'artistic misogynist (Jack) and the misogynist artist (Sickert).'

10. Popular crime writer, Patricia Cornwell wrote *Portrait of a killer: Jack the Ripper, case closed*, in 2002, in which she claims that British painter Walter Sickert is the Ripper. According to Smith (2007), this theory was originally brought forward by Jean Overton Fuller in his text *Sickert and the Ripper murders* (1990), but was popularised by Cornwell. Sickert was fascinated by the Ripper murders, often made reference to them in his work and it was also later proved that he wrote some of the letters to the police, believed to be from the Ripper.

The performance by Smith also featured actual works of Sickert, which were borrowed from various collections to be shown at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Smith is intrigued with Sickert's apparent attempts to implicate himself in the Ripper murders and his morbid fascination with the Ripper (Richards 2004:18). The connection between art and murder is also made explicit in the voice-over where a man, whom one can assume to be Sickert, can be heard saying: 'The power to kill can be just as satisfactory as the power to create.' Furthermore, the aestheticisation of the dead female body is a pertinent theme of this work and various other works by Smith, such as the *Memento Mori* (2004) photographic series, where Smith shows herself made up as a wounded and decaying murder victim. The eroticised, murdered female body has been a reoccurring theme in Smith's work since 1997. Murder, one of the most ancient taboos (Kristeva 1982; Bataille 1962), as well as artificial and actual self-wounding, is employed by Smith consistently in relation to the eroticised female body. Edgar Allen Poe's notion about the beautiful dead female body being the most 'poetic' thing in the world, as well as *Death and the Maiden* tropes are explored by these and other works by Smith through artifice and performance (Richards 2004:11).

Lara Weibgen (2009:56) ascribes the self-injuring alluded to by Smith in these works as 'a protest against the established order and a sacrifice endured for the benefit of others.' Smith, through the coupling of the Ripper murder narrative with the wilful scarring of her body through the act of tattooing, performs her own body as an ambivalent space where life and death intersect and violence literally leaves a mark in the form of the curious phrase tattooed on her arm.

Smith also opens up an ambivalent space where deliberate permissible scarring, in the form of a tattoo, is inflicted in close juxtaposition to a murder, which is unpermitted and criminal. Smith seems to be questioning the slippage between forms of self-scarring and bodies being hurt against their will. Amelia Jones (2009:46) argues that these two different positions from where wounding could take place influence the way in which viewers react to these wounds and that self-wounding in visual arts provokes different meanings and connotations than witnessing bodies being wounded unlawfully. The wounded body in performance art has the potential to act as a representational field through which political statements can be made, without evoking an overly emotional, self-identifying response (Boltanski in Jones 2009:49). Boltanski (in Jones 2009:49) argues that through self-mutilation, the personas of the artist, who in this case is also the perpetrator of pain, and the sufferer, are collapsed. In this work, an uncomfortable liminal space is created where the act of self-mutilation occurs through a proxy. In this way, Smith thus questions and confuses the binaries of victim and perpetrator and innocence and

guilt in a radical opposition to entrenched binaries. Self-inflicted pain, in this sense, opposes instances of pain and violence directed from third parties and communicates a desire to free the female body from its vulnerability and as an object to be appropriated by patriarchal violence and discourse.

In both *Jack and Johannesburg* (Figure 3) and the *Memento Mori* (2004) series, Smith shows her own body as artificially wounded, where she is both the victim of the wounding as well as the creative artist who creates her own body in the style of a murder victim. Jones (2009:50) argues that a live wound is often more effective than a performative one, such as in Smith's case. Photographic representations of wounding further complicate the binaries of the real and the represented or fake, causing both to arouse the same affects within the viewer. Furthermore, it is not the actual wound that causes effects of attraction and repulsion within us, as described by Kristeva (1982), but rather the idea that something similar might happen to our own bodies, which according to Jones (2009:51), has the power to have radical impact. It is the penetration of the skin that evokes a response that challenges the conception of a unified, impenetrable self and thus gives rise to empathy with others. The penetration of the skin through the act of tattooing, performed by a male artist, coupled with an eroticised body, is a metaphoric stand-in for the sexual act. Kristeva's notion that sexual penetration, even though consensual could be experienced by a women as rape, especially where a loss of virginity occurs, is brought to mind here as Smith questions the binaries of what is criminal and what is permitted (in Cresseils 2007:180).

