

Uneasy bodies, femininity and death: Representing the female corpse in fashion
photography and selected contemporary artworks.

by

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Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for

MASTERS OF ARTS degree in FINE ARTS

In the

DEPARTMENT OF VISUAL ARTS

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

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August 2016

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ABSTRACT

This mini-dissertation serves as a framework for my own creative practice. In this research paper my intention is to explore, within a feminist reading, representations of the female corpse in fashion photography and art. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall's theories on the concept of representation are utilised to critically analyse and interrogate selected images from fashion magazines, which depicts the female corpse in an idealised way. Such idealisation manifests in Western culture, in fashion magazines, as expressed in depictions of the attractive/ seductive/fine-looking female corpse. Fashion photographs that fit this description are critically contrasted and challenged to selected artworks by Penny Siopis and Marlene Dumas, alongside my own work, to explore how the female corpse can be represented, as strategy to undermine the aesthetic and cultural objectification of the female body. Here the study also explores the selected artists' utilisation of the abject and the grotesque in relation to their use of artistic mediums and modes of production as an attempt to create ambiguous and conflicting combinations of attraction and repulsion (the sublime aesthetic of delightful horror), thereby confronting the viewer with the notion of the objectification of the deceased feminine body as object to-be-looked-at. This necessitated the inclusion of seminal theories developed by the French theorist, Julia Kristeva (1982) on the abject and the Russian theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) on the grotesque.

Key Terms:

Abject, female corpse, forensic science, gendering of death, representation, feminism, grotesque, objectification, fashion magazines, mass media, photographic criticism, ideology, patriarchal power structures, domination, violence, Guy Bourdin, Penny Siopis, Marlene Dumas, classical beauty, subversion.

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RESEARCH PROPOSAL & ETHICS COMMITTEE

DECLARATION

Full name : THELMA VAN RENSBURG

Student Number : 88210442

Degree/Qualification: MASTER OF ARTS IN FINE ARTS

Title of thesis/dissertation/mini-dissertation:
UNEASY BODIES, FEMININITY AND DEATH:
REPRESENTING THE FEMALE CORPSE IN
FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY AND SELECTED
CONTEMPORARY ARTWORKS.

I declare that this thesis / dissertation / mini-dissertation is my own original work. Where secondary material is used, this has been carefully acknowledged and referenced in accordance with university requirements.

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15 August 2016
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and aims of the study

In contemporary global culture we are bombarded daily by images from the mass media such as magazines, digital media and advertising. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2009:9) point out that these images are intended for a variety of audiences and may produce a wide range of responses. Such images can become invested with an array of meanings and may carry immense power in influencing people's thoughts and beliefs (Sturken & Cartwright 2009:9-14). In support of this are the findings of Alexandra Hendriks and Michael Burgoon (2003:5) who state that the continuous subjection to popular media has subdued and mounting repercussions on moulding viewpoints of collective reality. Additionally, Sturken and Cartwright (2009:12) argue that people assign meaning to the material world within the cultural contexts in which we engage in every day. Therefore, we make sense of the world through the "practice of looking" and systems of representation we employ (Sturken & Cartwright 2009:12).

It is my intention in this research study to offer a feminist critique of the representation of women in the media and the partially biased construction of femininity. The focus is on the representation of women in contemporary fashion photography and visual texts, and specifically the way in which a link is constructed between femininity and death. The work of South African artists, Penny Siopis (South African, born 1953) and Marlene Dumas (South African, born 1953) who critique such representations, as well as my own creative practice will be visually analysed and compared to foreground and explore such a link.

The words of the feminist, literary critic, Beth Ann Bassein (quoted in Carlson 1996:388) on women's association with death prompted this investigation. She states that the obsession with the beautiful dead female "have helped to perpetuate a view of women that identifies her with the most passive state occurring, that of the dead."

Rosetta Brookes (1993:19) explains accordingly:

The passive reclining woman offers no threat; she is completely malleable, a dummy made of flesh. The object of gratuitous sexual violence and violation, she offers no resistance, but because of this she becomes unreal, like de Sade's libertines. As the threat of personality diminishes, her image-like quality transports her beyond the eroticism of the living to the fetishism of the inanimate object. She fits into dominant stereotypes so completely that she ceases to connote any reality apart from the images which constitute her.

The observation of the feminist philosopher, Susan Bordo (quoted in Shinkle 2013: 74) that fashion advertisements mobilise normalising and often demeaning and misogynist signifiers of femininity is also of specific relevance to this study. This dissertation is therefore first and foremost an attempt to decode the meanings in these images.

My contribution is therefore centered on three interrelated concerns. My primary aim involves the assessment of the construction and codification of femininity in fashion photography, specifically the link between femininity and death. Secondly, I endeavour to investigate the representation of female death in contemporary feminist art. My study's intention is to analyse the abject and the grotesque in the selected works as visual strategies to subvert normative readings. I argue that the viewer becomes aware of such links, through an ambiguous and conflicting combination of attraction and repulsion, also known as delightful horror (Brown 2007:13).¹ This topic is also theorised by Carolyn Korsmeyer in her book, *Savouring disgust: The foul and the fair in aesthetics* (2011) and Kerstin Mey in her book, *Art and obscenity* (2007).

My interest thus lies in the interplay of these three dynamics where they are striking and typical and the purpose of my own art-making is to develop fresh connections

¹ The aesthetic of the ugly and horrific also challenges the norm. Due to current social conditions, there has been an upsurge in the sublime aesthetic of *delightful horror* – the sensibility of shock and a fascination with terrifying spectacles such as the apprehension of death (Lima 2012:4-5). Burke (in Boulton 1958:57, 64, 136) comments “A mode of terror or of pain is always the cause of the sublime ... Astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror ... its strongest emotion is an emotion of distress brought about by the power of strength, violence, pain and terror and is stronger than the highest degree of pleasure”. The popularity of simultaneous aversion and attraction in the contemporary thriller genre of film, TV and novels confirms this phenomenon (this tendency is discussed at length in a collection of essays titled, *The Gothic - Probing the boundaries*, 2012).

between these dynamics.

1.2 Research question, problem and argument

In this dissertation, I argue that depictions of the female corpse as beautiful and contained in fashion photography, constructs disturbing and deeply coded links between femininity, patriarchy and death. My argument further explores the dead feminine body “as an object of sight” and fetish where the male spectator, becomes the active possessor of the passive feminine body (Bronfen 1992:xiii).² Furthermore, I argue that feminist artists such as Marlene Dumas and Penny Siopis who depict female death in their work comment and question such patriarchal ideologies and subverting these practices by confronting the viewer with a sense of abjection and the grotesque.

In this study, I wish to contribute to existing knowledge on femininity and death in certain portrayals available in the public domain. The aim is to explore the gap in research on women as dead bodies especially that of the attractive/seductive looking female corpse in contemporary fashion photography and art. Such representations will be analysed through the lens of feminism for their element of fixation, objectification and commodification.

This study is located within the contemporary society and cultural climate of our time, especially in South Africa where instances of violence toward women are commonplace. Apart from my own viewpoint as a practicing artist, this study on manifold levels thus draws attention to representation and meaning, women and ideology and the image as commodity and fetish.

1.3 Theoretical framework and methodology

The methodology in this research comprises a multidisciplinary literature study of

² This is most prominent in cases of necrophilia where it has been found that two-thirds of necrophiliac acts are prompted by the need to take possession of a submissive partner (Griffiths 2012).

various theories and visual texts, entrenched in readings about feminist ontology, theories of ideology and media analysis. This will entail an analysis of relevant theories on abjection, the grotesque, feminism, media representation, contemporary visual culture and feminist art.³

According to Beverly Skeggs (1994), feminist research is distinct from non-feminist research because it “begins from the premise that the nature of reality in western society is unequal and hierarchical, in which women have less access to positions of economic security and power” (Skeggs 1994:77). Skeggs also argues that research is feminist “if it draws on feminist theory; centers (sic) on gender ... exposes power relationships in the structuring of difference and inequalities; and if the research can be transformative” (Skeggs 1994:80). She furthers her explanation by stating that feminist research no longer only centers on the ‘experience’ of women but rather on power. Feminist research is also not only research which encompasses women, but rather research *for* women to be drawn on by women to refashion exacting and exploitive circumstances in their society (italics my own) (Skeggs 1994:81).

The female artists in this study are already embedded within established dominant western ideologies and from that standpoint are able to critique prejudices, patriarchal power structures and gender stereotypes in the social sphere, media and art. Ideology is an important concept in media studies as it sustains many other aspects of the field such as representation (Casey et al 2008:152) which is of prime importance in this dissertation. John Thompson in *Ideology and modern culture* (1991) offers a practical, inclusive critical definition of ideology. Thompson (1991:8) argues that the term refers to the “complex ways in which meaning is mobilized for the maintenance of relations of domination”. What this means is that power structures in cultural systems are kept in place through ideological means which persuades the greater number of people that the inequitable distribution of resources or power is justifiable or unpreventable (Casey et al 2008:152). It is argued by critical scholars that the

³ In her book *Art and feminism* (2012) Peggy Phelan offers a functional definition on feminism. Phelan (2012: 18) argues that: “feminism is the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture. Moreover, the pattern of that organization usually favours men over women.”

media in this sense “tend to express the ideological positions of those with power, suggesting the notion of a ‘dominant ideology’ that serves the needs” of the majority of people in a given society (Casey et al 2008:153).

In this study ideology entails “the concepts, categories, imagery of thought and the systems of representation” that western society deploys in order to evaluate, interpret and make lucid the way society works (Hall 1986:26). Hall’s critical theory of ideology presents a comprehensive method for the analysis and critique of not only commentary on the imposing capitalist system, but also methods to articulate “connections between ideological elements and social, political, economic” and media practices and structures (Jhally 2005:3; Makus 1990:496).

The research is carried out qualitatively as it embraces a strong theoretical background and relies on interpretations and speculative explanations of relevant theories and visual texts. Textual analysis and relationships to primary methodology is not textual analysis but rather making of and interacting with the images and through the artistic process of interacting with the images you reveal latent possibilities regarding the interpretation thereof.⁴ Through the material process of making, you come to a set of questions and unexplained possibilities of the female represented as corpse in fashion.

This dissertation is situated within first to third wave feminist discourses on fashion photography, femininity and the female corpse. In light of the lack of feminist theorists addressing contemporary fashion photography, I am also compelled to make use of contemporary scholars on fashion photography and visual culture.

⁴ Textual analysis per Allen Mckee (2003:2): “is a way for researchers to gather information about howother human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology - a data-gathering - process for those esearchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and how they fit into the world in which they live. When using textual analysis as a method, texts such as film, television programs, magazines and advertisements are interpreted as a means to obtain an understanding of the way particular cultures at certain times make sense of the world which they occupy. Mckee (2003:2) further accentuates the importance of “seeing the variety of ways in which it is possible to interpret reality. Through this process, Mckee (2003:2) argues: “we can begin to understand our own cultures better because we can start to see the limitations and advantages of our own sense-making practices.”

Furthermore, Mikhail Bakhtin's⁵ theories on the grotesque in his seminal book *Rabelais and his world* (1968) and Julia Kristeva's⁶ theories on the abject are sourced to critically analyse the artworks presented in this paper.

Feminist theorists and authors on female representation, femininity and the female corpse, such as Elizabeth Bronfen, Elizabeth Grosz, and Susan Bordo among others, will serve as a theoretical underpinning to guide the research and address the research question in addition to my own artworks.

1.4 Seminal sources and literature review

In this review, I give a brief overview on the gendering of death in western culture. To this end I draw largely on Elizabeth Bronfen's theories in her seminal book *Over her dead body: Death, femininity and the aesthetic* (1992). Bronfen offers a critical analysis of the prevalence of the intersection between beauty, femininity and death in western art and literature (Dill & Weinstein 2008:xii; Wyrick 1994:148). Elizabeth Dill and Sheri Weinstein (2008:xii) in their book *Death becomes her: Cultural narratives of femininity and death in nineteenth-century America*, elaborate that Bronfen's approach involves a post-Freudian, psychoanalytical reading of the dead female figure "as a site of cultural uncertainty and disorder" which is of particular interest to this study. I also provide a brief history of fashion photography and its hegemonic patriarchal objectification of women.⁷ Furthermore, I explore fashion photography's current fetishisation of the female corpse and the implication of a link between femininity and death. This necessitates an identification of feminist writers

⁵ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895 -1975) was a Russian literary theorist and philosopher of language whose wide-ranging ideas significantly influenced western thinking in cultural history, linguistics, literary theory, and aesthetics (Britannica 2013).

⁶ Julia Kristeva (June 24, 1941) is a Bulgarian born, French feminist, literary critic, psychoanalyst and novelist. She is best known for her discourse on psychoanalysis, semiotics and philosophical feminism (Oliver 2016).

⁷ Objectification is a key concept in feminist theory and can generally be defined "as the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, as an object" (Papadaki 2007). In this dissertation, the focus is primarily on sexual objectification, which is objectification occurring in the sexual realm. The feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky (1990:26) defines sexual objectification as follows "A [woman] is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her". Reducing women to body parts and appearance commonly seen in popular media, such as fashion photography and advertising is a form of objectification because the woman "becomes an object of appetite" (Papadaki 2007:333).

and theories and their link with femininity.

I now turn to the work of Bordo. According to Bordo (1997:113) in her essay, *Never just pictures: Bodies and fantasies*, fashion imagery is culturally complex, reaches an increasingly wide female audience, idealises certain body types and encourages women to strive for the gaunt, nearly dead look, which is glamourised in contemporary adverts.⁸ Bordo's essay has been enlightening because the challenge that I set forth and wish to address in this dissertation is to explore the subtle, powerful and mostly ideological messages inherent within such images of female corpses.

Historically fashion imagery can be traced to eighteenth-century Paris, where illustrated images of women's clothing were printed and sometimes hand coloured, in magazines (Shinkle 2008:3). The fashion photograph was thus invented to display and sell accessories and clothing to a female audience. Even though the medium of photography was developed in the 1830s, the fashion photograph gained appeal only much later in the early twentieth century, when developments in photographic techniques allowed for fashion photographs to feature in magazines (O'Rourke 2005:[sp]).

The French Periodical *La Mode Pratique* (Hall-Duncan 1979:26) was in 1892 the first to feature this newly developed photographic imagery and subsequently paved the way for the now famous, *Vogue* magazine's covers to be adorned with fashion photography for a more affluent audience (Hall-Duncan 1979:40). Since then the fashion photograph has become a global icon and major source of expression behind the fashion system (Shinkle 2008:1; Zahm 2011:376).

Eugenie Shinkle (2008:1), in her publication *Fashion as photograph: Viewing and reviewing images of fashion*, observes that despite the fact that fashion photography is more commonplace in the media than ever, there is still an absence of photographic criticism which engages with photography in a lasting way. She states that "lumped

⁸ It is relevant for this study to mention that these are also terms related to the corpse, which I will elaborate on in further detail in Chapter Two.

in with other forms of advertising, fashion images have too often been subjected to a limited range of analytical tools, most of them inherited from other discourses” (Shinkle 2008:1).⁹ The text supports my aims to address this lack of critical analysis in Chapter Two.

My analysis of fashion photography will be concerned with the decoding of the visual image within the fashion magazine, as producer and enforcer of femininity and normativity (Betterton 1987:5). This is well illustrated with the words of the authors Jonathan E. Schroeder and Detlev Zwick in their essay, *Mirrors of masculinity: Representation and identity in advertising images* (2004), where they state that: “femininity, is constructed, codified and contested within marketing imagery” (2004:22). Thus, what is of importance here is the inherent power of images (in this case fashion imagery) to construct and prescribe the feminine according to precise measures (Betterton 1987:5).

In my endeavor to decode the visual image in fashion photography, I refer to the theories of the cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall, the media and visual theorist and cultural analyst, Griselda Pollock and Sut Jhally, Executive Director of the Media Education Foundation.¹⁰ Hall’s in-depth research on representation in the transcript of his lecture, *Stuart Hall: Representation and the media* (Jhally 1997)¹¹ and the transcript of the video, *The codes of gender: Identity and performance in pop culture* (2009), by Jhally, form the basis of this analysis. Pollock’s (2003:174) discussion on the feminist theoretical

⁹ Non-critical printed media on fashion photography include exhibition catalogues, journals, limited edition books, photographic compilations, chronicles, newspapers and visual media. These fall short in the critical realm because of the nature of their purpose which primarily includes editorials and advertising, portraiture and documentary photography (Shinkle 2008:2). Fashion photography in the view of visual and cultural studies have failed to gain a critical position as a result of its status in industry as transient and fleeting and its stance in the controversial portrayal of feminine identity (Shinkle 2008:1).

¹⁰ Jamaican born, Stuart Hall (1932-2014) was Professor of Sociology at the Open University in the United Kingdom from 1979 until 1997 (Butler 2014; Morley & Schwarz 2014). Hall was also the founder of what is currently known as “British cultural studies” (Williamson 2014). His sociological research in the late seventies on race, gender and sexuality, and the connection between racial prejudice and the media, was regarded as groundbreaking (Butler 2014). His contribution to the field of popular media and culture and especially his theories on representation in the media are of special interest to this study.

¹¹ Transcript featuring a lecture by Stuart Hall at The Open University, introduced and directed by Professor Sut Jhally (Jhally 1997:1).

analysis of visual images in *A concise companion to feminist theory* is of value as it questions a number of existing regimes and stereotypes in representation.

To understand the development of the insertion of the impersonated dead female body in fashion photography, amongst others, I introduce the controversial French photographer, Guy Bourdin who is best known for his violent fashion photographs commissioned by French *Vogue* between the nineteen fifties and nineteen eighties. Yo Zushi's essay, *Death becomes her: The sinister sublime of Guy Bourdin* and Sean Brandt's documentary, *When the sky fell down: The myth of Guy Bourdin*, paraphrased here, were the most appropriate sources for analysing Bourdin's work

Paris born, Bourdin (1928-1991) met surrealist photographer, Man Ray at the age of 22 which greatly influenced his work (Zushi 2014:56). Ray affected Bourdin's work primarily through his conceptual fellowship with Surrealism and as a trained expert of the avant-garde movement, Dada. These factions are both characterised by unconventional art making and complete freedom of expression driven by rebellion against the measures of traditional art practice, which became noticeable in the photographs of Bourdin (Gingeras 2012:[sp], Tate 2016). Bourdin then ventured into fashion photography, employed by *Vogue* magazine and commissioned by brands such as *Chanel*, *Charles Jourdan* and *Ungaro* (Louis Alexander 2014). Curator, Ingo Taubhorn (cited by Louis Alexander 2014) explains that Bourdin uses the female body to construct "visual disruptions, the outrageous, the hair-raising, the indiscreet, the ugly, the doomed, the fragmentary and the absent, torsos and death". These photographs set the stage for female death in fashion photography due to Bourdin's depictions of dismembered female bodies and decapitated legs adorned with the latest style of Charles Jourdan shoes.¹²

¹² Recent examples of Bourdin's legacy of such brutality in fashion photography will be discussed at length in Chapter Two of this dissertation. I will argue that this kind of imagery is alarming when considering the extent of the audience reached and the fact that effectively, the proliferation of these images desensitises the viewer to the real issues at stake, which is the condoning of violence and abuse against women. There are various acute concerns here, which will be extended, in the following chapters of the dissertation.

The concepts of the abject and grotesque as originally formulated by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (1982), and Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his world* (1968) have been rigorously reassessed and analysed by various scholars and disciplines throughout history.¹³ For example; the contemporary feminist and other theorists such as Mary Russo in her book, *The female grotesque: Risk, excess and modernity* (1995), Frances S. Connelly in his book *Modern art and the grotesque* (2003), Justin D Edwards and Rune Graulund in *Grotesque* (2013) and in *The Routledge companion to feminism and postfeminism* (Gamble 2006). These texts provide ample evidence of how contemporary scholars scrutinise phenomena such as the monstrous and shameless, and have been extremely useful for the discussions later in this document.

Regarding the internationally respected South African, Amsterdam based artist, Marlene Dumas the catalogue created for the exhibition *Marlene Dumas: Measuring her own grave* (2008) held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York is of specific importance. This catalogue served as important source for analysing Dumas's work as it consists of an extensive illustrated exhibition history and includes all the works explored in this study. In addition, in the exhibition *Measuring her own grave*, Dumas focused specifically on grotesque depictions of feminine death and the corpse, which relates to my own research endeavours. Similarly, Siopis addressed female death and trauma in separate exhibitions held at the Michael Stevenson Gallery, *Afterlife* (Stevenson 2007a), *Lasso* (Stevenson 2007b), and *Who's afraid of the crowd?* (Stevenson 2011) and her retrospective exhibition *Time and again* (2015) at the Iziko Museum in Cape Town. Texts concerning these exhibitions are taken into account in Chapter Three of this study.

Similar to my own working methods, Dumas makes use of found media images from

¹³ Mary Douglas's book, *Purity and danger*, first published in 1966, played a leading role in Kristeva's concept of abjection. Like Kristeva, Douglas stresses the vulnerability of the body's margins especially "marginal stuff" such as blood, urine and excrement, which criss-crosses the body's boundaries, thereby endangering social structures (Schmahmann 2009:98). Kristeva's abjection differs from Douglas's in the way that she explores a psychological explanation of taboos (Schmahmann 2009:99). From a feminist perspective Kristeva's work is especially significant to this study because her work "provides a series of insights and reflections of great consequence for feminist theory" (Elizabeth Grosz quoted in Schmahmann 2009:99)

sources such as news photographs, fashion magazines, billboards and films, which she refers to as ‘second hand images’ (Watt 2004:[sp]). Her work thrives on confrontational images of dead women from press photographs such as *Dead Marilyn* (2008) (Figure 26), derived from a post-mortem photograph of the late Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) (Butler 2008; Schumacher 2009:53-54). Rainald Schumacher (2009:54-55) in his article on Dumas, in *Flash art* (2009), entitled *Yes we can*, states that Dumas’s paintings withdraw the women she paints from invisibility and compose identity and eternity amidst a terrain of total anonymity. Other texts concerning Dumas, which proved valuable to this study are the essay *Questions of intimacy and relations* (2008) by Emma Bedford and *Painter as witness* (2008) by Cornelia Butler.

The internationally acclaimed South African Artist, Penny Siopis’s career spans nearly four decades of artistic scrutiny (Minnaar 2015). Since her early *Cake* (1982) paintings she has been engaged in an investigation of female embodiment through the manipulation of paint and surface, to create the equivalent of female flesh, but not the smooth and flawless flesh of classical beauty, rather the bruised, scarred and tortured flesh (Krut 2004; Stielau 2015). When considering Siopis’s investigation into flesh, a number of words pertaining to my investigation of her work come to mind, such as trauma, wounding, suffering, mutilation, torture and most prominently, death and violence (Stielau 2015).

The work of Siopis is significant in this study as she explores the feminine body as played out in patriarchal white ruled South Africa. The catalogue with the same title, created for her first retrospective exhibition *Penny Siopis: Time and again* (2014) serves as valuable source concerning the analysis of artworks and texts related to this study. The theories of Grosz in *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism* (1994), serves as excellent reference in analysing depictions of violated female figures as related to the work of Siopis. Grosz’s theories give evidence of Siopis’s engagement in female embodiment which she often depicts by means of grotesque displays of femicide.¹⁴ This I argue offers a way of freeing the female body from the parameters of patriarchal rule which will become evident in the analysis of Grosz’s (amongst

¹⁴ The term *femicide* refers to gender hate crimes geared toward women and was first coined by the feminist author Diana E.H Russell. She defines the term as “the killing of females by males *because* they are female” (Russell 2001:4).

others) viewpoints later in this study (1994:14). The theories of Grosz also serve as feminist critique of the patriarchal cultured female body.

Both Siopis and Dumas use liquid mediums to probe and push the boundaries of their female subjects. Siopis and Dumas's, questioning of female representation, femininity and notions of beauty and ugliness in western culture and the media as attested by the academic, Tavish McIntosh on Siopis's exhibition, *Afterlife* at Michael Stevenson and Schumacher in his essay, *Yes we can* (2009) are of specific relevance to my own artistic endeavours and theoretical enquiry.

The work of the artists mentioned above will be analysed in more detail in Chapter Three.

The abovementioned literature based research has been examined in conjunction with the practice-based research, in my own body of work, which I have produced throughout the duration of this study. This is presented in my exhibition titled, *Shut up and be still*.

1.5 Practical component

The body of artworks presented in the exhibition *Shut up and be still* represent the culmination of the combined analyses of the theories presented and the works of the artists which are contextualised in the dissertation. Conclusions are thus drawn from a practice-based research process. Linda Candy (2006) explains practice-based research as:

An original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice. In a ... thesis, claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes in the form of designs, music, digital media, performances, and exhibitions. Whilst the significance and context of the claims are described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the outcomes.

Through the material process of making, you come to a set of questions and unexplained possibilities of the female represented as corpse in fashion.

The artworks and exhibitions of the two selected artists and my own body of work constitute the starting point for this research. Chapter Four of this mini-dissertation and the exhibition catalogue created alongside this study, which contains my own body of work, incorporates all the theories analysed throughout this dissertation and encompasses my observations and deductions of the problem statement.

My creative enquiry has focused on exploring meaning by using fluid, changeable materials and techniques such as ink and watercolour. I have aimed to create a body of work which interprets the concurrent occurrence of femininity and death with the use of found imagery from fashion magazines and the World Wide Web.

As mentioned previously, such depictions are aimed at commenting on and analysing patriarchal ideologies in relation to depictions of the seductive/fine-looking female corpse and the subversion of these practices by confronting the viewer with a sense of abjection and sometimes the grotesque.¹⁵



Figure 1: Thelma van Rensburg, *Confined space II*, 2013.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 32cm x 38cm.
Photograph by the author.

¹⁵ This study is based on my previous body of work, which I completed cum laude as part of a fourth-year study at the department of visual arts at the University of Pretoria, in 2013 (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 2: Thelma van Rensburg, *Space of becoming 1*, 2013.
Ink on German etching paper, 78.5cm x 107cm.
Photograph by the author.

My intention has been to further my exploration and expertise into the medium of ink and watercolour. I purposefully elected these mediums as both metaphor for their fluidity and their material ability to be manipulated into formlessness and as subversive device.

1.6 Overview of chapters

This dissertation serves as a structural outline for my own body of artworks presented in *Shut up and be still*. The study comprises five chapters, each serving an essential part to render intelligible the research conducted for my Masters of Arts degree.

Chapter One introduces the research problem, provides a literature review and equips the reader with a theoretical framework with which to comprehend the complete text.

Chapter Two comprises a historical overview about the representation of the conjunction of femininity and death in western art, culture and popular media whilst referring to the development of the patriarchal obsession with power and violence. Reference is made to the gendering of death in western culture and the containment of the unruly female body. Throughout the chapter examples of representations of femininity and death in art and fashion photography are analysed, critiqued and debated.

Chapter Three provides an in depth analysis and interpretation of the selected artworks of contemporary artists, Penny Siopis and Marlene Dumas. Reference is made to previous sections of this study especially those theories concerning the grotesque and abject, and combinations of femininity and death in western culture and the application of these concepts. The subject matter and mediums of these artists are investigated in terms of their intentions to undermine the powers structures inherent in representations of the beautified female corpse.

Chapter Four is presented in combination with the exhibition catalogue designed for *Shut up and be still* which forms an integral part of this study. The chapter encompasses and refers to the theories analysed and the photographs and artworks presented in this study. The research approach discussed in the text is analysed by and supported by means of the artworks created. The catalogue supplies an account of the different artworks, their application of medium, signification and intentions. As aforementioned the relevance of the grotesque and the abject in contemporary feminist art is contextualised, in relation to the artists discussed in this study and are considered and applied to challenge and transgress patriarchal notions of the female body.

Finally, the research paper is concluded in Chapter Five with a summary of the previous chapters and an integration of and reflection on the main concepts presented in and the study. Suggestions for further research are included in this chapter.

1.7 Significance of the study

Cardinal to this study is the questioning of the ongoing fetishisation of the beautified female corpse in fashion photography and art, as attested by Edgar Allen Poe's renowned words (quoted in Bronfen 1992:59), "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in world" and includes William Shakespeare's beautiful and tragic character *Ophelia*.¹⁶ This calls attention to the imposition of the

¹⁶ During the nineteenth century *Ophelia's* death scene as played out in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* became a cult figure and "the single most often represented female figure of the time" (Romanska

connotation between women and death, which Bassein (quoted in Carlson 1996:388), states has helped eternise a vision of women that establishes her with an extreme form of passivity, namely that of the dead.

2005:485). More recently, the film director, Tom Tykwer, repeated such scenes in the 2006 German film version of the novel *Perfume: the story of a murderer* by Patrick Süskind. It is about a male sociopath, serial killer driven by the scent of women and incapable of love or empathy. The cinematography initiated by Grank Griebe elicits Ophelia and recurrently fetishises the beautiful female corpse to the extreme (IMDB 2016, Thiessen 2008).

CHAPTER TWO: THE FEMALE CORPSE IN FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY

This chapter delves into the association in western representations between femininity and death and its signification. To this end, I will employ Elizabeth Bronfen's theories in her groundbreaking book, *Over her dead body: Death, femininity and the aesthetic* (1992). This publication has been authoritative in determining the historical source of contemporary culture's fixation with images of young and beautiful female mortality. The feminist philosopher, Grace Jantzen's book, *Death and the displacement of beauty: Foundations of violence* (2004) follows Bronfen's research. Since this publication first appeared thirteen years ago there has regrettably been an increase in this phenomenon, which is outlined later in this study.¹⁷ Therefore, I will continue to investigate the recurrence of femininity and death, and the representation thereof within the current trend. I contend that depicting beautiful women in fashion magazines in suggestive poses (which hint at male on female violence and the recently dead) is aberrant. My argument hinges on establishing that the gendering of death, which in turn involves a symbolic link between women and death, is intricately tangled with the overrepresentation of men with power, violence and aggression and the continuous overlooking and suppression of women and the maternal in western history (Jantzen 2004:16). Throughout the study I have aimed to support the notion of the feminine being considered a threat to the safety and order entrenched by patriarchal law.¹⁸

¹⁷ This is evident in an article in the Guardian titled; *How the female corpse became a fashion trend* (Cochrane 2014) and the BuzzFeed (2013) article titled: *The violent exploitation of women in fashion continues* featuring thirty-five images from 1978 till 2011. These images depict women in deathly and macabre poses in fashion photography, printed in magazines such as *Vogue Hommes International*, *Lula Magazine*, *Vogue Paris* as well as advertisements for designer labels such as *Dolce & Gabbana*, *Loula*, *Jimmy Choo*, *Louis Vuitton*, *Redwall*, *Duncan Quinn*, *Tom Ford*, *Kate Spade*, *American Apparel* and *Sisley*

¹⁸ See section 2.4. The concept of patriarchy within feminist discourse developed from a need to clarify and explain the doctrine of women's domination and inequality enforced by male power structures (Beechy 1979:66). The concept is also used here to theorise the creation of women's subordination and to investigate the myriad of manifestations it assumes (Beechy 1979:66). Sylvia Walby, Professor of Sociology at Lancaster University (Walby 2015), states that: "the concept and theory of patriarchy is essential to capture the depth, pervasiveness and interconnectedness of different aspects of women's subordination, and can be developed in such a way as to take account of different forms of gender over time, class and ethnic group" (1990:2). It is thus important to note that the concept of patriarchy does not imply one simple meaning; rather it encompasses a variety of separate meanings and feminist frameworks (Beechy 1979:66, Walby 1990:1). For the purpose of this study I will focus on the feminist framework called *Radical feminism*, which is marked by "its analysis of gender inequality". In this framework men dominate women as a group, men as a group being the main beneficiaries of such inequality (Walby 1990:3). This approach identifies male supremacy as manifested in the

This is followed by a brief history of the fashion photograph, its origins, target markets and influence. The work of photographer, Guy Bourdin are highlighted for its quintessential portrayal of femininity and death in western culture. In addition, I attempted to address the fact that very little in-depth research exists on the topic. My aim has thus to contribute towards this deficit in contemporary research.

2.1 Death and femininity

Jantzen (2004:17, 33) argues that men have been more obsessed with death and violence than women for reasons such as men's greater symbolic and biological tendency to aggressive behaviour. Furthermore, Jantzen (2004:16) points out that this is apparent in activities of war, prison populations and male sports. She argues that male obsession with violence is also evident in male dominated acts such as rape and sexual harassment. Similarly, the American radical feminist activist, John Stoltenberg (1998:151) argues, "Violence proves and privileges manhood in a way that myths and sexual anatomy cannot". For example, in South Africa a study conducted on violence against women by men, rated such cases as the highest ever reported in research anywhere in the world (Faul 2013).¹⁹

The South African Institute of race relations's estimates of violence against women also paint a dismal picture. According to the institute it is estimated that two thousand five hundred women are killed every year (Williams 2013). The number of violent acts against women increases considerably, when data of all violent assaults, rapes and other sexual violent acts against women are considered, the number rising to at least two hundred thousand adult women attacked in South Africa every year (Williams 2013).²⁰

apprehension of women's bodies and sexuality, especially in male violence against women (Walby 1990:3). In this framework, sexuality is thus considered to be the main cause in the domination of women.

¹⁹ This study done in South Africa in 2009 by the Medical Research Council, co-authored by Professor Rachel Jewkes on gender-based violence, estimated that a woman is killed by her intimate partner every eight hours (Faul 2013, Makhuba 2014).

²⁰ Some recent cases of cruelty and violence against women in South Africa have received a lot of attention in the media, both nationally and internationally. One such victim of brutality being the model and law graduate, Reeve Steenkamp. She was fatally shot, on Valentine's Day, 2013 by her boyfriend, the 26-year-old Paralympian, Oscar Pistorius (Faul 2013; Levs, Karimi & Mabuse 2013; Topping 2013).

Allan G. Johnson, in his book, *The gender knot: Unravelling our patriarchal legacy* (2014) explains this obsession with violence and death as stemming from one of the characteristics of patriarchy, namely control. According to him “control is an essential element of patriarchy: men maintain their privilege by controlling women and anyone else who might threaten it” (Johnson 2014:13). Control therefore manifests as “a core principal of social life” and as a result “defines patriarchal *manhood* (emphasis in original)” (Johnson 2014:14). Elias Canetti (in Bronfen 1992:65) also argues in favour of the gendering of death and the idea of patriarchal control in culture, explaining that the dead female body assumes a lying, horizontal, passive body and the spectator being the upright onlooker, gains a dominant position. Considering the above argument, it is clear that dominance, control and the enforcement of masculinity are key issues to be taken into account when theorising the representation of the dead female body in contemporary photography and art and will therefore be critically analysed throughout this dissertation (Bronfen 1992:12).

Masculinist control of the female body and obsession with death according to Jantzen (2004:17) “is at least to some extent displaced anxiety about the maternal body”. Jantzen’s argument was first theorised by the French feminist and socialist theorist, Simone De Beauvoir in her book *The second sex* first published in 1949. Her readings establish an anxiety where the servitude of women to their biological functions reminds men of their own origin and ultimate death (Guthke 1999:190). Women’s biological cycles of “birth, menstruation, childbearing and menopause” culminates into an equally amoebic, corporeal end (Guthke 1999:190).

The outcome of such an association is that woman and the maternal, the emblem of life, becomes a potent representation of death (Guthke 1999:190). Guthke (quoted in Malson 1998:184) explains this aptly in the following quote:

The mother dooms her son to death in giving him life, the loved one lures her lover on to renounce life and abandon himself to the last sleep. The bond that unites Love and Death is poignantly illuminated in the legend of Tristan, but it has a deeper truth. Born of the flesh the man in love finds fulfilment as flesh, and the flesh is destined to the tomb. Here the alliance between Woman and Death²¹ is confirmed; the great harvesters is the inverse aspect of fecundity that makes

²¹ Capitals added by De Beauvoir.

the grain thrive. But she appears, too, as the dreadful bride whose skeleton is revealed under her sweet mendacious flesh.

Kristeva (1987:374) also puts forward a point of view wherein she suggests that the maternal has been abjected (see footnote 1) in patriarchal cultures, thereby reducing women to their reproductive functions. Corresponding with Kristeva (1987:374), Jantzen (2004:17) and (cited in Guthke 1999:190), Bronfen (1992:xi) argues that the representation of death and femininity is a symptom of culture and an attempt to contain the unruly nature of the feminine. The beautiful dead woman is thus elevated to an object of desire in an attempt to relieve the anxiety of the monstrous feminine and death.²² The visual presentation of the concurrent interaction between femininity and death thus becomes interplay between power and powerlessness (Dill & Weinstein 2008:xiii).

2.2 History of the macabre combination of femininity and death in art

Bronfen examines the frequency of the occurrence of feminine death in western art and literature (Wyrick 1994:148). The most striking example, as aforementioned in Chapter One, being the words of the nineteenth century writer, Edgar Allen Poe on the combination of death, beauty and femininity (Bronfen 1992:59). Bronfen (1992:59) argues that the combination of words used by Poe is excessive and exaggerated and points to a set of prevailing norms where our fear of deterioration compels us to endow in images of beauty, immaculacy and perfection (Bronfen 1992:61-62). She then argues: “the superlative in conjunction with beauty and femininity serves as a figure for an uncanny contradictory relation to death, the translation of anxiety into desire” (Bronfen 1992:62). Such translation in the form of the macabre combination of women and death were made as early as the nineteenth century in art and literature. Examples in art can be found in the work of Gabriel von

²² The feminist theorist and Professor of cinema studies at the University of Melbourne, Barbra Creed (2007) coined the word the *monstrous feminine* in her book *The monstrous-feminine: film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. To her the term “implies a simple reversal of the ‘male-monster’” (Creed 2007:3). She states that “As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase ‘monstrous feminine’ emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity” (Creed 2007:3).

Max, *Der Anatom* (1869) (Figure 3) and in John Everett Millais work, *Ophelia* (1851-2) (Figure 4).²³

In the painting *Der Anatom* (Figure 3), the title, the beautiful female corpse and the combination of the male figure staring at her exposed upper body codes the scene as that of active male, preparing for an autopsy, and the passive female, lying excessively pale and exposed in the center of the painting (Bronfen 1992:4).



Figure 3: Gabriel von Max, *Der Anatom* (The anatomist), 1869.
Oil on canvas, 136.5cm x 189.5cm.
(Artrenewal 2015).

Bronfen (1992:5) describes that the arrested moment where the anatomist gazes at the corpse in her beautiful shape before he starts his dissection:

The painting enacts a crucial moment of hesitation: the draping of the shroud underscores the aesthetisation by suggesting the materialisation of a statue. The feminine body as a perfect immaculate aesthetic form because it is a dead body, solidified into an object of art.

The female corpse is therefore the passive, immobile, beautiful object and the anatomist the active bearer of the gaze and the corpses destruction, as he will ultimately deface her perfect, immaculate and whole body (Bronfen 1992:5).

²³ Gabriel von Max (1840-1915) was a German artist who concerned himself with the question of the souls' life after death and often depicted human scenes on the brink between life and the afterlife (Bronfen 1992:4). Von Max was influenced by spiritualists of the time which believed that "at the sight of a figuratively deadened feminine body the immaterial realm of the beyond could become visible, a contact between the living and the dead be established or secured, and the boundary between the here and beyond blurred" (Bronfen 1992:4).

The tradition of the association of death with femininity and the coupling thereof with the magnificent, spectacular and monumental is also evident in the death scene of *Ophelia* in William Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet* (1599-1602). Magda Romanska (2005:485), states that, in the nineteenth century *Ophelia's* corpse became an object of eroticism captured by painters such Benjamin West (1738-1820), Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863), Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) and Antoon van Welie (1866-1956) among others. These artists all depicted Ophelia as dead or dying immersed in a stream, surrounded and strikingly framed by grassland and flowers. The most famous of these depictions being John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851) (Figure 4) which picturesquely immortalised *Ophelia's* pale consumptive beauty and deathly frailty within a work of art.²⁴ Romanska (2005:486) continues:

As aforementioned, Ophelia's image has become a transcendental continuum of the politics of death and sexuality. ... Through Ophelia dying became an art, and through her artful death, Ophelia started living an existence independent of Shakespearean Hamlet. Her corpse became both a source of visual production and an identificatory beauty model of desirable femininity.



Figure 4: John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-2.
Oil on canvas, 76.2cm x 111.8cm.
(Tate 2015).