Wounding, which is found to be challenging with regard to our narcissistic notion of a completed, impenetrable self, is amplified in a radical way when it develops into suicide or murder.¹¹ Bataille (1962:82) explains murder as an abrupt disruption of the discontinuity of human existence. Human existence is characterised by the inevitable approach of death, described by Bataille (1962:83) as the 'discontinuity of human existence.' According to Bataille (1962:83-88), murder disrupts the natural order of being and gives the murderer a sense of control over destiny. Smith's insistence on the inscription and wounding of her body and the performance of her own body as murdered could therefore point to a desire to be in control of her own fortune, and by implication her own body. Bataille (1962:82) explains that:

A violent death disrupts the creature's continuity: what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one.

¹¹. Jones (2009) argues that the effectiveness of wounding as a political statement, largely rests on our having a narcissistic empathy with the body being wounded, for it reminds us that our own bodies can also be penetrated, bleed and be hurt.

The binaries of life and death are thus questioned here as death is what ‘saves’ the murder victim from the inevitability of her own death. The transgression of the taboo on murder, in this case, causes both anguish and ecstasy, as does the scarring by the tattoo artist on Smith’s arm. In the works described above, Smith explores the relationship between death and eroticism as elucidated by Bataille (Creissels 2007:179), where the body of a woman in the sexual act is understood as a blood-stained sacrificial animal. In this sense, the eroticised female body becomes a site of contravention as well as a possible passage towards the sacred. The body of the murder victim, beautiful and blood-stained, becomes a sacrificial object, which links the opposites of life and death through sexuality.

In an image from the *What I look like, what I feel like* (2008) series, Sharlene Khan engages with a suicide and a murder (Figure 4). Sylvain Levi demonstrates that all sacrificial acts are similar to suicide and notes how sacrifice could therefore be described as a form of self-sacrifice (in Smith and Doniger 1989:190). Again, confusion or conflation of the roles of sacrificer and victim is at stake; these two seemingly opposite notions are challenged and even fused, causing an extreme disruption in the symbolic order. On the left hand side of Khan’s depiction, the artist presents herself as Ophelia in a pose reminiscent of various popular and art-historical representations of Shakespeare’s tragic character.¹² On the right she is depicted as murdered French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat (1743-1793). Both of these images are also the theme for two well-known paintings from art history, *Ophelia* (1851-1852) by Sir John Everett Millais and Jacques-Louis David’s *Death of Marat* (1793). Sacrifice, according to both Bataille (1962) and Girard (1972) aims to sustain and enforce social cohesion. The narratives of Hamlet and Marat, a political revolutionary, are instances in which the social order is disrupted by a challenge to the king. The tragic characters that Khan refers to here both come to a violent end, albeit in different ways.

According to Timothy Chamberlain (1991:562), Charlotte Corday (1768–1793), believing that Marat had been responsible for the rise in extremism and violence associated with the French Revolution, decided to murder him in order to prevent further bloodshed. This “sacrifice” of Marat, is thus consistent with Girard’s (1972:8) contention that it serves the purpose of protecting a society against further violence, especially in instances where the judicial system or power structures have failed them. By performing Marat’s violent end, Khan thus positions herself as a sacrificial object, not just as a murder victim. The words embroidered between the two victims in Khan’s work state ‘Never, never and never again.’ These famous words was spoken by president Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) at his inauguration as president on 10 May 1994: ‘Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land

12. Ophelia, a tragic Shakespearean character, died from drowning in a brook, after falling from a willow tree. It is not clear from the text whether she committed suicide or if her death was an untimely accident and this scene has historically been interpreted in various ways.



FIGURE **Nº 4**



Sharlene Khan, *Never, never and never again*, 2008. Digital inkjet print on cotton rag, embroidery, 61cm x84cm.