²⁴ Consumption is a term originally used in the nineteenth century to refer to a disease known today as tuberculosis (Byrne 2011:192). The word consumption stems from the Latin word *consumere*, meaning “to eat up or devour” which referred to the wasting away of the body affected by consumption (Intagliata 2012). Tuberculosis killed more people during the nineteenth and early twentieth century than any other disease (Byrne 2011:1). A poem written in 1828 in *The mirror of literature, amusement and instruction*, provides evidence that women who had consumption were seen to be beautiful, because of their feminine frailty, rosy cheeks and paleness, which “left her lovely in her death, and beautiful as an embodied dream” (Byerley & Timbs 1828:265).

Millais used the popular Pre-Raphaelite model, Elizabeth Siddal as his muse to create the beautified death scene of *Ophelia* (Romanska 2005:497). Siddal, born in 1829, had consumption herself, which left her with a deathly pale complexion. Her affliction popularised her as a model for painters as her frailty was seen as the epitome of femininity at the time (Masters 2013; Romanska 2005:497).

These examples show that women's association with death, such as mentioned in Edgar Allen Poe's poem and the artworks discussed, have rather problematically immortalised women with the most extreme form of passive states, that of death.

2.3 The fashion photograph, consuming the female body

My reference to the fashion photograph in this section is aimed at the still photograph published in market leading magazines such as *Vogue Italia*, *American* and *British Vogue*, *Vogue Hommes International* and *W magazine*, among others. These magazines are highly regarded and collectable and therefore have a wide reader

audience (Miller 2010, Paper pursuit 2015).²⁵ They are available in bookstores, and as digital editions downloaded onto mobile devices such as tablets (Vogue 2015).

The photographs in these magazines sell a lifestyle wherein women are compelled to conform to a certain form of look and femininity. In this case, I concur with researcher Paul Jobling (1999:2) who believes that such images are aimed at making women more desirable to men.

Jobling (1999:2), further argues that fashion photography entices the reader into “a world of unbridled fantasies by placing fashion and the body in a number of discursive contexts” thus trading “on ideas of fantasy and masquerade.”

²⁵ To clarify; the target audience, focus and aim of these magazines are adult heterosexual women, which also delimits this research study. However, male readership cannot be excluded. The gross international readership of *Vogue* magazine, part of the flagship company *Condé Nast International*, is twelve and a half million readers, the magazine *Vogue Hommes international's* readership is four hundred and twenty thousand and *W magazine* is two hundred and twenty-five thousand readers (Conde Nast International 2015). *Condé Nast International* also owns *Glamour* magazine in South Africa with a readership of five hundred and sixty-five thousand and monthly page views of a hundred and fifty thousand (Conde Nast International 2015).

In short fashion imagery cannot pretend to be above suspicion and not riddled with “deeper ideological signification.”

The founder and owner of the French fashion and culture magazine *Purple*, Olivier Zahm (2011:376) agrees and accordingly argues that, capturing from all spheres of life, art, cultures, representation and aesthetic fields the fashion image has become a “hybrid” image, which has become quintessential in the documentation of the symptoms of its present time.

This point of view is argued compellingly in Zahm’s (2011:376) words:

The fashion image is a meta-image that totally transcends its object (clothing design) and specific context (fashion magazines) and, as such, has its circumference everywhere and its centre nowhere. Flexibility, furtiveness, adaptability, mobility: the fashion image is not an *imaginaire* but an operational matrix. It becomes a global icon, which deciphers the semiotic chaos characteristic of our time even as it contributes to and extends that chaos.

Christopher Breward (2003:122), agrees with and elaborates on this reading arguing that the published fashion image has become more than just the recording of the next trend in fashion. Breward (2003:122) further proposes that the role of the fashion image has been redefined in the twentieth century by the fashion magazine and importance of the photographer, the art director and the stylist as authoritative creators of image, identity and desire. Breward (2003:123) draws attention to this trend which was initially set by the publication *Vogue* wherein photographers created images, which fetishized “the surfaces of fashionable life”. Breward (2003:123) explains the trend more aptly in the following words:

Their work offered a luminous framework through which the reader might negotiate a more complex relationship between clothing, identity, image, and desire than that allowed by the more literal registers of the descriptive fashion plate.

Furthermore, Zahm (2011:380) explains that the fashion photograph has become an image without any stable referent and comprises of cannibalism and “vampirism of representation” in its endless consumption, destruction and fragmentation of the body. To clarify, I present the French theorist, Jean

Baudrillard's (1929-2007) analysis of consumer behaviour.²⁶ His analysis provides important insight into the consumption of the physical body in the mass media. Incorporating fields such as fashion, consumption, media and sexuality, he theorises that the omnipresence of the body, and specifically the female body "in advertising, fashion and mass culture" draws attention to "the obsession with youth, elegance, virility/femininity, treatments and regimes" (Baudrillard 1998:129). Baudrillard (1998:129-131) has directly stated that the body as "capital and fetish" in the capitalist system is "simply the finest of these psychically possessed manipulated and consumed objects".

Baudrillard's argument is of specific interest to this study because as object of desire, the fashion model embodies the quintessential sign of the consuming of bodies in the capitalist system (Toffoletti 2011:70; Wissinger 2009:273).²⁷ I argue that this dynamic becomes even more problematic when the object of desire and consumption is that of a beautiful, lifeless female body.

2.4 Representations of the female corpse in fashion photography: Interrogation of the image

Lorna Stevens and Jacob Ostberg (2011:392), argue that people are overwhelmed daily, by thousands of advertisements, which serve a range of purposes such as the selling of goods. However, the more significant and mostly unconscious function of advertising is the representation of a lifestyle of how people should behave and live their lives. In short "it provides us with images of how 'real' women and 'real' men should be", thus playing a significant role in the production, representation and sustaining of gender stereotypes and feminine ideals (Stevens & Ostberg 2011:392-393).²⁸

²⁶ In an economic system, the *consumer* is an individual who purchases and uses products and services. (Cambridge dictionaries online 2016). Unless stated otherwise the product in this study refers to the fashion photograph within the fashion magazine.

²⁷ *Capitalism* or a capitalist economic system is defined as "An economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry is controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state." (Oxford online dictionaries 2015).

²⁸ Stereotyping is a form of representation that operates as a system which distinctly categorises certain groups of people, thus homogenising them to a limited, often containing a negative, range of characteristics (Newton & Williams 2003:209). Dominant groups make use of stereotyping to

In conjunction, Bordo (1993:309) argues that female bodies are subjected to a never-ending pursuit of “an elusive ideal of femininity” which ultimately creates docile female bodies: “bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation and augmentation. One such form of regulation is representations of the ideal female body in fashion magazines.

It may be helpful at this point to continue by clarifying the signifying systems inherent in the word *representation*. Hall (in Dorfling 2013:4) did extensive research on this concept, which is central to the critical analysis of images in the media and art. Hall (in Jhally 2005:3) brings a new twist to the analysis of the term and explains that the term was usually connected with whether an image is an authentic or a corrupt impression of reality.

Hall (in Jhally 2005:3) proposes another reading in which the concept of *representation* is assigned a much more active role in connection with how people envision the world and their position in it. According to Hall (in Jhally 2005:6) it is commonly understood that “representation represents a meaning” that already exists. Hall argues that such an understanding constitutes a too simple view of the term. Hall (in Jhally 2005:3) thus exposes the meaning of images and its interpretation, as far more complex than previously thought and also argues that there is no assurance that the image created will bring across the meaning initially intended. In Hall’s words (cited in Jhally 2005:7):

in cultural studies now and in a great deal of media studies work, that notion of representation is regarded as too literal and too straightforward; and the reason for that is because we want to ask the question of whether events - the meaning of people, groups, and what they’re doing etc. - whether these things do have one essential, fixed or true meaning against which we could measure, as it were, the level of distortion in the way in which they’re represented.

What Hall (in Jhally 2005:7) is saying is “that *representation* does not really capture the process at all, because there was nothing absolutely fixed there in

subordinate another group thereby maintaining their position of power, for example masculine over feminine. Stereotypes objectify and deprive a person or persons of their original or personal qualities thereby undermining their diversity, personal power and uniqueness (Newton & Williams 2003:209).

the first place to *represent*”. According to him the meaning becomes manipulated and distorted within the representation of the event, a process that he explains as follows:

Representation does not occur *after* the event; representation is constitutive of the event ... It is one of its conditions of existence, and therefore representation is not *outside* the event, not *after* the event, but within the event itself; it is constitutive of it.

Hall (in Jhally 2005:9) states that within this search for the meaning of the event or its representation culture becomes a primary force. Culture therefore becomes central in making sense of the world that we live in. Culture according to Hall (in Jhally 2005:9) provides the ‘maps’ and ‘frameworks’ for deciphering the meanings inherent in representations and reiterates the theories of Baudrillard (1998:129-131) quoted above. Hall (in Jhally 2005:9) ultimately declares that without culture we would simply find the world incomprehensible.

The role of culture in generating and constructing meaning occupies a central role in the argument presented in this study and will therefore be referred to in various contexts in the following chapters.

Returning to *representation* and making sense of it, Hall (in Jhally 2005:3) argues that representation and its message are also always connected to power structures within cultures.²⁹ He states that:

The question of the circulation of meaning almost immediately involves the question of power. *Who* has the power, in *what* channels, to circulate *which* meanings to *whom*? Which is why the issue of power can never be bracketed out from the question of representation.

²⁹ Specified these power structures include commercial organizations and consolidated media empires dominated by a proportionally small number of companies (Gill 2007:180). The content of glossy magazines such as *Vogue* and *Glamour* are dominated by advertisements and advertising spreads, on average occupying 50 percent of women’s magazines (Gill 2007:180). Magazine’s profits come mainly from the sale of advertising space, which means that publishers must entice as many advertisers as possible (Gill 2007:180). Magazines attract these advertisers by creating the right content for their readers, the reader being high income and upmarket female consumers. The advertisement in these magazines engender powers structures through the offering of carefully planned and sourced seductive representations and products enticing the female consumer to engage in often “deeply problematic representations of sexuality, race, class, and their espousal of oppressive gender ideologies” (Gill 2007:195).

Hall proposes that we ‘interrogate’ how an image is represented and communicated (in Jhally 2005:3). To interrogate an image, he states, one needs to examine it and ask questions (Hall in Jhally 2005:3). Such interrogation needs to be done because Hall argues, when one is immersed within media culture, one may begin to accept it as the norm (Hall in Jhally 2005:3). The meaning of representation then becomes ingrained, therefore covering up the process of representation (Hall in Jhally 2005:19).

According to Hall (in Jhally 2005:19) that is what ideology tries to do; it aims to fix an image to one meaning. Interrogating the image should therefore ask questions that address this naturalisation of meaning. For example, one may question where the image came from, probe the production of it and investigate who is suppressed in the making of the image? I am aware that these questions require the analysis of the power of stereotypes within images and I will therefore attempt to address the use of female stereotypes in the fashion magazine in this chapter.

2.5 Fashion’s morbid obsession with death

Taking the former arguments in consideration it is my intention in the following chapters to ‘interrogate’ the implied meanings behind the female image as corpse as represented in the fashion photograph (Hall in Jhally 2005:3). The questions that I pose and attempt to answer through the course of this chapter concern firstly, the obsession with beautiful models faking death in fashion photography and secondly, the glamorisation and exploitation of violence against women. The messages conveyed by such a practice to readers and to society in general, I argue, are questionable. In order to fully understand the meaning of the photographs (as recommended by Hall above), I will now proceed to scrutinise and interrogate them.

The intention of this dissertation is to focus on the bizarre and ominous infatuation and fetishisation with attractive models arranged in deathly, morbid poses in fashion photography. In these photographs female models are portrayed in a variety of sexualized, passive postures, such as lying down excessively pale, deformed and contorted, naked or half-naked, wearing glamorous designer items such as shoes, underwear and couture dresses. In addition, the models in these photographs fit the western feminine ideal of the tightly managed contained body profile (Bordo 1993:188). To elucidate I refer to a quote by Bakhtin (2003:228) on the western

contained body ideal:

The newly bodily canon in all its historic variations and different genres presents an entirely finished, completed strictly limited body... that which protrudes, bulges, sprouts or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed.

The obsession with the tightly contained body is especially evident in fashion photography as argued by Susan Buck-Morss (1991:99). She argues that fashion's dictation of conformity for the ideal human form "becomes the biological rigor mortis of eternal youth". Caroline Evans (2007:133), in her book, *Fashion at the edge: Spectacle, modernity, and deathliness*, comparatively argues, by juxtaposing fashion's inherent transience with its obsession with thin, youthful, beautiful models, that "Within fashion's ceaseless preoccupation with change and alteration are inscribed the brevity of youth and the ephemerality of beauty." Essentially what Buck-Morss and Evans are critiquing is the joint expression of beauty and death inherent in fashion and fashion photography.

These are but some of the dynamics that exist in the fashion photographs which I present in this chapter.

Following Hall's (in Jhally 2005:9) argument, on the importance of culture in making sense of representation it is important to bring to attention the images to be analysed in the following chapters. They are not only targeted at women but also masked by the phallogocentric gaze which is driven by patriarchal culture, "a culture in which the idea of an unequal sexual difference as necessary and desirable is law" (Wallenberg 2013:148).³⁰ As Wallenberg (2013:148) states, fashion photography may therefore be geared *toward* women but is *not for* women (italics my own).

³⁰ Even though men do not necessarily read fashion magazines, it is factual that in contemporary image culture depictions of the female body which dominate TV, films advertising and internet media fit the same ideal as the artificially, airbrushed, normative, thin female models propagated in fashion magazines (Bakhtin 2003:228; Bordo 1993:188; Buck-Morss 1991:99; Evans 2007:133; Mulvey 2009:15; Ponterotto 2016:135). This is explained by Berger (1972:16, 53, 63, 64) who states that the "visible world is always arranged" for an "ideal spectator" where the eyes of the beholder are universally recognised as male.

A valid argument would therefore be that the fashion photograph turns women into commodities aimed for mass consumption by males³¹.

Diana Fuss (1992:713) elaborates on the commodification of women in fashion photography by arguing that the fashion photograph is a commercial photograph that women “are encouraged to *consume* in voyeuristic if not vampiristic fashion, the images of other women”. Women are therefore spectators of their own consumption, victims of their own objectification. In conjunction, when a beautiful, slender woman is depicted as a victim of violent crime/a corpse, by what seem mostly male photographers, such as Guy Bourdin, Helmut Newton, Izima Kauro, Terry Richardson, Juergen Telleras, and the duo Mert Alas and Marcus Piggot, new meanings crop up (Evans 2007:133). It is my intention to explore these meanings in the following chapters by referring to the theories of Mulvey and Bronfen on the ‘male gaze’ and sexual fetish as manifested in selected fashion photographs by the fashion photographer, Guy Bourdin.

2.6 Consuming violence and death in the photographs of Guy Bourdin

Both Alison M. Gingeras (2011) and Gaby Wood (2003) draw attention to the fact that the photographer mentioned as one of the most ground-breaking photographers of the twentieth century and innovator of images who mixes glamour and the macabre in fashion photography is the French photographer Guy Bourdin (1928-1991). Pioneering seduction and the world of the fetish, Bourdin’s perverse trademark is that of the archetypal woman, photographed in sadistic, deathly morbid positions (Wood 2003).

His photographs include violent crime scenes, severed legs in technicolor and nude limp, bodies (Figures 5-7). Bourdin’s assistant, Sean Brandt made a documentary of his works in 2009 titled; *When the sky fell down: The myth of Guy Bourdin*, which documents his work and influence in the world of fashion photography. Bourdin was

³¹ This is aptly described amongst others, by French feminist Luce Irigaray (1985:187): “Just as, in commodities, natural utility is overridden by the exchange function, so the properties of a woman’s body have to be suppressed and subordinated to the exigencies of its transformation into an object of circulation among men.”

a controversial figure. He often placed his models in life threatening positions and was delighted if informed by his editor that they might die (Wood 2003). At one shoot he covered the models in glue and black pearls preventing their skin from breathing, causing them to pass out (Wood 2003). When the editor stopped the shoot due to fear of them dying, Bourdin replied “Oh it would be beautiful-to have them dead in bed” (Creative Mapping 2015). The violence toward women Bourdin portrayed in his work also materialised in his personal life. His first wife hanged herself in 1971 and two of his girlfriends committed suicide (Silverton 2009; Wood 2003).

Bourdin’s images balance on the perverse edge of sex and violence as is evident in one of his most famous photographs (Figure 5). The photograph is a mock-up of the aftermath of a crime scene (Wood 2003). In the homicidal scene a chalk outline of a victim is drawn onto a sidewalk deliberately depicting a dress to accentuate the fact that the victim is female.



Figure 5: Guy Bourdin, *Charles Jourdan*, 1975.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
The Guy Bourdin Estate 2014.
(Brandt 2009).

The scene is dark and gloomy and shows a car parked next to the pavement (Wood 2003). Dark liquid pools are seeping into the pavement (Wood 2003). All that remain of the victim is a pair of glamorous pink shoes and sunglasses (Wood 2003). The scene accentuates the act of looking and spectatorship therefore making the female spectator victim of her own voyeuristic gaze (Mulvey 2009:19). In

concurrency with Zahm (2011:380), quoted above, Fuss (1992:730) suggests this to be “vampirism of representation” which she argues presents a “third possible mode of looking, a position that demands both separation and identification, both a having and a becoming-indeed, a having *through* a becoming”.



Figure 6: Guy Bourdin, *Charles Jourdan*, Autumn 1970.
Photograph. The Guy Bourdin Estate, 2014.
(Aesthetica Magazine 2015:69).

Similar to the arguments of Hall on the complexity of representation, Fuss (1992:730) argues that not only the look becomes vampiric, but also the:

Spectatorial relation of the woman to her image serially displayed across the pages of the magazine... involving neither immediate identification nor unmediated desire but rather a complicated and unstable exchange between already mediated forms.

It can therefore be argued that within representations as seen in Figures 5 and 6 a cannibalistic exchange takes place where one becomes “the other by feeding off the other” (Fuss 1992:730).

The theories of Laura Mulvey (2009:15) on the ‘other’ and the ‘male gaze’ are of interest here. Woman becomes a signifier “for the male other” in patriarchal culture constricted by an essentialism “in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions”. Thereby vampirically gazing upon the “silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning”. Again the split of the active/looking man and the passive/looked-at woman plays out, accentuating sexual difference and “the power of the male symbolic” (Mulvey 1989:24). In concurrence

with Mulvey (2013:6), I argue that such fantasies become manifest in sexual fetishism, which in definition is “a form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree to a particular object, item of clothing, part of the body” (Oxford online dictionaries 2015).

Evidently fetishism plays a very important and complex part in the objectification, commodification and consumption of the feminine body in fashion photography and the fashion magazine (Rabine 1994:72).³² It is precisely this complexity that I address in the images presented. To elaborate, Rabine (1994:72) argues that fashion photography as a genre and its connection to fetishism revolves around women’s lack of a phallus. She is thus “conceived only in terms of having or lacking the phallus, as threatening or warding off man’s castration, but cannot be conceived in other terms (Rabine 1994:72). The author Leslie W. Rabine (1994:68) who writes extensively on the *fetish* argues that fashion is “a symbolic system inseparably linked to the expression of sexuality and an integral part of the global capitalist system” and therefore needs to be “analyzed in terms of the concept of fetishism”.

Following Freud’s (1927:200) definition, Mulvey (2009:840) also equates the fetish to the male’s threat of castration at the female’s lack of a penis, which she explains as follows:

³² Given the fact that fetishism has become an all-inclusive term associated with several pathological and perverse erotic obsessions, a short overview of a few models of fetishism is provided such as: *Anthropological fetishism* which refers to the belief in ‘magical’ potions, charms and amulets, and ‘alternative semantics of the body’ which has been suppressed by layers of western rationalism (Warr 2000:11). The Freudian version of neurotic male sexual fetishism and the fixation on a surrogate object (Freud claimed that the sight of the woman’s ‘lack’ of a penis generates the need for a fantasised substitute). The *Marxian* version of commercial fetishism questions the relationship between labour, product, value and the perplexing character of commodity as an *object of exchange*. It is due to commodity as a representation or a *perversion* of an article of utility that it obtains its interest and becomes a fetish (Foster, in Apter 1993:252; Baudrillard 1988:69; Miklitsch 1998:66). In post-industrial capitalism this type of fetishism has reached high levels of intensity, as is clearly illustrated by the mass culture this use value has been dislocated to become ‘image’ value where a blend of implied violence, desire and fantasy is exploited by erotic codes in for example magazine advertising.