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will again experience the oppression of one by another ...' (Mandela 1994:[sp]). These words affirm the idea that Khan is making a political statement and refer to Mandela's "sacrifice" to attain peace in South Africa. The words could also be ironic in that Khan alludes to the inequality of men and women in South African society. This inscription is coupled with an image of a knife, known to be the murder weapon in the case of Marat as well as Hamlet's murder of Polonius. These details reiterate the idea of putting an end to violence through sacrifice.

The body of Ophelia, in this case, is an especially tragic one. Ophelia could be described as a victim of the political struggles of her family members and, throughout the narrative of Hamlet, is robbed of her agency as an empowered human being. Magda Romanska (2005:485) also notes how the sexualised image of Ophelia's corpse is the most often represented female figure of the nineteenth century, often associated with female mental disorder and almost always eroticised through various artistic representations thereof. Romanska (2005:486) argues that through

the representation of Ophelia's sexualised corpse, it 'became both a source of visual production and an identificatory beauty model of desirable femininity.' Romanska (2005:494) further notes how the character of Ophelia is portrayed in popular stage productions as 'fragile, stupid, weak ... shallow, cheap ... without character.' Ophelia's suicide is described by Queen Gertrude as an accident, implying that Ophelia was not even in charge of her own misery or decision to take her own life. Khan's depiction of herself as Ophelia thus points to a radical sacrifice of the self from a position of powerlessness and anguish, as she was given no agency in the setting of Shakespeare's narrative.

The juxtaposition of Marat and Ophelia sets the "innocent" victim against the "guilty" Marat, with the invisible Charlotte Corday hovering somewhere in-between criminality and heroism. According to Nina Gelbart (2004:212), art historical depictions of Corday, such as those by Jean-Jacques Hauer (1751-1829) just before her execution for Marat's murder, show her as a blonde woman, whilst evidence points to her having chestnut hair. Gelbart (2004:214) ascribes this to the heroic mythology built around Corday, where bloneness symbolises 'fairness as opposed to Marat's foulness' (Gelbart 2004:214). Similarly, the depiction of an innocent, beautiful Ophelia in Khan's work places the beautiful, and innocent against the criminal body of Marat, scarred by a rare skin-malaise at the time of his death.¹³

In the case of Ophelia versus Marat as played out in Khan's *Never, Never and Never Again*, the artist questions the agency provided to her as a female within a specific socio-cultural setting. The image of Ophelia, beautiful, sexualised, insipid and disempowered is compared with the empowered figure of a political martyr (Marat). The figure of Corday fuses the binaries of innocent and criminal and the opposites of power and incapacity through her double role as heroine and murderer. So extreme was Corday's rebellious act at the time, that an autopsy was performed after her execution in order to show that she was sexually active and thus a "fallen woman". The autopsy, however, proved her to be a virgin, disappointing her enemies greatly (Gelbart 2012:205).

The title of the series of which this work forms part, *What I Look Like, What I Feel Like*, suggests that even though Khan intends to be recognised as a political revolutionary (what she *feels like*), she *looks like* the tragic figure of a sexualised Ophelia. The invisible liminal figure of Corday, however, slips uncomfortably in-between binaries and thwarts classification as a murderer or a heroine, thereby destabilising and challenging the dualisms presented in this work.

13. Marat contracted a rare, disfiguring skin-disease while he was hiding in the sewers of Paris before the Revolution. His face was apparently so disfigured that his corpse was not deemed fit to be seen and a death mask was made for his burial (Kaufman & McNeil 1989:298).

It is also worth noting that neither of these “sacrifices” had the intended outcome within their respective narratives. Marat’s assassination did not prevent further bloodshed and neither did the suicide of Ophelia: Marat’s assassination did not end the French Revolution and Ophelia’s death was followed by the death of the hero, Hamlet himself. Corday was arrested, tried and executed for her murderous act, thus becoming a martyr or a sacrifice herself. The sacrifice of these two bodies both became one with the narrative of their respective time’s political upheavals and could be said to have been futile.