In the case of *techno-fetishism* technology has become an object of idolatry. Contemporary visual culture is equivalent to the abovementioned fetish practices due to its reliance on illusion, myth and magic, and our fascination with its conundrum. Utopian speculation and euphoric messages have become an existential necessity (Bullock 1988:889).

Thus, the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), ... or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.

In essence, according to Bronfen (1992:123), Mulvey poses a paradox where “the sight of Woman” is coded both as desirable object and as object of threat. This links directly to the concept of the fetish, which is rooted in deficiency. Bronfen’s (1992:124) argument is of value here as she states that ‘what man is not’ thus that which is excluded; femininity, death and the image, materializes when a feminine body is depicted, “and most perfectly when it is an absent, a dead body.” Death and the crossing between death and the feminine are thus always “a simultaneous reward and punishment (Dill & Weinstein 2008:xiv).

Returning to the discussion above concerning the sinister overtones of Bourdin one can distinguish such dynamics in the images presented. For example in Figure 7, a violence-themed fashion shoot shows a pale, slender



Figure 7: Guy Bourdin, 1975.
Photograph. Dimensions not available.
The Guy Bourdin Estate 2014.
(Brandt 2009).

woman, wearing only a pair of red shoes, sprawled naked over a table in the center of a room. In the right-hand corner of the room another model, wearing a polka dot dress and blue shoes, is hanging lifeless from a rope around her

neck. More dresses hang from the roof in what looks like an abandoned clothing factory. The models passive positions and poses clearly imply that they are no longer alive. They suffered a violent death in the form of what seems to be rape and suffocation, but there are no signs of bruising or a struggle.

It may be helpful at this point to step back and question what is represented here? To achieve this, I will refer to Pollock's (2003:174) discussion on the feminist theoretical analysis of visual images (similar to Hall in Jhally 2005:3) who proposes a number of questions on existing regimes and stereotypes in representation, such as: Who is represented and who is representing? Who is seen and who is looking? Whose interests does an image encode, whose eroticism and desire and who becomes the object or sign of that desire?

The first endeavour, according to Pollock (2003:174) is to unravel current systems of representation, thus determining the "dominant 'story'" which will allow us to ascertain what is excluded in order to distinguish "how a phallogocentric culture does not represent women, feminine desire(s) and difference(s)".

Deducted from the arguments hypothesised so far, I argue that the naked woman placed centrally in the image is intended to-be-looked-at, her body is the surface on which male desire and anxiety is played out (Pollock 2003:177). In this regard I would argue that the image is clearly not a representation of female desire or intended entirely for the selling of high fashion clothing. The visual representation of femininity (the beautiful, slender, naked, Caucasian dead female body) in combination with the fetish (the red shoes) is an idealised image of the feminine. As mentioned earlier, there are no visible bruises or signs of decay, therefore rendering the corpse aesthetically pleasing, which Bronfen (1992:11) argues, suggests "harmony, wholeness, immortality, because it is a 'secured dead body'".³³ Above all,

³³ The term, *decay*, refers to the gradual decomposition process that takes place after a human or anything organic dies. *Decay* is also defined as rotted matter or the state of rotting, deteriorating or

Bronfen (1992:98), states; the beauty of the female body “marks the purification and distance from two moments of insecurity-female sexuality and decay” (Bronfen 1992:11). This quest for the unattainable whole female body within the corpse she argues “is meant to be the message of the image”. Bronfen’s (1992:181) argues that such cultural representations of the dead female body are a means of re-establishing and re-inscribing the balance and security, which is constantly threatened by female bodily lack.

The representation of the dead feminine body in this sense is mystifying as she simultaneously disconcerts and comforts and in similar fashion stands for lack and what disguises lack (Su-Lin Wee 1997:[sp]).³⁴ This can be explained in the words of Bronfen (1992:98): “As a corpse, the feminine ... loses her quality of being Other (another sex), and becomes the site where the gazed-at object and the object desired by the gazing subject merge perfectly into indistinction”. This is comforting to the male gazer because “By turning the feminine into a dead body, phallic idealisation places itself on a pedestal” (Bronfen 1992:99). The dead feminine body therefore functions akin to the fetish, as argued in the words of Bronfen (1992:98) “To celebrate the feminine corpse can serve as a double fetish, for insensible and impenetrable; the body becomes ‘phallic’”.

Such images also support the disciplining of the female body as argued by the French Philosopher, Michel Foucault in his book, *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (1995). He argues that the female body is disciplined and controlled by ideological practices related to the normalising of the feminine body, such as depictions of beautiful, ultra-thin women in fashion magazines. Russo (1995:10) in concurrence with Foucault (1995:184) argues that normalisation is one of “the great

declining (Merriam-Webster online dictionary 2015). Neurobiologist-turned-science writer, Mo Costandi (2015) attests that decomposition of a human body causes the breakdown of soft tissue from molecular death, which brings about discoloration of the body. He indicates that upon further decomposition hemoglobin molecules, which once carried oxygen in the blood, converts to sulphaemoglobin (Costandi 2015). This molecule, when settled in the blood, “gives the skin the marbled, greenish-black appearance characteristic of a body undergoing active decomposition” (Costandi 2015). These facts have had an impact on my own artworks linked to this document.

³⁴ The female corpse is disconcerting because connotations of aggression, violence, sexuality and death are at play (Elder 1998:32).

instruments of power in the modern age, supplementing if not replacing other signs of status and rank”. She argues that the constant perusal and demarcation of female body types as well as the subdivision and selection of diverse ‘models’ for diverse consumers categorises unique bodies as exceptions to the rule (Russo 1995:10).

Despite feminist theory, the hitherto conventional argument has been that femininity, as an embodied concept, requires disciplinary practice.³⁵ Foucault (1995:25-26) describes the practices that women engage in daily to maintain their femininity, as disciplinary practices that are underscored by “systems of punishment” which forces the body into submission. He draws our attention to the fact that these are ideological instruments that function as a calculated strategy to control and manipulate bodies into subordination and obedience (Foucault 1995:138). In this way, bodies are moulded into ideological constructs, which underscores stereotyping, and the fabrication of meaning (Pollock 2003:175).

Bordo (1993:309) similarly argues that female bodies are subjected to a never-ending pursuit of an intangible pleasing feminine ideal, which ultimately creates docile female bodies; “bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation and ‘improvement’. The practices described are a process in which the female body is inscribed with the so-called ‘ideal’ feminine body. Bartky, in her book, *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*, (1990:100) describes it as a “practiced and subjected body... a body in which an inferior status has been inscribed”. A woman’s body is thus by default a deficient body.

Furthermore, such images as depicted in Figure 7 evoke necrophilia and are further fetishisation, which provoke the prejudices and stereotypes of the

³⁵ Dieting and exercise are some of the ways women discipline their bodies to conform to what Sandra Bartky (1990:96) refers to as the “tyranny of slenderness” which is an unattainable feminine ideal for the majority of women, and heavily portrayed in all forms of media (Kwan & Fackler 2008:1). Bartky’s philosophical discourse is of interest here because it is mainly concerned with the examining of “embodied femininity” and draws from Foucault’s ‘disciplinary practices’ (Schell 1992:166).

viewers (De Villiers 2008:69).³⁶ This will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

2.7 Recent examples of the representation of the dead feminine body in fashion magazines

In the nineteen nineties death and the feminine in fashion photography once again gained prominence and marked an ever more ominous obsession and fetishisation with aesthetically pleasing, slender, Caucasian models arranged in deathly, morbid poses (Evans 2007:194; Ferro 2014:[sp]).³⁷ This trend sets the stage for contemporary fashion photography where many such examples exist, ranging from an advertisement for Jimmy Choo shoes in 2006, depicting a dead woman in a trunk of a car, to an advertisement of a sliced-up woman in 2010 for *Blender*, a fashion concept store in Istanbul.

A recent example of death in fashion is the 2014 advertising campaign for *Marc Jacobs*, featuring the Pop singer, Miley Cyrus (Figures 8-11) (Peppers 2014). The series of photographs in this campaign depicts Miley sitting on the beach in front of a brooding ‘post-apocalyptic’ background, staring into the

³⁶Stephen J. Hucker (2005) describes necrophilia as “sexual arousal stimulated by a dead body”. The arousal can be contained in the form of fantasising about corpses or it can take the form of actual physical contact with the corpse. The spectrum of necrophilic behaviours ranges from fantasies to actual murder to obtain a corpse (Hucker 2005). Researchers Jonathan P. Rosman and Phillip J. Resnick (1989:158) found that 46% of their sample of necrophiles had resorted to murder to obtain a body for the purpose of sexual violence. They also found that in all cases the necrophiles were male and their sexual preference was for a corpse rather than a living female (Rosman & Resnick 1989:160-161). Hucker (2005) argues this most probably appointed the fact that the lifeless condition of the corpse, therefore not being able to offer any resistance which satisfies the desires of the necrophile.

³⁷ Arguably this could be fruitfully expanded by a discussion of whiteness and its relationship to the central argument presented here. For example, by referring to the differences between the manner in which notions of the grotesque and abjection feature in relation to white and black bodies. A decidedly racial point of view could be highlighted. However, this argument to contents of the dissertation would possibly expand its scope too much. Nonetheless the following references to relevant texts may be consulted by the reader: For example, Nicole R. Fleetwood’s book, *Troubling Vision: Performance, visibility and blackness* (2011), Janell Hobson’s book, *Body as evidence: Mediating race, globalizing gender* (2012), Monica L. Miller’s book, *Slaves to fashion: Black dandyism and the styling of black diasporic identity* (2009), Julee Wilson Chanel’s article, *Iman talks racism in the fashion industry: ‘We already found One black girl. We don’t need you* (2013) and Soongi’s article, *Black the color we wear: The temporality of blackness in fashion* (2015).

distance (Peppers 2014). In Figure 8 below a clothed model is lying flat on her back next to Cyrus, her red hair partially covering her face. Her demeanor is stiff and lifeless as that of a corpse (Peppers 2014). In Figure 9 a hardly visible blonde model is lying lifeless on a heap of sand behind Cyrus.

In Figure 11 three models dressed alluringly in designer clothing are also lying on the sand looking stiff and motionless with the disposition of bodies in a mortuary (Cochrane 2014). Per Shinkle (2008:48) such a narrative sequence of photographs,



Figure 8: David Sims/Marc Jacobs, Marc Jacobs advertising campaign featuring Miley Cyrus, 2014. Photograph, dimensions unknown. (Peppers 2014).

distinct in magazines and a prime aspect of fashion imagery is aimed at drawing the viewer into not only a single image, but also rather “a picture story that exerts an extended control.”³⁸ The choice of theme and the sequencing [thus] become

³⁸ A Narrative sequence, also known as visual narrative is a sequential arrangement of images for the purpose of telling a story or dramatising an idea (Pimenta & Poovaiah 2010:25-26). Within the narrative sequence in the fashion magazine, dress becomes secondary, framing the “garment as unfolding action” instead (Berry 2013[sp]). Jess Berry states that the “fashion narrative” presented as editorials in fashion magazines have been utilised since the 1920’s. In accordance with Sherline Pimenta and Ravi Poovaiah (2010:25) and Berry (2013[sp]) argues that the narrative in fashion photography, as constructed by the fashion photographer and stylist, has become foregrounded “casting garments as secondary characters of stories of eroticism, death and psychological tension”. Because of the limited scope of this study I will not conduct an in-depth analysis into the field of visual narratives.



Figure 9: David Sims/Marc Jacobs, Marc Jacobs advertising campaign featuring Miley Cyrus, 2014.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
(Peppers 2014).

crucial.” Within this shoot the dominant story plays out within a gloomy, ominous atmosphere enhanced by the poses of beautiful models in feminine dresses, strewn like broken rag dolls (Cochrane 2014).



Figure 10: David Sims/Marc Jacobs, Marc Jacobs advertising campaign featuring Miley Cyrus, 2014.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
(Peppers 2014).



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Figure 11: David Sims/Marc Jacobs, Marc Jacobs advertising campaign featuring Miley Cyrus, 2014. Photograph, dimensions unknown. (Peppers 2014).

In similar fashion to Mulvey (2013:6 and 1989:24) quoted above in section 2.6, Brookes (1993:19), explains images such as the aforementioned, as stereotyping. She explains; “it binds us to a model of femininity beyond existing norms, converting them to stereotypes” and regards it as a quest to subdue any sense of the unconventionality of sexual figuration, converting femininity into a stagnant category or commodity (Brookes 1993:19). The inert reclining women exemplified above, thus increases the impact of the underlying fetishized doll-like and dead feminine body, and the demands of power and the gaze, which is consigned to the female body. The outward gaze of the model and the deathly stares of the models (Figures 8-11) also evidence this. Linda Williams (2015:17), explains this argument in terms of the look which forces women to consent to their own helplessness in the face of atrocities such as femicide, rape and murder. Williams’ argument follows Mulvey’s (2009:19) theory on looking, which she states is disproportionately balanced toward the dominant male look. The woman is then left without the pleasure of her own looking, which reduces her to a sexual object and “can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 2009:19). The woman displayed for male fantasy according to Mulvey, becomes the “leitmotif of erotic spectacle” (2009:19), which will be evaluated in the next series of photographs.

2.7.1 Into the woods

In August 2007, *W Magazine* published a fashion editorial with a narrative sequence suggestively titled: *Into the woods*. The shoot with model, Doutzen Kroes, features stuffed bears, designer fur coats, boots, underwear, oversized bows, life-sized teddy bears and bear suits, all backgrounded ominously in the woods (Figures 12-16). Fetish objects such as satin, fur, lingerie, shoes, and exposed skin, mingle with scenes of stalking, sexual violence and death.³⁹ Mulvey's (2009:8, 11) view on the value of the fetish in patriarchal culture is of specific interest here. She argues that the fetish manifests as retribution for women's lack of a penis. The fetish is therefore a substitute for the lacking penis (Mulvey 2009:11). Jean Petrucelli (2006:108) who calls on Freudian theory to make her point states that objects such as tight shoes and corsets gain phallic significance because they offer a form of punishment to the man's fear of castration, caused by the visual shortage of a penis.



Figure 12: *W Magazine*, *Into the woods*, 2007.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
Photograph by Mert Alas & Marcus Piggot.
(Theglitterunderground 2013).

Examples of the 'fetishistic image' as 'both phallic extension and a means of discomfort and constriction' as formerly mentioned are illustrated in the photographs of Bourdin (Figures 5 and 7) and are especially significant in the following

³⁹ Although the photographs discussed in this section include fetish objects such as fur, I will not be making use of such objects or illustrations thereof in my own body of work.

photographs. For example, in Figure 12, a life-size teddy bear is implicitly stalking the fur-coated model from behind, as if she is prey.

In Figure 12 the model is lying half naked on a bed of leaves, giving the impression of a beautiful broken doll. In this image, the model is wearing a designer fur coat, black boots, provocative underwear, a blue bow and gloves, juxtaposed with an oversized brown teddy bear posed in similar fashion as the model. The model's body mimics the aftermath of a tragedy, exposed contorted and fragile against the dark, leafy background which is accentuated in the way her 'lifeless' hand is holding onto the teddy bear.

Figure 12 can also be understood in terms of voyeurism which is described by Mulvey (2004:837) as the construct of man as bearer of 'the look' and women's appearance as codified for observable fixed effect and erotically suggestive impact. I concur with Mulvey (2004:837) who argues that the visible occupancy of the woman in images such as these stage frozen moments of sensual contemplation and as erotic objects for the spectator. My reference to 'the spectator' here assumes John Berger's "prototypical, heterosexual/ normative male spectator, that only a male can 'interpret' the image of the female, and that females identify with the heteronormative male's interpretation" (DeMarchi 2014).⁴⁰ Berger in his seminal work *Ways of seeing* (1972) first theorised this internalisation of the male look by women. Berger (1972:47) explains this process as follows:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object-and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.

On another level the visual objectification includes signifying props like the teddy bear in various forms throughout these particular shoots, which can be read as

⁴⁰ John Berger is the author of the groundbreaking book *Ways of seeing*, first published in 1972 and based on the BBC television series of the same name. Still as influential today as at the time of its publication, the book consists of a series written and visual essays that raise questions about hidden ideologies in visual images and art (Kent 2015:211-213; Rose 2012:13). Berger concentrates specifically on the way women are depicted in media advertisements and on the genre of female nude painting in western art (Kent 2015:211-213).

infantilisation of the model.⁴¹ As Jhally (2009:14) states: “it is now the image of a little girl that stands for womanhood”. Presenting adult women as little girls therefore become problematic because through this process little girls are turned into sex objects and adult women are forced to look young, slender and childlike.



Figure 13: W Magazine, *Into the woods*, 2007.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
Photograph by Mert Alas & Marcus Piggot.
(Theglitterunderground 2013).

⁴¹ Infantilisation is another form of eroticization and a common trend in fashion photography and the media (Jhally 2009, Malsen 1995:218). The late sociologist, Erving Goffman analysed gender representation in the media in his seminal book *Gender advertisements* (1976). From this research he originated the term “infantilization of women” which refers to the way women are presented in childlike poses or dressed sexually suggestive as young girls (Jhally 2009, Sharp 2008). The Executive Director of the Media Education Foundation, Sut Jhally (2009:13) refers to the research of Goffman, arguing that women are infantilised through poses that hint at childhood insecurities such as placing “their fingers in their mouths when nervous, uncertain or shy” (Jahlly 2015). Infantilising takes on many forms in fashion photography and the media. One such example is the way models are posed, hiding behind objects, trees and other items similar to children who often hide behind things to fake concealment (Jhally 2009:13). Other manifestations of infantilisation are the use of bows, pigtails and school related attire such as stockings and school dresses in fashion shoots. Infantilisation in the media is also achieved by presenting adult women in a doll-like manner, which culturally links “womanhood with girlhood” (Jhally 2009:14).



Figure 14: W Magazine, *Into the woods*, 2007.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
Photograph by Mert Alas & Marcus Piggot.
(Theglitterunderground).

In Figure 15 below the model appears doll-like by the addition of the oversized pink bow attached to her head. The model is lying in a cadaverous pose; face down on a bed of leaves. Other than the pink bow, she dons only a pair of black boots, therefore exposing her pale nude and ‘obligatory’ slim body.



Figure 15: W Magazine, *Into the woods*, 2007.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
Photograph by Mert Alas & Marcus Piggot.
(Theglitterunderground 2013).

Long before this particular photo shoot, Bronfen (1992:99) already argued that when a dead female body is represented in a doll-like manner, the two

conundrums of western culture, death and female sexuality, are restrained through an erasure of their disorderly and imprecise qualities.

As mentioned before, the bodies depicted in Figures 12 and 15 are also contained bodies, which are in line with the finished and completed body of historical classical beauty, femininity and traditional aesthetics (Meagher 2003:36).⁴² Following Mulvey's (2009:8) theory of the fetish, it can again be argued that the contained body also implies inanimate constriction, containment and punishment and thus serves as a fetishised body. Furthermore, as Kristeva (1984:4) points out the abject demonstrates the impossibility of clear cut, lines of demarcation, division between the clean and the unclean, the proper and the improper, order and disorder. This is especially true when considering that the majority of bodies, (for example Figures 7, 8, 12 and 15) analysed thus far are presented as corpses and are therefore according to Kristeva (2011:45): '...nothing other than abject'. I will analyse Kristeva's notion of the abject and its relation to my premise, extensively in Chapter Three.



Figure 16: *W Magazine, Into the woods, 2007.*
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
Photograph by Mert Alas & Marcus Piggot.
(Theglitterunderground 2013).

⁴² For the sake of clarity, I wish to repeat a quote by Bakhtin (2003:228) on the western contained body ideal wherein he states that "The newly bodily canon in all its historic variations and different genres presents an entirely finished, completed strictly limited body".

The images also serve as examples of Bronfen's (1992:121) and Mulvey's (1975:8) suggestion that the gaze in images such as the ones discussed, are of isolation, eroticism and display, which in turn signify feminine sexuality (the nude body), desire (the boots and bow) and death (the photographic pose).

This is again evident in Figure 16 where a seemingly dead female figure dressed in a designer fur coat, is depicted with a large, red satin bow attached to her head. The placement of the bow is evocative of blood flowing from the model's head, which again eroticizes violence and fetishises the dead feminine body.

For reasons of clarity and interrogation of the image I will compare Figure 16 to a similar photograph shot by Bourdin for *Pentax calendar* (Figure 17) in 1980. In Figure 17 below a nude slender woman is depicted face down in an awkward, contorted position with a red substance flowing from her mouth. Other than in Figure 16 the eroticizing of the beautiful dead female is not subtle but glamourised and overt (Borecka 2014). She is apparently dead but her body is completely free of bruises or signs of a struggle and her cheeks are unnervingly rosy.