Sacrifice and infanticide

Children as surrogate sacrificial bodies are featured in the work of a number of South African female artists dealing with a variety of sociological and psychological issues. According to Girard (1972:12), children are the most common human sacrifice in many ancient and some primitive societies. Their position as property of the father and their subaltern status as individuals not yet fully integrated within society make them the most obvious choice for a human sacrifice. Kristeva (1982:77) also notes how the male parent in primitive societies, who cannot prove his paternity physically through birth, sometimes murders his firstborn in order to show his power over the life or death of his offspring, thereby making a patrilineal claim.

An installation piece by Christine Dixie entitled *The Binding*, (Figure 5) features five prints of her own son sleeping, hung on a wall, reminiscent of war banners, set in opposition to embroidered cloths hanging in the middle of the space featuring images of child soldiers. Between the wall-mounted prints and the hung images, the artist placed altar-like tables on which the shadow figures of the boys on the five prints are made up from toy soldiers. Each table is covered by what can be described as an altar cloth. Dixie (2010:[sp]) describes the theme of the exhibition as follows:

The ritual of sacrifice ... seems to be intrinsically linked to the establishment of male identity and the unspoken role of the mother to the father-son relationship ...

Again, the idea of sacrifice as an affirmation of traditional hierarchies and power relationships are brought to the fore, as in the biblical narrative of Isaac, who narrowly escaped being sacrificed by his father, Abraham. In this narrative, on which this work is loosely based, God provided a sacrificial substitute, in the form of a lamb. Dixie (2010:[sp]) explains in her catalogue essay how this close encounter

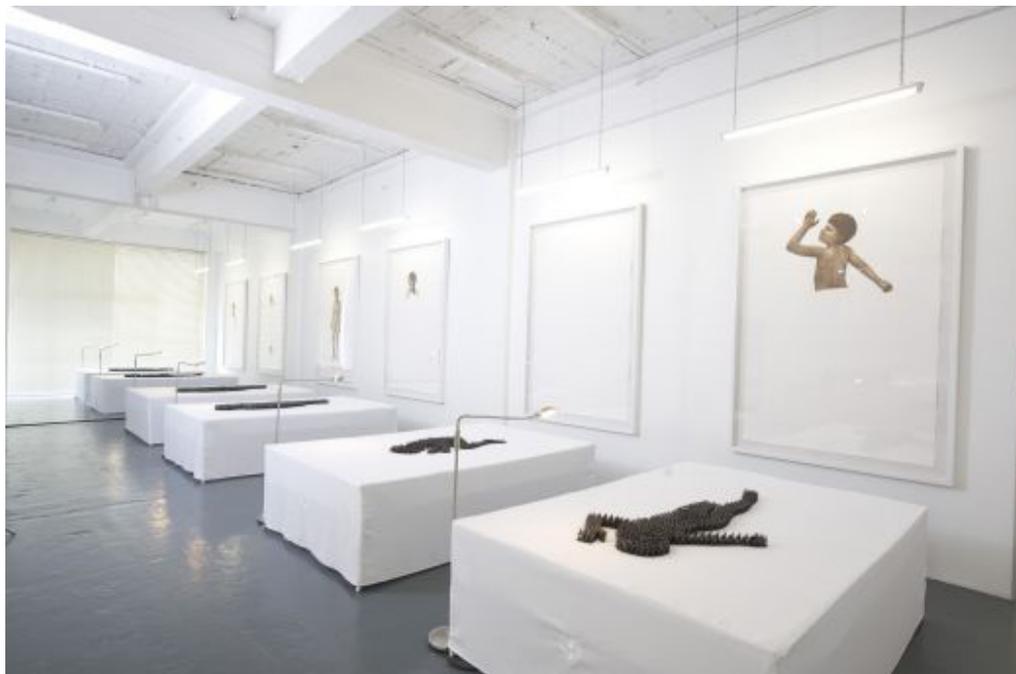


FIGURE **Nº 5**



Christine Dixie, *The binding* (installation view), 2010.

Reproduced by permission of the artist and Art on Paper Gallery.

with death, symbolically serves as a rebirth of the son through the hands of the father. Dixie's own son, six years old at the time of the making of the works, is the boy used for the images on the prints (Buys 2009:1). The five prints show the various stages of the preparation for the sacrifice, interspersed with images of him sleeping peacefully, as if the sacrificial elements shown are merely a bad dream. According to Dixie (2010:[sp]), the life-size scale of the child is deliberate in order to set up a tension between the artwork and the viewer, here set to take the place of the parent looking down at the child shadows on the altars and up at the images on the wall. Dixie notes how the way that mothers "look" differs from the way that fathers "look" in that the child passes from the safe realm of the mother, here symbolised by the embossed blanket (in Figure 6) and towards a violent world symbolised by the toy gun, also embossed, lying beside the sleeping boy.

To Dream (Figure 6) speaks about the fear of the mother regarding the violent world that into which she is sending her son, as well as her loss of control over the life of her child. Furthermore, the work could also be a foreboding of the possible violence that her son, as a grown-up man, is capable of inflicting on others: a fear which many South African women share. The sacrifice of male children could also



FIGURE **N° 6**



Christine Dixie, *To dream*, 2009. Etching, collograph, 1970mm x1250mm. Edition 1/10.

Reproduced by permission of the artist and Art on Paper Gallery.

be an articulation of an extreme rebellion against patriarchal oppression and rule: Not only has the women brought the child to life through biological birth, but she has also decided on his fate through her sacrificial ritual. Girard's (1972:14) comments regarding the function of sacrifice as a possible antithesis to violence within societies could also be connected here with the mother's sacrificial act. The mother gives up something of great value (her own son) in order to bring an end to gendered violence. The son could here be interpreted as a scapegoat for this violence. The mother, however, has no choice in this matter of sacrifice and no alternative, as in the narrative of Abraham and Isaac, is provided in the form of an animal: it is the body of the son which is offered here as ultimate passage towards the sacred.

Child sacrifice is similarly employed in an uncanny installation work by Wilma Cruise (Figure 7) featured as part of the *Alice Diaries* show at the Circa gallery in 2012. Cruise finds her inspiration for this series from the popular children's novel by Lewis Carroll, entitled *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), where Alice, a young girl, finds herself in a strange world where the polarity between humans and animals is questioned and animals seem more human, whilst humans are often monstrous.

Cruise's work juxtaposes sculptures of animals and strangely deformed creatures with the bodies of hundreds of armless ceramic babies. Cruise's work, explores, according to De Freitas (2012:1), 'the existential crises experienced subconsciously by people, confronted by a world that does not make sense.' In *Wonderland*, knowledgeable animals, bearing unusual agendas of their own, confront Alice, causing her to question her existence (De Freitas 2013:2). In the installation at Circa, the *Caucus Rabbit* stares ominously over the expanse of armless babies. In Carroll's *Alice* and in Cruise's work, it is the animals that have agency. The humans are trapped and without voice, confused about what and who they are. Cruise again employs armlessness as a symbol for the loss of agency in the human babies scattered across the floor. According to Cruise (2013:[sp]), the story of Alice questions our '... right to presume our position of superiority in relation to the animals ... Do we really deserve our place on top of the Cartesian pile?'

Cruise's main interest, which spans a series of exhibitions built around the theme of Alice, concerns the dichotomy between animal and human and the ensuing relationships based on this dichotomy, which she aims to unsettle (Tully 2012:2). As in previous works, language is questioned as the primary mode of giving agency to living beings, thereby unsettling Cartesian notions of being, which place the human being above the animal. Although there are many possible readings of this work pertaining to existential, environmental or even animal rights issues, my interest lies with the use of the infant human bodies which are presented in a sacrificial



FIGURE N° 7



Wilma Cruise, *The cradle* (Installation view), 2012. Installation, ceramic sculptures, dimensions variable (De Freitas 2012).

manner, almost as in a grave or a site of mass infanticide. Cruise titles the ceramic baby sculptures *Woodfired Babies*, thus mirroring the manufacturing process of these sculptures in the title. Their being ‘woodfired’ suggests their very status as sacrificial objects.