Figure 17: Guy Bourdin, *Pentax calendar*, 1980.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
The Guy Bourdin Estate 2014.
(Brandt 2009).

Stereotypes of female eroticism, subordination, powerlessness and passivity are at play here, traits also associated with the patriarchal notion of the epitome of femininity (Malson 1995:218, Malson 1998:108, Mulvey 2009:8).

I argue that these images implicate violence in the form of abduction, rape and death, clearly evidenced in the way the model is presented in a variety of deathly poses. It can be argued that the women in these images are voyeuristically depicted as post-coital, passive victims of sexual violence, which eroticises and fetishises domination, sexual violence and death. Mulvey (2009:11) refers to such displays of eroticism as “fetishistic scopophilia” which she argues to be the male’s second avenue of escape from the threat of castration. Fetishistic scopophilia she states “builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself” which I argue is thoroughly illustrated in Figures 12, 14, 15 and 16.

Following the arguments discussed, I conclude that the women in the images are presented by patriarchy as; beautified and erotised by the glamorisation and fetishisation of violence, weakness, vulnerability, sexual infantilisation, victimisation and most disturbingly the erotification of female death.

2.8 Conclusion

Man wishes her to be carnal, her beauty like that of fruits and flowers; but he would also have her smooth, hard, changeless as a pebble. The function of ornament is to make her share more intimately in nature and at the same time to remove her from the natural, it is to lend to palpitating life the rigour of artifice (De Beauvoir 2011:177).

This quote by De Beauvoir encapsulates masculine fixation on entrapment of women within youthful, slender, erotic feminine bodies, which I have analysed thus far in this dissertation. Furthermore, I elaborated on the connection in western culture between femininity and death and the historical link thereof with society’s compulsion to equate males with dominance, power and violence, and women with childlike naivety, inferiority, passivity and death. This has been argued by providing the supporting theories of Bronfen, De Beauvoir and Mulvey and as an attempt to unmask a range of contemporary visual culture, which strives to contain women’s unruly nature and to sustain men’s hierarchal dominance.

Hereafter my analysis extends to the female body, depicted as dead within fashion photography. The fashion photograph being part and parcel of mass media stereotyping and the consumption of the female body, through the constant

bombardment of women with images, which are geared toward the sustaining of gender stereotypes and misdirected feminine ideals in western culture.

During this research through the interrogation of fashion photographs depicting beautiful women in violent death scenes, I discovered meanings that trace the objectification and sexual fetishisation of female carnal death. Such fetishisation was explained through the arguments of Bronfen (1992:xiii), Mulvey (2013:6) and Rabine (1994:68, 98) in the light of what they regard as the average Freudian perceived threat of castration, which is substituted with a fetishised object such as the depiction of a deceased female. Most importantly, it has been concluded that these images do not represent female desire but rather male desire which manifests as a lifeless, contained and impenetrable female body. The deliberately aestheticised absence of bruises, blood or signs of struggle in the photographs evidence this.

Traits associated with the patriarchal epitome of femininity, such as passivity, powerlessness, vulnerability, weakness and feminine beauty are plentiful in these photographs. Analysis leads to the conclusion that these sensationalistic images are so common because the fashion and advertising industry has stumbled on the logic that if “the sexualised stereotype of a woman in our culture is passive and vulnerable” then “there is nothing more alluring than a dead girl” (Cochrane 2014).

Tragically, what the advocates of such commercial strategies do not realize (or ignore), is that they are blatantly condoning sexualised violence against women. It is extremely alarming when considering that this is an industry geared mainly toward women and especially younger women. The quoted theorists in this chapter such as Berger, Brookes, Bryant, Cochrane, Goffman and Jhally have proven through their research that images such as these have resounding consequences.

CHAPTER THREE: DEATH BECOMES HER: THE FEMALE CORPSE IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN ART

3.1 The grotesque and the abject female corpse

The decision to use representations of the grotesque and abject in art as portent of focus in this dissertation arose from the contemporary inclination in visual art to portray the grotesque body (disproportionate, unfinished, ambiguous and ever-becoming), as locus of resistance against the “male produced ‘female’ body” (Wallace 2009:266).⁴³ What is evident and extremely important in my investigation of the artworks in this study is the grotesque’s inherent characteristic of testing boundaries Connelly (2012:4) explains:

The grotesque is defined by what it does to boundaries, transgressing, merging, overflowing, destabilizing them. Put bluntly, the grotesque is a boundary creature and does not exist except in relation to a boundary, convention or exception ... Boundedness is a critical feature of the grotesque’s relationship with both the beautiful and sublime. In aesthetic discourse, clear and discreet boundaries are integral to the apprehension of beauty ...

In my own artworks and that of the artists discussed in this study, the grotesque is utilised for this very ability to transgress patriarchal boundaries and social rules and for its close connection to the excessive body, which secretes bodily fluids (Kristeva 1982:73, Wall 2010:280). Elements of shock and attraction, so inherent to the grotesque, are employed to make the viewer aware of the estranged and unresolved. The American scholar Alyce Baker (2009:3) accordingly argues that the grotesque has the ability to evoke contradictory feelings such as horror, disgust, amusement and laughter. Therefore, the grotesque allows no neutrality from the viewer. This will become evident in the artworks discussed in this chapter.

The grotesque is a term that originated in the Gothic era from the mid twelfth-century to the fifteenth century and was a means to describe the ornamentation discovered

⁴³ My discussion of the grotesque is generally limited to the western European tradition. Irigaray (cited by Grosz in her discussion of Irigaray’s work 1989:109) argues that women in phallogocentric confines “function only as objects (of consumption or exchange) between and for men”. Phallogocentric systems she argues, produce female corporeality in representational systems that position them as defective and subordinate. She maintains that such systems are thus unable to position women in women-oriented terms.

during the Renaissance in Rome. These decorative wall ornaments consisting of combinations of fabled creatures, plants and fantastical figures were excavated from the ruins of Nero's Golden Palace the Domus Aurea (Connelly 2012:3). The word grotesque (From the Italian word '*grottesche*') was derived from the underground rooms, which were reminiscent of grottos and decorated with bizarre elements, found in the palace (Connelly 2012:3). Soon after its discovery this peculiar ornamentation influenced the arts and decorative traditions of the Renaissance (Connelly 2012:3). The fifteenth century artist, Hieronymus Bosch's (1450-1516) paintings serve as an example of this tendency (see Figure 18 below).



Figure 18: Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ in Limbo*, About 1575.
Oil on wood, 58.1cm x 72.1cm.
Image courtesy of Indianapolis Museum of Art.
(Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2015).

As evident from Bosch's *Christ in limbo* (Figure 18), the grotesque also became a term commonly used to refer to all that is strange, deformed, monstrous, deviant and physically ugly (Connelly 2003:2). Such iconography is visible in Bosch's work by means of a nightmarish and surreal scene filled with symbolic representations of hell and purgatory. A monstrous oversized head with an enormous open stretched mouth is depicted engulfing naked human bodies. An amalgam of bestial human/animal figures also populate the scene. Similar supernatural, grotesque hybrid gargoyle

figures exist in Medieval Gothic cathedrals (Edwards & Graulund 2013:40). In addition, early Christian buildings such as churches and cathedrals feature many severed human head designs (Edwards & Graulund 2013:40). At the time they portrayed ideas about irrational understandings of the human subject as a re-shaped entity for didactic, functional as well as decorative purpose. These hybrid figures were to serve as a reminder to the unfaithful of what awaits them in hell (Harding 1998:37). According to Hurley (1996:4-6) a ‘Gothic sensibility’ was also revived in the nineteenth century due to a renewed interest in science, psychology and in human anxieties. Since then a variety of representational strategies were devised to depict the human form and its sub-conscious feelings of alienation.

The meaning of the word *grotesque* and expressions of the grotesque changed immensely since the fifteenth century. This is evident in Bakhtin’s (1968) expression of the grotesque as carnivalesque and regenerative.⁴⁴ The grotesque also gained tremendous interest in the arts and was embraced in the twentieth century by movements such as Dada, Cubism and Expressionism (Connelly 2012:3). These developments make it extremely difficult to pinpoint the grotesque, because it cannot be fixed to any one style, it is always in flux. I concur with Connelly (2012:4) who argues that: “[The grotesque] always represents a state of change, breaking open what we know and merging it with the unknown. As such, the one consistent visual attribute of the grotesque is that of flux.” This is evident in current synonyms ascribed to the grotesque such as, absurd, ridiculous, extreme, fantastic, ludicrous, distorted, uncanny, bizarre, aberrant, freakish, perverted, whimsical, preposterous (Merriam-Webster online thesaurus 2016). It is this trait of unpredictability and open-endedness associated with the grotesque, which forms the nucleus of the remainder of this dissertation.

⁴⁴ In *Rabelais and his world* (1968), Bakhtin’s theory on carnivalesque laughter is based on the tradition of medieval carnival (Guzlowski 1998:168). Grotesque expressions of carnival such as the clown and the fool, he argues, allows “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order” and is therefore regenerative (Bakhtin 1968:20, 27, 10).

3.2 Bakhtin's grotesque

Bakhtin's theories on the grotesque in his seminal book *Rabelais and his world* (1968) and its historical development as element of the 'other' and the 'abject' is of significance here.⁴⁵ As in this dissertation, the body is the central axis around which Bakhtin's theories pivot. He regards the body as a "fundamental category of the grotesque as represented and developed in the original medieval literary genre of *grotesque realism*" (Bakhtin 1968:19). "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract" (Bakhtin 1968:19-20). In grotesque realism, the "material bodily principle" thus acquires almost utopian qualities in the respect that the bodily element cannot disown its earthly materiality and origins (Bakhtin 1968:27). Bakhtin (1995:19) draws a distinction between the 'grotesque' body and 'classical' body and interprets the 'classical' body as a contained or enclosed body. In contrast, he defines the 'grotesque' body as a body that defies the "smooth surfaces of the body and retains only its excrescences" (Bakhtin 1968:21). This body is concerned with the "lower stratum of the body" relating to abject "acts of defecation, and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth" (Bakhtin 1968:21).

In the Renaissance, the body of grotesque realism was regarded as monstrous and shapeless (Bakhtin 1968:29). The grotesque body thus did not fit the framework of the conceptions of the magnificent as conceived by the Renaissance. Bakhtin (1968:24) sees the grotesque image as an image in "transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming." Bakhtin's grotesque also acts as support for Russo's feminist grotesque which she places in between the "correct and conventional" and institutional borders and "ordinary feminism as "heterogeneous, strange ... incomplete (1995:vii). This stance is extremely important to this study because as Russo (1995:vii) claims: "As a body politic, it would not be so easily recognized or so easily disavowed". In light of this

⁴⁵ The *Other* is used as description of a male dominated culture, which treats woman as Other in relation to man (Meyers 2010). De Beauvoir (2011:5) calls the Other the minority and least favoured compared to man. She argues that "man represents both the positive and the neutral"; whereas woman represents only the negative defined by "limiting criteria, without reciprocity".

statement, I propose that the importance of the grotesque body to celebrate differences and create empowered bodies cannot be overemphasised.

Theorist on the grotesque such as Connelly (2003:2), Edwards and Graulund (2013:37) concur that the grotesque today has gained a foregrounded role in art and image culture. As explained by Edwards and Graulund (2013:115-116) describing the work of the artist, Francis Bacon (1909-1992), the grotesque in art has become characteristic of works that ignore the rules of symmetry, clarity and order, which is characteristic of the classical world; in contrast the grotesque of today combines human and animal forms, the ugly, the formless and the mutilated. Evident in the works of Bacon (Edwards & Graulund 2013:116), it exaggerates, distorts and dissolves bodies.⁴⁶

The incongruous challenges boundaries and ignores categories. The horrific, deformed and transgressed all find a comfortable home within grotesque imagery (Connelly 2003:2-3). Terms central to this study, such as *the abject* and the *formless* also oscillate on the borderlines of this grotesque (Connelly 2003:2). Usages of the grotesque in art is therefore also a form of revolt against the exploitation and oppression of bodies (Edwards & Graulund 2013:116, Delgado 2010:vi). In the visual arts, established contemporary artists, such as Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith and Jenny Saville employ grotesque imagery as a defiant stance and means of “social protest” to vanquish dictatorial hegemonies (Delgado 2010:vi).⁴⁷

The British artist, Jenny Saville’s work is most securely tailored to the realm of

⁴⁶ The work of Francis Bacon delves into the realm of raw “brutalized” flesh, breaching boundaries of inside and outside (Edwards & Graulund 2013:114-115). Edwards & Graulund (2013) aptly describes his work as follows: “Through slices of life and brutality of fact, Bacon’s distorted figures, his images of contorted body parts and corporeal peculiarities, often include indefinable forms that merge the categories of man, animal and meat” exemplified in his work *Three studies for a Crucifixion* (1962).

⁴⁷ The American photographer, Cindy Sherman’s *Sex pictures*, created in 1992 explores the “ugly, macabre and grotesque” most convincingly (Respini 2012:35). The photographs, consisting of horrific pornographically staged mannequins, masks and prosthesis, which she acquired from medical catalogues, critiques male fetishes and in the words of the author, Eva Respini (2012:53) serve as “empty receptacles that function as signifiers for death power and aggression”.

The American feminist artist, Kiki Smith exposes the limits placed on the female body in western culture (Weitman 2004:10). Smith attempts to reappropriate the body as the site of women’s lived experience by utilising Bakhtin’s (in Russo 1986:219) “open, extended, secreting body”. The female body in her work secretes bodily fluids and excrement, evident in her sculptural works such as *Pee body* (1992) and *Train* (1993) (Weitman 2004:18-19).

Bakhtin's grotesque. Her grotesque depictions of severely obese, nude women, painted on oversized canvasses confront the viewer with unbounded, uncontrolled and unruly female flesh (Meagher 2003:36). Her bodies are in stark contrast to the contemporary western ideal of the tightly contained, slender female figure as seen in the aforementioned examples. Saville's nudes do not fit the conventions of the traditional female nude in western art history (Meagher 2003: 36).

Her work *Fulcrum* (1999) is an excellent example of grotesque's ability to transcend boundaries and break the rules of traditional western bodily ideals. In *Fulcrum* excessive, cadaver-like nude, female flesh is laid bare on a massive canvas of 2.6 meters by 4.87 meters (Meagher 2003:34).



Figure 19: Jenny Saville, *Fulcrum*, 1999.
Oil on canvas, 261,6cm x 487,7cm.
(Saatchi 2013).

The work overwhelms the spectator and threatens fixed body boundaries. The author Michelle Meagher (2003:24) describes this as follows:

In a cultural climate that encourages women to conceal, if not excise, those parts of their bodies considered fat, jiggly out of control and excessive, Saville insists upon revealing precisely these features.

Not only are Saville's bodies out of control and excessive, they also depict flesh that seems to be in the act of decaying with its permeation of blue, purple, yellow and green colouring (Smith & Watson 2002:138). By painting deformed, scarred and blotchy flesh, Saville's work violates both the tradition of the female nude and

popular media representations of the young, slender and most often, digitally enhanced female figure and are in stark contrast to the magazine images illustrated in Chapter Two of this study (Meagher 2003:37).

I strongly believe Saville is appropriating the monster and the grotesque to elevate women's self-representation to a place of power and becoming. As attested in the words of Marsha Meskimmon (1996:7):

The monster becomes an empowering trope for women artists precisely because it cannot be fixed: it is always 'becoming', poised on the borders ...They exist in a state of becoming rather than a false marker of fixity.

The grotesque's ability to overcome the boundaries, borders and rules of the enclosed classical body is of specific significance here. My interest in the grotesque thus revolves around its mastery in unravelling representations of the female figure, that stress women's corporeality as faultless surface and commodity (Pollock 2003:191). This is argued compellingly by Victor Hugo (quoted in Connelly 2003:4), stating that other than prevailing concepts of ideal beauty, which has only one standard, the grotesque, through its lack of fixity and unpredictability, offers limitless possibilities for autonomous expression of female embodiment.⁴⁸ The grotesque therefore serves the purpose of deconstructing phallogentric representations of women as object of the male gaze and as alternative for women's self-representation.

The grotesque body is then often depicted as a female body of reproduction, ageing, death and is described by Russo (1995:56) as a body that extends its boundaries and which is in a constant flux. This links to the abject body of Kristeva, which I will discuss in the next section.

3.3 Abjection

The word *abjection* originated in the fifteenth century from the Latin word *abjectus*, which literally means, "to cast off" or "throw away" (Merriam-Webster online

⁴⁸ Victor-Marie Hugo (1802-1885), French poet and novelist was one of the pioneering theorists on the grotesque and protagonist of the Romantic Movement in France (Goodreads 2015). One of his most lingering works, *The Hunchback of Notre Dam (Notre-Dam De Paris)* was published in 1831 (Biography.com 2015).

dictionary 2015). The ‘word’ abject refers to that which is liminal, wretched and disgusting, which hovers on the borders of human and non-human and is associated with the intolerable, such as bodily waste and excrement (Covino 2004:17).

For Julia Kristeva in *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection* (1982), abjection first occurs at the point where the child separates from the mother, the child then enters the symbolic realm or law of the father. Abjection thus represents a revolt against that which gave us our existence (Pentony 1996:1). The abject body becomes intolerable because it leaks wastes and fluids and is in violation of the hope for a flawless and decent body (Kristeva 1982:73). Much like the grotesque body of Bakhtin the abject body is ambiguous and reminds us of our corporeal deterioration and eventual death (Covino 2004:17). Kristeva (1982:4) sees the corpse as the ultimate symbol of abjection. It fractures the boundaries between inside and outside, fluid and solid (Menninghaus 2003:374). It is the ultimate disintegration of the autonomous subject “the corpse represents fundamental pollution” (Kristeva 1982:109). In addition, Kristeva (1982:4) states:

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.

The abject, similar to the grotesque, thus evokes horror, which is a combination of fear and disgust (Kristeva 1982:3). Noël Carroll (2003:300) states that the emotion of fear must satisfy the paradigm of harmfulness, which is disgust and its criterion-impurity. Blood, faecal waste, mucous, vomit, and pieces of flesh are ambiguous because they are treated as impurities. The ambiguity lays in distinctions such as me/not me, living/dead, inside/outside.

In a review of Douglas’s analysis of the body in *Purity and danger* (2003) Butler offers a feasible commencement for “understanding the relationship by which social taboos institute and maintain the boundaries of the body” (Butler 2008:207). Douglas (in Butler 2008:207) argues that the body’s contours are secured through surveillance that aspire to institute distinct measures of cultural continuity. In her essay *Bodily*

inscriptions, performative subversions, Butler (2008:207) describes that within such a view the boundaries of the body might well be understood as the margins of the cultural dominion. Butler (2008:207) argues that within Douglas's analysis the perimeters of the body, intrinsically become the circumscription of the collective. The cultural hegemony thus demarcates the boundaries of the body and as I argue, especially that of the female body. This is evident in the concept of "the male gaze" of Mulvey (2009:15) where men exercise power over women's bodies, through socially constructed standards (Berger 1972:64; Gagné & McGaughey 2002:815).

Grosz (1994:192) argues that: "abjection links the lived experience [and] the social and cultural specific meanings of the body". She states that there is a cultural investment in "selectively marking the body [by] privileging some parts and functions while ... leaving un- or underrepresented other parts and functions" (Ibid). Butler (2008:207) accordingly argues that imposing power systems that naturalises "certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange of the body" defines what enacts bodies such as those in the examples discussed (Figures 12, 15 and 17). Michel Foucault pinpoints a similar argument in his book, *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (1995), which I considered in Chapter Two.

Siopis's work *Feral Fables: Changeling* (2007) (Figure 20) (next page) provides an excellent example of how the abject repulses and transgresses bodily boundaries by revealing blood, bodily fluids and the maternal body. For the sake of fully explaining her work, I will explore the connection between the maternal body and abjection. For evidently it is within the maternal state that the abject is most pronounced (Creed 2007:47; Kristeva 1982:47, 1987:357).



Figure 20: Penny Siopis, *Feral Fables: Changeling*, 2007.
Ink and glue on paper, 76.5 cm x 56cm.
(McIntosh 2007).