Cruise (2013:[sp]) describes the work as her ‘way of making sense of an increasingly confusing and seemingly dangerous world.’ This presentation of small sacrificial bodies creates an almost religious undertone in the gallery space – as a sacred place of contemplation but also of horror. The babies are monstrous figures, each one crafted individually, contorted and sexless, some with gaping mouths, others with no mouths (consistent with Cruise’s previous depiction of human faces). Some of the babies have features that become beak-like or claw-like, echoing the presence of the animal caucus that guards the installation (Young 2011:9).

In this uncanny sacrificial scene set by Cruise, as in the previous work by Dixie, no animal substitute is provided. It is the animals that watch, contemplative, silent: a dog, a rabbit and a slightly deformed figure, entitled *The Mother*. This work, like the story of Alice, aims to disturb the human/animal hierarchy and thus challenge

Cartesian dualisms, where animals occupy the lower rungs of being. The viewer is left with questions regarding the purpose of the mass offering. Gavin Young (2011:7), in his catalogue essay for the exhibition, notes the 'visceral violence' in this work, which is loaded with questions and secrets, opening up a 'space of potential healing.' Young also mentions Cruise's belief in art as 'social action.' In this work, Cruise challenges dualisms that structures social hierarchies, through the unsettling of the human/animal divide. She also acknowledges the inherent dangers of the society in which she finds herself and communicates her estrangement and confusion at prevailing societal hierarchies. Her figures occupy a liminal space where human and animal characteristics are fused and where language occupies an ambivalent space of incompetence, thus destabilising the binaries of nature and culture.

Conclusion

Karen von Veh (2012:22) argues that 'feminist strategies exposing patriarchal controls are still a necessary response to local conditions', and she believes in the abilities of such depictions to challenge inequality and bring about social change. The artists discussed in this article expose Cartesian dualisms that are prevalent in popular discourse by challenging and unsettling their hierarchical structures. These images also serve as a metaphor for broader social concerns and might be used as a catalyst for social comment and change.

Sacrifice as described by Girard (1972), Bataille (1962) and Kristeva (1982) aims to re-establish social order through making binary divisions apparent where they are challenged. The female artists described in this article, however have overturned the sacrificial metaphor, by fusing or further complicating binaries, such as the work of Smith, Khan and Cruise. The roles of the victim and sacrificer become blurred and innocence and guilt can no longer be upheld where opposites are fused. Cruise's monstrous infants and hybrid animal figures upset our understanding of the liminal space between nature and culture, thus destabilising hierarchies based on agency and power.

Muholi and Dixie, through their employment of more literal sacrificial scenes, show the absurdity of the binaries presented and how patriarchal discourses play themselves out on vulnerable bodies. The public spectacle of sacrifice is put against the private struggles of the mother in Dixie's work, whilst Muholi questions the opposites of the modern and the secular.

The body, specifically the sacrificial body, as employed by the artists discussed, becomes a tool for 'reckoning with the world' (Weibgen 2009:55), where the insistence on its materiality in contrast with its discursive possibilities, forefronts feminist concerns that are corporeal. Sacrificial bodies, according to Weibgen (2009:61), present us with territories which are 'sacred and which cannot be controlled even under extreme regulation.'

Elizabeth Grosz (2011:153) writes:

Hegel addresses the processes by which nature is sublated into spirit, and animal life ... the life that also characterises sexual difference, is sacrificed, surpassed and uplifted. The intense immediacy of sexual and family life must give way to the forces of the nation and the processes of sacrifice, death and mourning ...

In a society rife with violence against women and children, permeated by patriarchal discourse characterised by the insistence on binaries based on race and gender, female artists use visual devices concerned with the sacrificial as an exorcism of sorts, where sacrifice as a metaphor and a symbolic act, hopes to collapse dualisms and forefront societal issues that are applicable to them.

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