Similar to the grotesque body of Bakhtin, the maternal body is a body “in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed” it is the “open penetrable body *par excellence*” (Bakhtin 1968:317, Mazzoni 2002:32). Russo (1995:29) argues that the maternal body has long since been identified with the grotesque through its link with the grotto-like womb. Bakhtin (1968:25-26) also describes the ultimate grotesque as

seen in the ancient terracotta figurines of senile pregnant hags (Jones 2008:118).⁴⁹

Bakhtin in this regard (1968:26-26) remarks:

There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine senile, decaying, and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed ... it is the epitome of incompleteness.

As argued by Kristeva (1982:4) Siopis's image defies cultural boundaries and does not respect "borders, positions, rules". In this respect I concur with Brenda Schmahmann (2007:26) who argues that "the pregnant, laboring and lactating body" is possibly provocative because it ignores normative cultural systems.

Siopis's unsettling work falls in this realm as her paintings comment on the coalition between femininity and abjection which is evident in Kristeva's (1982:374) theories concerning the abject. Siopis's work, *Feral Fables: Changeling* (2007) (Figure 20) explores the connection between femininity and abjection as follows: She depicts a woman-standing upright, tugging at her dress. The female figure rendered completely in crimson and pink hues, appears to have just given birth. Her face seems to be dissolving as red ink mixed with viscose glue, flows downward from her head toward her parted legs. McIntosh (2007:[sp]) aptly describes the materiality of Siopis's work as unruly and "overwhelming in [the] evocation of the gooey, glibbery melting of pictorial surfaces".

I propose that all the numerous taboos regarding death and the limits of the female body are revealed in Siopis's work. This is apparent in the arguments of Jantzen (2004:17), De Beauvoir (1989:148) and Karl Guthke (1999:190) who point out that woman through taboos such as menstruation, childbearing and the maternal, the symbol of life, becomes a compelling reminder of death (Guthke 1999:190).

This association became entrenched by the historical pathologising of the maternal body (Davis & Walker 2010:459).

⁴⁹ A collection of Hellenistic terracotta figurines depicting 'senile pregnant hags' was found in Kerch in the Ukraine (Metzler 2013:114).

For example the womb has been associated with one of the first diagnosed mental disorders fixed solely upon women, namely hysteria (Tasca et al 2012:110).⁵⁰

The aforementioned arguments historically link the womb to the monstrous and the abject (Creed 2007:48). The reason according to Creed (2007:49) is that the womb can never be totally eliminated and hovers on the borders of inside and outside, thus connecting it to the abject in a very profound way. Creed (2007:49) states that the womb exemplifies:

the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life from which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination-blood, afterbirth, faeces ... The womb is horrifying *per se* and within patriarchal discourse it has been used to represent woman's body as marked, impure and part of the animal/natural world.

To expand on this argument, I refer to Grosz (1994:14) who argues that in misogynist notions women have been contained within bodies that are represented as fragile, deficient, disorderly and treacherous. She further argues that this is directly connoted by patriarchal thought to female sexuality and women's reproductive capabilities which defines women culturally in a male/female and mind/body opposition (Grosz 1994:14).

In conclusion, it is evident in Siopis's turbulent use of art materials that she had intended to express the unsettling nature of the abject maternal body, as is aptly captured in her work *Feral Fables: Changeling* (2007). McIntosh (2007:[sp]), in agreement with Bakhtin (1968:19) explains that some occasions vindicate and disallows the expulsion of the bodily element and commands the subversive to refuse loss of "self/body", thereby transcending the boundaries of the female body imposed by culture.

I want to draw this section to a close by highlighting that the readings established in this section are extremely important in the analysis of the female corpse in relation to the works of the photographers and painters thus far in this study. This will become

⁵⁰ The first definition of hysteria dates to 1900 BC (Kahun Papyrus) and establishes the cause of hysteria to be a wandering womb⁵⁰ (Tasca et al 2012:110, Adair 1995:153). Plato went as far as to argue the womb to be a mindless animal roaming around the body of a woman causing hysterical symptoms (quoted in Adair 1995:154-155).

conclusive in my own theoretical stance and critical analysis of selected visual texts (in Chapter 3 and 4), giving evidence that the grotesque and abject in the work of the artist's address and challenge the regularised woman and the rigidly finished, impenetrable female body (Stallybrass in Stephenson 1999:64-65).

3.4 The female corpse in the work of Penny Siopis and Marlene Dumas

3.4.1 Penny Siopis

Penny Siopis is a long-standing South African artist and esteemed academic from Greek ancestry. She was born in 1953 in Vryburg in the Northern Cape Province. She received her Fine Arts degree at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. She completed her master's degree in 1976 and pursued postgraduate studies at Portsmouth Polytechnic in England (Krut 2004). Siopis became especially well-known for her *banquet* paintings and her ironic history paintings in the nineteen eighties (Krut 2004). Her use of tactile materials to encompass elements such as the discreet and formless are of specific interest to me (Olivier 2014:31). Her focus on the female body's incompleteness and vulnerability and her subversion of corrupt representations will be addressed in this section (Olivier 2014:31).

A substantiation example of the above statement can be found in Siopis's work, *Break* (2007) (see Figure 21 below). The painting depicts a harrowingly violent scene of a



Figure 21: Penny Siopis, *Break*, 2007.
Ink, oil and glue on paper, 23cm x 29.5cm.
(Stevenson 2007a)

mutilated and decapitated female, rendered in Siopis's more recent characteristic pink and red tones.

For the sake of appraisal, it is useful to revert to Chapter Two wherein I analyse the concurrence of death and femininity in fashion photography. I will juxtapose Siopis's work with an advertisement for *Blender* (see Figure 22 below), a fashion concept store in Istanbul.⁵¹ Both images depict a nude, sliced-up woman, where the amalgamation of sex and violence are apparent.



Figure 22: Beymen Blender fashion concept store: *Butcher shop*, 2010.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
Photograph by Koray Birand.
(AOTW 2010).

In *Butcher shop* (Figure 22) the nude woman dressed only in black stilettos and gold bracelets looks alluringly at the camera. She has been dismembered into diversely sized pieces and suspended in a horizontal position from 'meat' hooks, simulating an animal carcass in a butchery carved up for consumption. The feminist, animal activist and blogger, Kelly Garbato (2011) aptly describes the advertisement "as the pairing of fashion with misogyny ... and the linkage of women and nonhuman animals [to] consumable objects" and therefore I argue an extreme form of sexual objectification and contained brutality (Buzzfeed 2013; Grabe 2013:418).⁵²

⁵¹ Such juxtaposition, I argue, reveals how elements of the abject and grotesque change the reading of an image and elaborates on the valued stance of these concepts in this dissertation.

⁵² This was discussed earlier in the theories of Bartky (1993:309), Bordo (1993:309), Foucault (1995:184) and (1986:184) in Chapter Two of this study.

Furthering my argument of the represented images I observe that even though Figure 22 depicts a sliced female figure, the figure is still partially contained in its absence of blood and severed flesh and obvious signs of digital alteration. Examples of digital alteration include perfecting the skin by removing signs of cellulite or stretch marks and slimming the body to fit the unrealistic body ideals endorsed by fashion magazines as illustrated in Figures 7, 12, 15 and 17 (Beauty Redefined 2014). In Figure 22 the female nude is seemingly not perturbed by her ‘severed’ condition and is young and slender with perfect, blemish-free and youthful skin. One of her legs is absent from the photograph, which proves my previous observation of digital alteration.

Siopis’s work *Break* (Figure 21) depicts the female body as scattered fragments and chunks of flesh, borderless and detached, arranged in an elliptic, womb-like white circle enclosed in a pink background. Other than in Figure 22 there is no beautified gaze or superficially seductive allure intended in the work. Rather, Siopis’s grotesque scene conjures a sense of the monstrous womb and I argue, redefines beauty as a body made-up of more than its parts. Drawing from Kristeva (1982:96), Creed (2007:47) refers to the ‘monstrous womb’ where the woman’s maternal function is abjected as her capacity to procreate connects her to the beastly and untamed and to the course of “birth, decay and death”. As theorised by Russo (1995:8) in *Break* (Figure 21) femininity, death and descriptions of the grotesque as revealed and protuberant become intertwined, consequently polluting the ideal image of the female body as discussed in Chapter Two and evident in Figure 22.

Siopis’s *Break* can therefore be argued to present a “radical interiority” a phrase coined by Georgina Colby (2012:183), which is the decontaminated body in rebellion.⁵³ In this case I concur with the author Susan Corey (1997:229-230) who states that the grotesque crosses “over conventional boundaries undermining the established order and exposing oppressive systems, whether economic, racial, religious or gender-based”. Furthermore,

⁵³ Therefore closely related to the versions of Bakhtin’s grotesque and Kristeva’s abject.

she proposes that the meaningfulness of grotesque figurations lie on the edge of our value systems, which empowers the writer or artist to confront any concluding or impenetrable construction of certainty, “to raise questions about what has been lost or omitted from a particular view of reality, and to explore the paradoxical, ambiguous, mixed nature of human life” (Corey 1997:229-30).

Considering the aforementioned, I argue, that in *Break*, (Figure 21) Siopis employs the grotesque as an aesthetic technique to generate intense emotions in the viewer such as disgust, confusion and ambiguity questioning fixed value systems. I would suggest that the grotesque evoked by the female mutilated body in *Break* (Figure 21), produces high narrative disclosure which creates a link between the artwork and the viewer and hence in the construction of meaning.⁵⁴ The viewer, I argue, is forced, by repulsive images such as *Break*, to question his or her own viewpoint of accuracy and validity, thereby opening new avenues of interpretation and engagement with the ambiguities inherent in gruesome, monstrous images (Andrews 2015:4).

Alternatively stated by Kant (in Küplen 2015:146) “the disgusting prevents the possibility to find the object beautiful and hence its power reaches aesthetic territory also”. This I would suggest as is evident in Siopis’s work *Break* (Figure 21).

I argue that the painting *Break* (Figure 21) and the *Blender* (Figure 22) advertisement differ markedly, formally and aesthetically. For example, in *Break* the image comes

⁵⁴ Davis Drew Halfmann and Michael P. Young declares disgust to be ‘gut reaction[s]’ that reduce the “complexity and dimensionality of issues” (Halfmann & Young 2010:4). Writing on Kant’s concept of disgust Hannah Freed-Thall (2015:139) who has a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California, stresses that: “Disgust is the only affect that threatens aesthetic representation with collapse”. This is evident in Associate Professor of Germanic studies at the College of Arts and Science at Indiana University, Bloomington, Michel Chaouli’s argument on disgust (Chaouli 2015, Chaouli 2003:60). Also drawing from Kant, Chaouli (2003:61) argues that disgust occurs when something cannot be assigned to a category and “a description of disgust can consist only of examples.” He then argues that “disgusting non-things”, in contrast to the Kantian beautiful, cannot be absorbed “disinterestedly” because as Kant states (in Chaouli 2003:61) ‘they insist, obtrude, thrust themselves ... on the subject’. Argued this way the object world starts to intrude on the subject and the resultant non-autonomous subject, is reduced solely to a “heteronomous object” (Chaouli 2003:61). From this line of reasoning it can be deduced that disgust is not “inherent in the object” *per se*, but rather ensnare the subject more forcibly than do “concepts such as the ugly or the terrifying” (Chaouli 2003:60). Disgust, in my view is therefore defined by what it does to the beautiful. Per Kant (in Freed-Thall 2015:139) it forces enjoyment on the subject and can therefore “be neither beautiful nor ugly, nor sublime, give rise to neither positive or negative, neither to interested or disinterested pleasure”.

forth as chaotic, tragic and fragmented, enhancing its violent undertones. The work leaves no escape for the viewer, rather the viewers cognisance is thrust into a whirlpool of flesh and dismembered body parts. In contrast the *Blender* (Figure 22) advertisement is formally sleek and finished with smooth tranquil colours and an absence of bruises, making it visually pleasing thereby deliberately aestheticising the fragmentation of the female body in the media. In contrast, the dismembered disposition of Siopis's work, makes drivel of the confined feminine logotype advocated by the mass media, thereby succeeding in subverting female bodily constraintment (Herbst 2005:85).

In the work *Break* (Figure 21) and most other works by Siopis the colour red, form a central part of her artistic practice. With each new body of work red (from crimson to barely blush) is used repeatedly as metaphor and as reference to the world, the artist inhabits. It is of value to explore Siopis's use of colour as creator of meaning because the meaning of the colour red, through ages and cultures, has accumulated a greater number of associations. The suffragist and writer, Alice Meynell (2004:1), described the colour red as not the colour of life as commonly perceived, but of life broken open, of life violated "it is the secret of life, and not the manifestation thereof. It is one of the things the value of which is secrecy" and can be linked to the ancient medical texts and misdirected philosophical notions quoted above (Meynell 2004:1). The colour red has many connotations such as passion, guilt, sin, also anger, violence, sacrifice, but possibly the most insinuating - the colour of blood and wounding.

Siopis's *Shame* series (2002-2005) (Figure 23) and her work *Feral Fables: Changeling* (Figure 20), serve as prime examples of the expression of meaning intended in Siopis's use of the colour red. In her *Shame* series, which consist of ninety mixed media works of eighteen centimeters by twenty-four and a half centimeters, she creates distressing images of girls and women that signify an amalgamation of sexuality and trauma. She achieves this by using shades of red paint and ink, which she drips and pools until the figure is oozing red, interplayed with various shades of pink.

Her process, she explains is as significant as the works themselves and describes it as follows:

Many of the ‘shame’ paintings begin as ‘blots’; formless, splashes drips and drags of coloured liquid that run, pool and congeals. This raw clotted, liquid matter is open-form and invites entangled thoughts and feelings. Paint becomes a kind of physical emanation and a ‘ground’ for me, touching on something quite primary. In these works the initially amorphous forms, liquid form sets conditions for unspeakable things. Shame is a sensation as much as it is an image (Siopis 2014:245).

The South African critic, Sarah Nuttall (2014:185) similarly explains that in the work “body parts and fleshy part-object pool, stain and congeal into personal transpersonal and/or erotic connections between the girl body and a stranger”. The girl body is flattened and spills out in liquids of shame and “disgrace” (Nuttall 2014:185-186).



Figure 23: Penny Siopis, Details from the *Shame* series, 2002 -2005. Mixed media on paper, 18.5 cm x 24.5 cm. (Arts Observer 2014).

Siopis places the sexually branded girl child in the center of the works to signal the social atrocities of gendered violence, such as the high incidence of incest, rape and abuse, in South Africa (Nuttall 2005:141). The girl figure portrayed as violated and sexed is an intimate revelation of bodily experience, which purposely unsettles confines, commonly maintained by the personal and the communal, forcefully opening avenues which necessitates new forms of contemplation (ibid 2005:141). Siopis publicises the private and disrupts borderlines of inner and outer worlds, self and other.

It is evident in her *Shame* series that Siopis, paradigmatic with feminist endeavours, challenges the traditional enclosed feminine body and, embraces formlessness by using the ambiguous and uncontained female body (Schmahmann 2009:104). By depicting cruelly, violated figures, she brings home to the viewer, representations of the feminine body as traditionally constructed by the male gaze, as exemplified in the photographs in Chapter Two. These works which speak of disempowerment address a myriad of abused women around the world (Sibanda 2007).

In line with Bakhtin's grotesque bodies, the bodies of Siopis are shocking but also intensely beautiful (in a totally different way to the bodies depicted in the selected photographic advertisements above). Her bodies are not smoothed out and unnaturally ornamented as in the photograph *Butcher shop* (Figure 22). Even though her colour palette and manipulation of ink creates evocative and hard to ignore, entrancing images, her work also repulses because the viewer is forced to become a voyeur to heinous crimes such as sexual violence, wounding and death (Sibanda 2007; Smith 2005:137). Kathryn Smith (2005:137) explains these phenomena of attraction and repulsion when faced with ultimate abjection as follows:

[The work] ... suggests to us, in a highly complex way, that at the limits of the ugly, the abject, the repulsive, horror and disgust, beauty might be found; that beauty stands in intimate relationship to ugliness. The work reveals to us the difficulty of beauty as a concept; its shock, which forces in us an active rather than passive response. Drawing attention to the shameful, to that which makes us ugly to ourselves, Siopis' work at the same time confronts us with the conundrum, the predicament of beauty.

Another work of Siopis quintessential to the aforementioned combination of beauty and horror is *Head* (Figure 24) (next page).



Figure 24: Penny Siopis, *Head*, 2007.
Ink, oil and glue on paper, 14,7 cm x 21cm.
(Stevenson 2007b).

The work formed part of an exhibition titled, *Lasso* at Michael Stevenson Gallery and is a depiction of a decapitated head of girl lying on its side (Stevenson 2007b). I argue that the violence done to female representation throughout history seems to come under scrutiny in the work. The fleshy head, created with glue and ink, and the cadaver-like appearance and placement of the head attests to this. It is an image of beauty, but far from historical classical beauty as discussed in Chapter Two. The fragmentation of the female body, so familiar in fashion photography, is taken to the extreme, thereby opening avenues of conversation and questioning, so vital to correcting the wrongs done to women in western culture.

3.4.2 Marlene Dumas

Marlene Dumas was born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1953 (Butler 2015:43). She relocated to the Netherlands in 1976 and resides in Amsterdam (Butler 2015:43, Cox 2008). She has been a practicing artist for more than thirty years, gaining worldwide attention in the 1980's (Cox 2008). Dumas does not paint directly from life, but rather from visual references both personal and public (Cox 2008).

Her extensive visual archive consists of mostly of newspaper and magazine photographs (Coelewij 2014). She also favours deceased public figures such as Amy Winehouse, Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana (Cox 2008). My interest in Dumas's work is focused on the array of dead female figures, which she portrays in almost liquefied form. Her exclusive focus on bodies and her penchant for dead female figures resonates with my own interest in the macabre combination of femininity and death.

Dumas is strongly aware of the power of representation and uses this as tool to assign the viewer as co-conspirator in the fabrication of meaning (Bedford 2008:34-35, 43).⁵⁵ Dumas (quoted in Bedford 2008:43) states that “The aim of my work ... has always been to arouse in my audience (as well as myself) an experience of empathy with my subject matter”. In similar manner to the work of Siopis and my own work, her portrayal of female figures, questions female representation, femininity and notions of beauty and ugliness in art and the media.⁵⁶ Similar to Siopis, Dumas achieves this by using the liquidity of paint to probe and push the boundaries of her subjects (see Figure 25 below).



Figure 25: *Marlene Dumas painting in her studio*, [sp].
Photograph, Dimensions unknown.
Photographed by Paul Andriessse.
(Startkunsteducatie 2014).

Her control of fluid stains is both seductive and disturbing in its proximity to emotional and ominous turf, as is strikingly evident in her work, *Dead Marilyn* (Figure 26) (next page). *Dead Marilyn* is based on a poignant mortuary, newspaper

⁵⁵ As discussed in Chapter Two relating to the theories of Stuart Hall.

⁵⁶ I am aware that Dumas's subject matter extends beyond female figures, but for the purposes of this study I will focus only on her work that presents a combination of femininity and death.

photograph of Marilyn Monroe. The work formed part of Dumas's retrospective exhibition, *Measuring your own grave* (Butler 2008) and shows her characteristic style of diluted, fluid use of inks and watercolours (Figure 25) which renders Marilyn almost unrecognisable in blotchy patches of blues and greens (Schjeldahl 2008).⁵⁷



Figure 26: Marlene Dumas, *Dead Marilyn*, 2008.
Oil on canvas, 38cm x 49cm.
(Schumacher 2009).

Dead Marilyn and similar works of Dumas that combine death and the feminine such as *Dead girl* (2002) (Figure 27) (next page) and *Losing (Her meaning)* (1988) (Figure 28) (next page) ruthlessly delves into the abject and Bakhtin's grotesque by tormenting the viewer with simultaneous reactions such as shock and fascination. The viewer is also burdened with the collapse of boundaries and classifications entrenched in power structures of enclosure and enclosure (Anspaugh 1995:129; Connelly 2012:4; Valdez 2016).

⁵⁷ Marilyn Monroe was found dead face down in her apartment on August the fifth, 1962 (Pocklington 2015). The blotchy discoloration of Marilyn's face can be explained in terms of lividity. Lividity results when a person dies. Firstly, the heart stops pumping causing the blood to settle in direct response to gravity. The parts of the body that touches the ground then becomes ashy and greyish (Pocklington 2015). Marilyn died face down, causing lividity in her face, leaving it blotchy and unrecognizable (Pocklington 2015).



Figure 27: Marlene Dumas, *Dead girl*, 2002.
Oil on canvas, 130cm x 110cm.
(Butler 2008:185).

The female figure in *Losing (Her meaning)* (Figure 28) below attests to Dumas's use of the abject to bring across meanings such as the patriarchal western tradition of the female nude in art and its association to present-day media portrayals of the nude female body (Bedford 2008:39).⁵⁸



Figure 28: Marlene Dumas, *Losing (Her meaning)*, 1988.
Oil on canvas, 60cm x 70cm.
(Butler 2008:253).

⁵⁸ I refer to the texts on abjection by Douglas (in Pajaczowska & Ward 2008), Kristeva (1982:4) and Butler (2007:207) and to Kristeva's (1982:4) text on the corpse as the ultimate symbol of abjection.

Losing (Her meaning) (Figure 28) depicts a pale, lifeless female body hovering face-down in a pool of water, like Ophelia tipped over (Bedford 2008:39, Cahill 2015:279). The work is rendered in monotone white, green and black hues, which enhances its dark and haunting subject matter. The centrally placed figure, dominates the frame and seems to implore open-ended readings. This is endorsed by curator and art critic, Emma Bedford's description of the work "as a metaphor for the inability to act or connect, or perhaps a sheer indifference to the world" (Bedford 2008:39). Bedford (2008:40) confirms my larger argument by contending that it is the very ambiguity of Dumas's work and its co-existence with firm descriptions and viewpoints, which go beyond fixed meanings and opens up spaces for new interpretations surrounding the female body. She further states that: "In tackling the arena of the presentation and representation of sexuality, historically the preserve of the male gaze, Dumas subverts the conventional gendered hierarchy" (Bedford 2008:41). It is thus argued by Bedford that by inverting the nude figure, Dumas expressly and theoretically turns the traditional western nude on its head, simultaneously undermining (or literally drowning) the traditional male gaze as exemplified in the traditional *Ophelia* figure of Millais (Figure 4). Examples of the gazed upon nude in Figures 7, 12, 15 and 17 in Chapter Two function in the same manner.

3.5 Synthesis and conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter, it is unmistakable that Siopis and Dumas employ liquefied mediums to embody strong visceral responses of seduction and repulsion in their work. This dialectic which I have attested to is most common in the theories of Kristeva and Bakhtin discussed in Chapter Two of this study and are pertinent to Dumas and Siopis's interest in the ruptured and revealed female body. As I have set out to prove, their representations of subversive, violated female bodies strongly contrast with the glamorized female corpses depicted in the fashion photographs accentuated in Chapter Two. Other than in Chapter Two which concentrates on representations of the beatified contained female corpse, I have established in this chapter that Siopis's and Dumas's handling of the female corpse revels in visceral materiality, abject fluidity and the monstrous and grotesque female body. By such

means they apply the female body as subversive tool, triumphing over the threat of excessive female flesh and collective norms advocated in the mass media.

The following chapter contains an analysis of the practice-led research approach followed in the body of work created for this study. In the exhibition accompanying this research the artistic process is juxtaposed with the work of Dumas and Siopis in both subject matter, medium and application. Similar to their work, my focus is on the female figure/corpse as sourced from popular culture and the mass media.

CHAPTER FOUR: SHUTUP AND BE STILL

4.1 Practice-led research

The body of work in this study is an extension of my practice in 2013, which is part of the requirements for the fourth year at the department of visual arts at the University of Pretoria. For this MA (FA) study, I continued my investigation into the application of liquid media such as ink and watercolour. My conceptual interrogation of the commodified feminine body in fashion photography hinges on theories of representation and the expressive application of fluid mediums to subvert such representations. My choice of painting and source material developed from a need to articulate criticism on patriarchal representations of women in contemporary society.

I specifically selected the mediums of ink and watercolour because when applied and manipulated with water and gesture, they are responsive and expressive. On a somewhat subjective level, the results resemble the notion of the abject as described by Kristeva: “a crises and collapse when one is neither a subject nor an object” (Kristeva in Warr 2006:242) and the grotesque described by Bakhtin: “the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed complete unit” (Bakhtin 1968:26). In the same way, the visual form of the female body in my work is rendered unpredictable, open-ended and balances on the uncertain edge of surface and depth, articulation and incompleteness. This is eloquently explained in the words of Siopis (quoted in De Angelis 2014:277): “The border between form and formlessness is uncertain: where anything might emerge, a patient suspension of disbelief is required in order to let images come into being and visibility.” Similar to Siopis my aim is to embrace uncertainty and instability - “exhilarating change” (Nuttall 2009). That said, the accompanying exhibition of artworks for this study creates a dialogue between the cadaverous female figure and the materials used, embodying my own interpretation of this particular combination of portrayed symbols.

The designated title *Shut up and be still* has dual implications. Firstly, it indicates a defiant stance to compel the viewer to engage with the intended message of the work, which is the interrogation of the patriarchal silencing and pacifying of women through the ages, established since the dawn of Eve. This is corroborated by the author

Elizabeth V. Dowling's (2007:30) argument that patriarchal expectation is geared toward the silencing of women. Likewise, the author Robin Morgan (1989:108) maintains that "The majority of the population in virtually all nation-states is female, and is forced by patriarchy to obey, be silent and acquiesce". I have also discussed earlier in this dissertation that male-on-female violence is central to the silencing and pacifying of women in western society, especially in cases of rape and domestic violence (Burte 2008:viii-ix; Cox 2010:ii).⁵⁹ The word *still* in the title refers to the fetishisation of the passive, lifeless female figure as discussed in Chapters One and Two of the dissertation. My body of work, through the exploration of the concurrent identification of femininity with death in western culture, encourages a dissection of these established patriarchal atrocities against women. Secondly the title *Shut up and be still* could be interpreted as the traditional gesture of respect and deliberation after a tragic event. For the viewer a moment infused with silence may evoke some contemplation in remembrance of multiple abused women depicted in this exhibition.

4.2 Process

As mentioned in Chapter One and in section 4.1 above, this study is based on a practice-based research approach. The body of work created during the phase of this research developed and changed as the process of making and the creation of meaning progressed.

My work developed mentally and emotionally through the interpretation of numerous visual texts from fashion photographs depicting deceased female figures, and the theories concerning femininity and death elucidated in this study. The theories on femininity and death, the fashion photographs discussed and the interpretation of the work of Siopis and Dumas is implicit in my own body of work. The meaning of my work can be understood through a synthesis of viewer, argument, medium and the specific context in which the works are considered. Through my process and on-going awareness of the state of women's plight in predominantly in western society, but also in the world at large, I came to a better understanding of my own journey as a women and my role in it.

⁵⁹ See Chapter One.

Because I have been faced with domestic violence in my own life it has particular resonance for me and hence the expressions thereof in my work.

The process of my practice-led research entails the use of fashion photographs (exampled in Figure 29) as source material in most my work. Similar to the work of Dumas discussed in Chapter Three, my images are not derived from live models but from popular media such as magazines and the World Wide Web. My aim was to subvert and call into question the highly codified female figures, depicted in the photographic source material (Bonacossa 2006:9).⁶⁰



Figure 29: W magazine, *East of Eden*, 2013.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
Photograph by Mert Alas and Marcus Piggot.
(W Magazine 2013).

⁶⁰ This includes sexually objectified and stereotyped images of female figures.



Figure 30: Vogue Japan, *Perfection in Couture*, 2011.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
Photograph by Mert Alas and Marcus Piggot.
(Stylebrity 2011).

Akin to the Japanese artist, Fumie Sasabuchi (see Figure 31 below), I undermine the polished image of the female corpse as depicted in international fashion magazines (Figures 7, 12, 15, 17, 29 and 30).



Figure 31: Fumie Sasabuchi, Selection of work, [Sa].
Photograph, dimension unknown.
Photograph by Fumie Sasabuchi.
(Fei 2009).

My process is closely linked to the theories on the abject and the amorphous manner in which I engage with the mediums. Multifarious experiments in my work are the result of processes of engagement with the irregular material characteristics of

mediums such as ink⁶¹ and watercolour. While Sasabuchi literally dissects the flawless facades of female bodies from fashion magazines by drawing onto them (Figure 31) I on the other hand, dissect these surfaces by decomposing and disintegrating the pictorial space through the use of these flowing, mutable materials (Schwenk 2012:[sp]).

My process entails physically grappling with the medium and the fascinating tension it enacts between containment and formlessness. I am therefore interested in the unstable and incomplete female body as juxtaposed to the idealised ‘classic’ and static body as portrayed in fashion magazines. The work, *Subverting constraint* (Figure 32) as seen below exemplifies ink and watercolours as having the required



Figure 32: Thelma van Rensburg, *Subverting constraint*. 2015.
Calligraphy ink on Fabriano paper, 56cm x 76cm.
Photograph by the artist.

⁶¹ The first known inks comprised of red, ochre, and black manganese dyes (Morris 2014). The application of ink to announce images and writing spans over many centuries (Morris 2014). Cave paintings dating back more than forty thousand years were found in El Castillo in Northern Spain and Sulawesi in Indonesia (Morris 2014). Ink was used exclusively for artistic purposes for more than thirty-five years. Apart from cave paintings, ink gained prominence five thousand years ago in China, where it was originally used to blacken pictures and texts in raised stone-carved hieroglyphics (Greene 2006:16). This ink called, *Indian ink*, consisted of a mixture of soot extracted from pine smoke and lamp oil (Greene 2006:16). The Japanese refined this recipe by experimenting with natural elements such as plants, fruits and minerals (Greene 2006:16). Presently ink is used in many different pens for writing and drawing, and also for printing and dyeing.

capriciousness to provide the sought after formal and conceptual properties of the eventual mark on the paper which is of course dependent on the moisture of the brush and paper.

Decisions are made as the image emerges, determining what to retain, remove or develop. Therefore, these actions and decisions become distinctive references to the source material used, as well as the interaction of the medium, paper and physical movement of the hand and brush. Rather than being read as lines, shapes or gestures, such marks become spontaneous stains, drips and pools of fluid ink causing the female figural body to materialise as demonstrated by the work *Anonymous* (see Figure 33 below).



Figure 33: Thelma van Rensburg, *Anonymous*. 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 35cm x 34,5cm.
Photograph by the artist.

I deliberately rely on chance when creating the image, depending on the natural interaction of the fluids and colours to create the quality of mark that will reflect the purpose of the work, which is to echo the permeability of the female body. Tracy Warr (2000:29) confirms that the trend concerning the body within postmodern art practice since the 1960s has caused artists to acknowledge the body as a “stinking, breathing, needy, everyday body”. In this regard the surface of the paper becomes the meeting place of the image, the material and the context of the work, and becomes the site of the struggle between these forces. This involves a literal confrontation with the medium, which manifests as personal frustration when the image goes array. I am

interested in the edgy tension between representation and abstraction in order to subvert the traditional flawless and enclosed female figure of western body ideals discussed in Chapter Two. This also involves a literal struggle with the medium, which manifests as personal frustration when the image does not go as planned or some vital content seems amiss.

Comparable to the violence done to the female figure when represented as beautiful and lifeless, my artistic process becomes a violent rebellious activity geared toward unsettling such representations. This process is thus also a form of mental release from my own tensions regarding the constraints placed on my female body in western society. In some cases, I might decide to discard the work and in others I will spray water on the work or place it under running water and even bleach segments to remove the colour, thus it becomes a form of symbolic cleansing and personal liberation.

4.3 Medium

4.3.1 Ink and watercolour

I use an assortment of inks and watercolours, such as pigmented calligraphy ink (traditionally used for writing), acrylic ink and liquid watercolours. These inks and watercolours differ in properties, which I use to create the ephemeral, pooling and drip effects I desire. The calligraphy ink is non-waterproof while the acrylic-based pigmented ink is water-resistant (Dick Blick 2015). This enables me to manipulate the work even after it has dried which (as stated above) includes spraying water on the work, leaving metaphoric ghost traces of the formerly applied ink. The work then assimilates the aforementioned diminishing boundaries, which is a characteristic of the grotesque and the abject as established in my research. In this sense, I concur with Pollock (2003:191) who argues that if beauty and perfection are at the core of phallogentric representations of women, then re-representing women as abject through the uncovering of their, body fluids, internal bodies and so called ‘unruly parts’ such as menstruation birth, vomit and decay, will unravel the dominion of male optic visual enjoyment. As said above, I use the inks in conjunction with transparent watercolours, which allows for different visual effects that resemble bodily fluids.

With these means I am able to layer several colours on top of each other. Apart from enriching the work my layered technique emblematically expresses the complexity of the issues addressed in this research.

4.4 Artworks

4.4.1 Reveling in the abject, the imperfect *Ophelia*

In my work, comparable to Siopis and Dumas, my interest lies in pushing my subjects to the limits of instability, pressuring for threatening corporeity and the degeneration of image and surface which ink and suitable paper allows me to do. For example, in the work *Ophelia* (see Figure 34 below) my aim was to express Kristeva's abjection and disrupt the combination of appealing femininity and death (found in other renditions of Ophelia) by means of the manipulation of ink. In the work, in accord with Siopis, I used mainly the colour red, brown and white, which resulted in varieties of red, ochre and pink. These colours are reminiscent of bodily fluids and trauma, which are also perceptible in the work of Siopis's, *Feral fables: Changeling* (Figure 20).



Figure 34: Thelma van Rensburg, *Ophelia*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 45cm x 30cm.
Photograph by the artist.

As aforementioned in a different context, many of the paintings in the collection of works for my exhibition, Kristeva's (1982:4) and Bakhtin's (1968:21) description of 'borderless bodies' are discernible.⁶² (Figures 7, 12, 15, 17 and 22).

My intention is to let the figures become enmeshed in a sensation of instability and ambiguity - fundamental to the grotesque and abject (Anspaugh 1995:129).

Korsmeyer (2008:367) argues that to fully grasp an artwork emotional captivation is crucial and she favours *digust* as a captivating 'aesthetic' emotion. I argue that my work in the words of Korsmeyer (2008:368) *sublate* or "signals aesthetic insight in a bodily visceral response" akin to Kristeva's theories on abjection.⁶³

The work *Ophelia* (Figure 34) refers to Hamlet's tragic heroine discussed in Chapter Two of this study. I elected *Ophelia* as a subject because there are plentiful references in fashion photography based on this iconic feminine corpse. Other than the beautified *Ophelia* of Millais (Figure 4), my work depicts an ascending body severed in half by the composition, floating upright, seemingly dissolving and decomposing into the paper. Ink drips bleed from her body rendering the figure blurred. The boundaries of the figural body appear erratic, irregular and fluctuating, subverting the multiple 'pretty' depictions of Ophelia.

My intention was for the internal body to emerge and appear externalised, bursting with grotesque figuration and abject instability as seen in Figures 35-38 which are also based on found fashion photographs depicting female deaths such as

⁶²This is exemplified in my work *Ophelia I* (2015) (Figure 35) which I will discuss shortly.

⁶³ The term *sublate* is opposed to the term "sublime" and "is likened to an elevation and expansion of spirit – free from earthly weight – so the sublate signals aesthetic insight in a bodily, visceral response." (Korsmeyer 2008:368).



Figure 35: Thelma van Rensburg, *Monument*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 45cm x 30cm.



Figure 36: Thelma van Rensburg, *End of Eden*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 20.5cm x 18cm
Photograph by the artist



Figure 37: Thelma van Rensburg, *Ambiguous death*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 24cm x 29.5cm.
Photograph by the artist.



Figure 38: Thelma van Rensburg, *Murky waters*, 2016.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 45cm x 30cm.
Photograph by the artist.

Ophelia. I want to refer again to the words of Kristeva (1982:3) on abjection and the crossing of boundaries which was my conceptual intention in the above works:

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being ... Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit-cadere, cadaver ... "I" is expelled. The border has become an object.

I argue that works such as *Monument* (Figure 35) and *Murky waters* (Figure 38) embrace both the grotesque and abject in terms of disorder, ambiguity, instability, flux and the exceeding of limits. In this regard, I argue that the works depicted in Figures 35-38 resist the totalitarian, perfected, immutable, well-defined and standardised female body of patriarchal normative structures (Shabot 2014:503, Berberick 2011:2).

4.4.2 The decapitated female nude

In Chapter Two I delved extensively into the fetishisation of the deceased, beautified nude female body instated by patriarchy and the male gaze (Figures 7, 12, 15 and 17). In relation to this I was provoked to undermine the beautified female corpse by analysing the decaying, deceased female body, which I have attempted to contrast to the flawless fashion photographs depicted in Chapter Two. Keeping this in mind I created the works *Burdensome* (Figure 39), *Unnuded* (Figure 40) and *Discarded* (Figure 41). These works were painted to resemble the decay that sets in shortly after death such as *Livor mortis* as well as *venous marbling* which are some of the post-mortem changes that occur after death (Wagner 2009:21 and 26).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *Livor mortis* is the settling of blood in the lower parts of the body; for example, when the body is lying on its back the blood will settle there and will cause purple and pink discolouration of the skin. Although the parts of the body which are in direct contact with objects such as bra straps and the floor will become pale as a result of the pressure on the veins of the skin (Wagner 2009:21). In forensics *venous marbling* or patterning is a term that refers to the tree like patterns that become visible on the skin due to blood breakdown of superficial veins (Wagner 2009:26).



Figure 39: Thelma van Rensburg, *Burdensome*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 20cm x 35.5cm.
Photograph by the artist.

In Figures 39-42, I made use of similar colours and attributes as manifested by livor mortis and venous marbling to convey to the viewer of my work that female death is not beautiful at all, but rather grotesque and pitiless.



Figure 40: Thelma van Rensburg, *Unnuded*, 2016.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 56cm x 76cm.
Photograph by the artist.



Figure 41: Thelma van Rensburg, *Discarded*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 35cm x 19cm.
Photograph by the artist.

This is especially evident in the work *Venus Marbling* (see Figure 42 below) which depicts a nude woman rendered in mottled pink and blue hues, her face and body distorted seemingly decomposing and in rigor.



Figure 42: Thelma van Rensburg, *Venus Marbling*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 30cm x 45cm.
Photograph by the artist.

The relevance of these works is that I was provoked by French feminist writer, Hélène Cixous's description of Rembrandt's female nude in *Bathsheba bathing* (1654). She argues that the nude in *Bathsheba bathing* "is not a nude. Not the object of desire ... [She is] the non-nude nudity. Not denuded. Not undressed" (Cixous 2003:256).

I further argue that the deceased nudes in my work are also not nude but dressed with skin discolouration and patterning, which occurs in the decomposition process. The female corpses in these images (Figures 39-42) are also not contained and flawless as depicted in the photographs of Figures 12 and 15 in Chapter Two, but rather stained and discoloured. Another characteristic of the decomposition process is the leaking of decomposed blood and fluids from bodily orifices (Wagner 2009:27). In the works *Unnuded* (Figure 40), *Discarded* (Figure 41) and *Slippage* (see Figure 43 below) and many of my other works such as *Ophelia I* (Figure 36), *End of Eden* (Figure 36), and *Murky waters* (Figure 38), I depict leakages of the body, through the visceral painterly process of drips, seepage, stains and hemorrhaging.



Figure 43: Thelma van Rensburg, *Slippage*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 23cm x 32.5 cm.
Photograph by the artist.

Comparable to Siopis's work, *Feral fables: Changeling* (Figure 20) and Dumas's work, *Dead girl* (Figure 27), I herewith evoke tension between stable and unstable,

which is also evident in the decomposition process of the body after death as well as the grotesque open, protruding inner body as postulated by Bakhtin.

Even though similarities between my working methods and that of Siopis and Dumas exist, my technique differs in medium and paint application. Other than Siopis's distinct process of mixing thinned inks with white glue to create tactile, visceral surfaces parallel to encaustic methods, I combine liquid watercolours, white acrylic ink and shellac based inks to achieve tension between thick and thin substances and paper and medium (Artthrob 2009, Siopis 2009:97).⁶⁵ I also often apply several layers of these mediums to create intensity between opaque and luminous surfaces. Dumas on the other hand makes use of oil paints which she thins with solvents, stretching it to its limits (Artthrob 2009).

4.4.3 Inside/outside: Emerging

In the following set of works my intention was to unearth the repressed, fixed divides related to the internal otherness of the female figure. I concentrated on re-figuration of female otherness by fragmenting the 'male gaze' as theorised by Mulvey (2009:15) in Chapter Two. The work *The forensic look: Bloody body* (Figure 44) depicts a series of ink works which conceal and reveal selected body parts of a slumped figure of a woman. Implications of violence in the work allude to a series of post-mortem photographs of body parts taken at a crime scene (feet, bruised legs and a hand hanging limp from a mottled burgundy dress).

⁶⁵ Shellac is a yellowish resin created from the excretions of resin from the lac bug. It is commonly used to create varnish by dissolving it in ethanol (Collins English dictionary online 2016).



Figure 44: Thelma van Rensburg, *Forensic look: Bloody body*, 2016.
Watercolour and ink on Fabriano paper, sizes variable.
Photographs by the artist.

The dress appears to be soaked in blood, dripping and bleeding at its margins. The work can be contrasted to the perverse photographs of Bourdin in Figures 45 and 46, which are equivalently based on crime scenes.

Bourdin's photographs depicted here are composed of slender, desirable models fragmented to reveal only their unblemished legs and buttocks. In both images the models have been detruncated, accentuating the focus on the models exposed *derriere*, black stockings and stilettos. In Figure 45 the model is placed in an absurd



Figure 45: Guy Bourdin, *Pentax calendar*, 1980.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
(Bourdin 2008, plate 19).

headless and seductive pose, accentuating the erotic gaze, also obvious in Figure 46 with the inclusion of a juvenile, furry toy elephant.



Figure 46: Guy Bourdin, *Campaign for Charles Jourdan*, Spring 1979.
Photograph, dimensions unknown.
(Bourdin 2008, plate 18).

Creating the work *Forensic look: Still waters* (Figure 47), I employed a similar method of depicting snap-shots of hands and feet which allude to forensic photographs of detached body parts.



Figure 47: Thelma van Rensburg, *Forensic look: Still waters*, 2016.
Ink and watercolour on hand made cotton paper.
Photographs by the artist.

Similar to the works of Dumas, *Dead Marilyn* (2008) (Figure 26) and *Losing (Her meaning)* (1988) (Figure 28), I opted for blotchy blues and greys with touches of ochre and red as device to draw the viewer into alluring, intricate flow patterns caused by the application of ink and watercolour. This I contrasted with stark backgrounds in shades of black creating a menacing dialogue between figure and background, thereby accentuating the macabre and ominous atmosphere of the works. The work can also be compared to Siopis' work *Break* (2007) (Figure 21), as related to the emotive use

of colour and the scattering of body parts which creates dialogue between embodiment and signification. Similar to Siopis, my aim is for “message and meaning” to become inseparable (Martin 2009).

4.4.4 Decomposing Bourdin

The following works *Desirous* (Figure 48) seen below, *Nameless commodity* (Figure 49) and *Beyond sacrifice* (Figure 50) were created to contrast the glossy, erotic images of Bourdin in Figure 46 and 47. For example, the work *Desirous* (see Figure 48 below) depicts two abnormally twisted legs with inchoate, distorted and indistinct edges reminiscent of Bakhtin’s (1968:26) text “unfinished and open body” and abject decomposing corpse of Kristeva (1982:26).



Figure 48: Thelma van Rensburg, *Desirous*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 30cm x 22.5 cm.
Photograph by the artist.

Correspondingly, the work *Nameless commodity* (Figure 49) reveals a detuncated female body oozing fluids, lying with her hands bound behind her back. A gauzy dress, draped over her head revealing her bare buttocks and legs. The image speaks of the aftermath of a violent death and is suggestive of torture and perhaps rape,

befalling many women at the hands of men as asserted by Phumla Williams in her report, *Gender violence concerns all of us* (2013).



Figure 49: Thelma van Rensburg, *Nameless commodity*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 30cm x 45cm.
Photograph by the artist.

The painting, *Beyond sacrifice* (Figure 50) (next page) equivalently depicts a nude female body lying exposed over a table, once again referencing violence in the form of rape. The spread-eagled woman also alludes to a sacrificial sensibility.⁶⁶

Unlike Bourdin's placated sensationalist images (Figure 44 and 46) these works are intended to be alarming, startling and shocking. In addition, I argue that in both *Nameless commodity* (Figure 49) seen above and *Beyond sacrifice* (Figure 50) the female body exemplifies what Bronfen (1992:141) describes as "signify[ing] a moment of control and power".

⁶⁶ On the readings of Irigaray the author Tatjana Alecsic (2013:22) argues that radical feminism situates female sacrifice as the foundation of patriarchal order. She argues that by means of male domination, normalisation and ownership of the women's bodies, women become sacrificial victims. According to Alecsic (2013:22), Cixous (2000:165) similarly denounces female sacrifice as the cornerstone of the patriarchal social system.



Figure 50: Thelma van Rensburg, *Beyond sacrifice* 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 45cm x 30cm.
Photograph by the artist.

With further analysis, I argue that the work, *Beyond sacrifice* (Figure 50) incorporates all the elements of the abject and grotesque in formal attributes such as a female figure lying unnaturally draped over a table in seeming rigor mortis with fluids draining in trickles down the edges of the table.⁶⁷ It is my intention in the work to

⁶⁷ According to Scott A. Wagner in his book *Death scene investigation: A field guide* (2009:19) *rigor mortis* can be defined as ‘the stiffening of death’. Rigor mortis is a chemical reaction, which occurs in the muscles after death. The body stiffens causing the limbs of the deceased to remain fixed in position

draw the viewer in and to prompt dialogue regarding such atrocities. An analysis by Frederick Burwick (1990) on the effect of the grotesque on the viewer seems apt here. He argues that, “the grotesque results from the ironic tensions of form *vs.* content, illusion *vs.* delusion” affectively aggravating such responses as “attraction and repulsion, participation and rejection” in the viewer (Burwick 1990:137). The impression of the grotesque he states: “requires a metonymic game with cause and effect”. This assumption he substantiates with the following words:

Thus we look at the work even while we enter into it; we maintain aesthetic distance outside the work even while we feel ourselves implicated in the conditions represented inside. When delusion is thematized in a work of art, the viewer is able to engage an illusion of delusion.

The viewer is therefore consciously aware of his or her uncompelled cooperation in the effects of the work (Burwick 1990:137). It is anticipated that the imitation of the female corpse in my work then becomes an encounter with the viewer, an encounter of representation which releases the imprisoned female body from her perfected cave and from futile images, infuriating reflections and mocking alteration (Irigaray 1974:179). In conclusion, it is thus evidently a game of transgression and subversion as Russo asserts (1995:65).

4.4.5 Not so pretty death: Rigor mortis and decomposition

As mentioned above rigor mortis refers to the stiffening of the body as is the case when the individual afflicted individual takes on the posture of the body assumed before death (Wagner 2009:20). In this section I elaborate on my own exploration of this occurrence in my work to illustrate the horrific, unbeautified reality of violent death. My work, *Rigor of the feminine I and II* (Figure 51 and 52), were motivated by the visual traits of rigor mortis. I aimed to achieve the unnatural peculiarities of rigor mortis can take on by depicting two figures with clenched hands, rigidly fixed arms and the hyper extended head of the woman in *Rigor of the feminine II* (Figure 52).⁶⁸

from the moment of death. The body then remains in this position for up to thirty-six hours (Wagner 2009:20).

⁶⁸ Apart from rigor mortis, clenched hands with no period of flexibility can also occur because of *cadaveric spasm* which occurs after intensified physical or traumatic activity directly before death, often found in the case of homicide (Vij 2011:88)



Figure 51: Thelma van Rensburg, *Rigor of the the feminine I*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 45cm x 30cm.
Photograph by the artist.



Figure 52: Thelma van Rensburg, *Rigor of the feminine II*, 2015.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 45cm x 30cm.
Photograph by the artist.

I argue that the rigidity of rigor mortis acknowledges my contention on feminine *angst*, containment and restriction because the body becomes fixed in one position (Russo 1995:10, Foucault 1995:25-26, Brookes 1993:19). I attempt to evoke the claustrophobia of such restriction in Figure 51 and 52 (above) by means of formal attributes such as extreme cropping and the ‘oppressive placement’ of female figures in relation to the format.

Extending my exploration of rigor mortis and its link to feminine confinement, I created the work, *Coffin of glass* (Figure 53) (next page). The work was inspired by

the words of Buck-Morss (1991:99) as formerly stated in her argument that fashion's dictation of conformity for the ideal human form "becomes the biological rigor mortis of eternal youth".



Figure 53: Thelma van Rensburg, *Coffin of glass*, 2016.
Ink on Fabriano paper, 22.5cm x 30cm.
Photograph by the artist.

Coffin of glass (Figure 53) above pictures a youthful, powdery pale, almost childlike face.⁶⁹ Excessively contrasted to the light pink and white colours of the overall image is her black hair, which corresponds with the story of *Snow white*. The girl in *Coffin of glass* (Figure 53) details a gaunt rigid hand in pink hues next to the head of the figure. As in the tale of Ophelia, *Snow white*, which is exemplified in Figure 53, compounds the age-old tradition of the merging of femininity and death and the comparison thereof with a passive object to be scrutinised (Berger 1972:47; Bronfen 1992:65; Mulvey 1989:24). In this respect I argue that the work emphasises the way in which the horror of female death is obscured or aggrandised in western culture (Su-Lin Wee 1997:[sp]).

Another work that hints at rigor mortis and the decomposing body is *Forest* (Figure 54). The work, *Forest* (Figure 54) (next page) is juxtaposed to the fashion

⁶⁹ Pallor mortis is the first stage of death and occurs immediately after death in the body of a person with light skin because of lack of blood circulation (Schäfer 2000:81).

photographs of the *W* magazine spread: *Into the woods* discussed in Chapter Two of this study (Figures 12-16). Composed of four parts, the work is presented as a grid revealing four women in hauntingly dark outdoor locations. The figures were situated in different contorted positions in order to mimic cases of rigor mortis. Branches and soil surround the figures, hinting at victims found in remote locations.



Figure 54: Thelma van Rensburg, *Forest*, 2015
Ink on Fabriano paper, 45cm x 55cm.
Photograph by the artist

Other than the ornamented bodies depicted in the fashion photographs of the *W* magazine spread: *Into the woods*, my work, *Forest* (see Figure 54 above) reveals bodies rendered in hues of blue and grey, aligned with the decomposition process which occurs in the body after death.⁷⁰ The contorted bodies in the work *Forest*

⁷⁰ Decomposition occurs after rigor and livor mortis. The decomposing body progressively changes from a green discolouration in the abdominal region to swelling and bloating of the body (Wagner 2009:26). The environment plays a major role in the category of decomposition and degree at which it advances (Dix & Graham 2000:10). During the bloating phase, bodily fluids may ooze from the

(Figure 54) with their heads obliterated by black and white ink, references the oozing of fluids, which occurs at the bloating phase of decomposition. The work indulges in the discomforting nature of death and bodily fluids and attests to Grosz (1994:193-4) and Kristeva (1982:3), who regard fluids as a marginal condition and lurking crisis to systems and order (Grosz 1994:192). Grosz (1994:192) states that:

corporeal flows ... attest to certain irreducible 'dirt' or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence or impossibility of the 'clean' and 'proper'.

The work, *Forest* (Figure 54) endeavors, to subvert the enclosed body of the male controlling gaze discussed in Chapter Two. This is also implicated by the window format of the work, which links to gaze as theorised by Mulvey (1975:4) and Berger (1972:64).

In view of the artworks discussed and theories considered in this study, it is noticeable that contemporary female artists and theorists are still extensively engaged in issues of feminism through expressions of the unscrupulous representation of the female body. The artworks in this study established that delving into the realm of openness, transgression and contamination of the clear and distinct male established *feminine* body (in this case the unblemished beautified, female corpse in fashion photography as formerly established) brings the female body to the fore as a subversive speaking body and as "symbol of liberatory potential" (Gilbert 1997:18). The words of the author Pamela K. Gilbert seems apt in this regard. Gilbert (1997:154) states that; "the female body is the dangerous liaison between realms that are, ideologically, mutually exclusive" as a result of its openness and therefore I argue holds the promise of diversity and transcendence of oppressive regimes.

body's orifices. Eventually the body's soft tissue will degenerate into a mass of indistinguishable tissue (Dix & Graham 2000:10). A detailed discussion on human decomposition goes beyond the scope of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of chapters

For centuries women have been associated with passivity, excessive corporeality, weakness, dependence and irrationality in relation to men, which has unfortunately been regarded as the norm. In certain circles, women came to be deemed as mere objects, who needed to be controlled to uphold the *status quo* of male supremacy, thereby dispossessing female subjectivity and embodiment (Malson 1995:218; Malson 1998:108; Mulvey 2009:8; Peterson & Lupton 1996:73).

This study embarked by delineating and elucidating the context and terminology related to the research topic. Drawing on a selection of examples from early and recent fashion photographs, Chapter Two mapped out, through the theories of Bronfen, Mulvey and Hall, the significant influence media representations of the female body, such as the beautiful corpse, exert on the consumption and media circulation of the female body in western culture. I established that - like a spider - such representations ensnare the female body within dominant power relations such as patriarchy and repressive pre-defined and stereotyped female body ideals (Mey 2007:44-45; Morgan 1989:108; Pollock 2003:174). This was outlined by analysing contemporary fashion photographs that erotically and voyeuristically juxtapose femininity and death. In the event, this study has shown the perpetuation of morbid representations of classical ideal femininity as seen in *Ophelia* by Millais as well as the ancient myth of sleeping beauty. The subsequent replicas using death as gimmick in fashion photography turns the female body into a tightly manipulated commodity and fetish as depicted in Millais' *Ophelia* and subsequent contemporary replicas. It has also been established that such representations are associated with misogyny and extreme pacification of the female body (Berberick 2011:2; Bronfen 1992:98; Mulvey 2009:840). As substantiated by Berger (1972:16, 53, 63, 64), Bartky (1990:96) and Foucault (1995:25-26), women are influenced and feel compelled to discipline their bodies to attain the impossible standards propagated in such representations. Deep-rooted treachery of dominance, power and violence are thus at the heart of such representations (Beechy 1979:66; Butler 2008:207; Casey et al 2008:153; Dill & Weinstein 2008:xiii).

In Chapter Three, I considered the work of Marlene Dumas and Penny Siopis in relation to the grotesque of Bakhtin and Kristeva's notion of the abject to illustrate the inexpressible and unmanageable female body in the form of the female corpse. The works analysed, served as aesthetic substitutions for the glamourised female corpses in fashion shoots as depicted in Chapter Two. The aim was to articulate and reveal the veritable nature of male on female violence reaching even as far as seemingly innocuous photography in popular magazines. In contrast I have aspired to show the reality of the unbeautified corpse, which is also confirmed in my own body of work.

In Chapter Four I continued to explore the unbeautified corpse. Rather the corpse in state of rigor, decomposition and putrification - and the ultimate of abjection and transgression (Kristeva 1982:4, 109). My intention was thus to subvert the female corpse as an object of desire by revealing through simultaneous allure and revulsion (by means of images and techniques), the acrimonious aberration and horror of femicide and female death.

5.2 Conclusion of the study

When women want to escape from exploitation, they do not simply destroy a few 'prejudices'; they upset the whole set of dominant values - economic, social, moral, sexual. They challenge every theory, every thought, every existing language in that these are monopolized by men only. They question the very *foundation of our social and cultural order*, the organization of which has been prescribed by the patriarchal system (Irigaray quoted in Porter & Kelso 2008:x).

The overarching premise of this study was to offer a feminist critique of the representation of women in the media, where the visual image enforces the partially biased construction of femininity. By means of the theories of Hall, Pollock, Bronfen and Bakhtin among others, the combined representations of the feminine contained body and female corpse in contemporary art and fashion photography has been analysed. In this dissertation, I have ascertained that historical representations of the beautiful female corpse in literature, art and ultimately contemporary mass media which have endured for centuries. By means of the theories of Freud, Mulvey and Rabine, such representations were investigated for their objectification, commodification, fetishistic and oppressive encoding of the attractive, young, slender and Caucasian female body.

Hall and Grosz's theories concerning ideological constructs such as patriarchy and gender stereotypes have been addressed in this research for their exploitive, oppressive and dominating regimentation of the female body, especially evident in fashion magazines. It was concurred among theorists Berger, Bronfen, Foucault and Jantzen that patriarchy hinges on power structures, which ensnares women in the controlling male gaze. Furthermore, their extensive enquiry has confirmed that male-on-female violence secures masculinity and male cohesion. This statement is evidenced in the words of Bronfen (1992:12-13) who rationalises that "Over the dead woman's corpse, his status as subject will have been secured."

In my research, the theories of Bronfen, Bakhtin and Kristeva on the disorderly, abject and grotesque female body have been then juxtaposed and contrasted with regard to the abovementioned representations and ideologies. Kristeva, Grosz and Bakhtin's theories among other feminist theorists were articulated to conduct and in-depth analyses of contemporary feminist artists who appropriate and interpret the abject and grotesque female body in their work.

The selection of national and international female artists emphasised the contemporary feminist inclination to refuse the normative, idealized, flawless fixed images of the female body as represented in contemporary culture. Instead, they draw attention to the 'imperfect' excesses and ambiguity of the female corpse, which traverses bodily peripheries as a result of leakages and decomposition. It has been established in this study that the selected artists resist and subvert misrepresentation and patriarchal control of the female body. Siopis, paradigmatic with feminist aims, investigates female embodiment through depictions of violated, mutilated and decapitated female figures. Combinations of formlessness, fragmentation and horror as seen in her *Shame* series (2002-2005) (Figure 23), are inherent in her characteristic style. Oozing fluid mediums such as ink, watercolours and liquid glue form the heart of Siopis' scrutiny into the dreaded leaking, bleeding, birthing female body.

Similar to my own working methods, Dumas finds inspiration in images from the mass media such as her work *Dead Marilyn* (2008) (Figure 26) (Watt 2004:[sp]). She creates dissolving, blemished figures by means of paint thinned to its limits. By these

means, she questions and dissects the tradition of feminine beauty in art and challenges stereotyping of the female body in the mass media. Fuzzy and blurry her brush work and processes birth figures that at one glance seems benign, but soon become disconcertingly beautiful and uncomfortable at the same time.

The elected contemporary artists in this study therefore depend on the dissolving of boundaries (through the usage of various liquid mediums and techniques) between the aesthetic and ambiguous, thereby defying disciplining and cleansing hegemonies (Mey 2007:84). Through their artworks the artists explore the abject and grotesque female body as potent instrument of transgression and resistance against dominant social norms (Mey 2007:2). The viewer then becomes the mediator, who bears witness to such atrocities, forcing a vivid experience of violated, rotting, lifeless flesh onto the viewer, and opening avenues of questioning.

Considering the artworks discussed in this research it is evident that Siopis, Dumas (and to a lesser extent Saville) and I, utilise dichotomies inherent in the understanding of the female body in western culture to explore the unanswered void of contagion, violation and bodily decay related to female corporeality. The questions raised in this study are therefore interpreted by the selected artists, each in their unique and overlapping approach and medium of expression of the cultural atrocities that configure the female body. It could be argued that the mediums and materials used and approaches taken by each artist reflect and represent a forensic interestedness in the unrepresentable in representation, representation that fails toward formlessness and oblivion, but also extra-sensory awareness (Elkin 2008:xv-xvi).

In conclusion, it is only through exploration in my own body of artworks as related to the concepts discussed in this study and the gradual process of writing, that I have come to understand the connections between the two selected artists and their unique creation of meaning in understanding women's plight in society. Even though the artists do not have control over the interpretation of their work, thought provoking understanding and empathy about the dilemma of female representation may be initiated.

5.3 Suggestions for further research

Considering that this study focused mainly on western representations and portrayals of the deceased female figure, it might prove valuable for future research to investigate such representations in Eastern, Oriental and African cultures. Examples of such depictions can be found in twelve-century Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints also appropriated by Siopis in her work.

Further analysis into mass cultural depictions of the female corpse in film and television could prove to be overlapping with this study and produce intriguing results.

Theorists that might prove interesting to include in future studies are Melissa M. Matthes (2009) on the spectacle of the female corpse and Jean Baudrillard's theories on simulacra and the spectacle. The possibilities of such comparisons are multiple and far-reaching and could prove to be (similar to the female body) provocatively open-ended.

Ultimately and dismally, the fashion images discussed in this study echo and propagate the normalisation and perverse approval in western culture with mainstream images of violence and actual brutality against women (Bryant 2013:6-7). I argue that they are the indisputable and extreme endpoint of a parameter in which women's passivity and silence are sexualised and has become highly commercialised. At the very least, this should be met with real academic and feminist confrontation and an outcry from the target audience, which are women.

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