Vitreous Fragility: Reimagining Women Through Art

Shary Boyle¹

This section of the book explores feminist artistry as an essential aspect of bringing feminist knowledge about sexual assault into action. Shary Boyle uses her work to express taboo subjects like trauma and shame, and so she embraced the challenge of illustrating Jane Doe’s book, The Story of Jane Doe, with drawings that used humour to subvert the official narrative of sexual assault and to celebrate women’s resistance. Her current artistic practice pushes the boundaries between media, gender, animals, humans and the natural world. By refusing to work within accepted categories, Boyle creates new space for envisioning change.

As a visual artist, I draw inspiration from a rich history of incredible women in my field who have tenaciously battled to express their personal truths. The world of historical and contemporary art has been and remains steeped in gender inequality. The art I make comes out of a long tradition of subversive, powerful female artists who have paved the way for the next generation to carry on. I would like to introduce the audience to some of the work I have created in the spirit of feminist expression and social change.

I graduated from the Ontario College of Art when I was twenty-one, and the drawings I began creating after my school experience became the foundation for my practice today. The most important thing I have ever done as an artist and a woman is to give myself permission to explore my ideas uncensored. Early on, I began developing a visual language to express the angry, painful, or taboo subjects I was just beginning to process. Sometimes these images were very difficult to look at, but as I let the feelings move through me, I discovered my own humour and capacity for mischief and joy. Creating artwork empowered me; it

¹ I would like to thank Jane Doe for her ceaseless action and strength of commitment on behalf of all of our legal rights, as well as her humour, intelligence, and vision in supporting the many ways to tell a story.
allowed me to define my personal voice outside of any pre-existing system. There was no right or wrong, no class or gender restrictions to my imagination. As a girl from the blue-collar suburbs, I found this experience transcendent. It was total freedom, and for the first time I felt like I could begin to tell my own story.

This early work allowed me to safely translate the self-destructive urge produced by trauma away from my body and into marks on a
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I was able to describe my anger and invent alternative worlds that better illustrated how I wanted life to be. Truth and imagination are therapeutic when forged. As my work developed, it became more balanced, in parallel to the evolution of maturity often experienced during our twenties and thirties. My young efforts planted the seeds for many important projects, one of the most profound being an invitation to make drawings in response to Jane Doe’s Book The Story of Jane Doe.²

In 2000, Jane Doe contacted me after being introduced to my art through a mutual friend, Lisa Steele. Jane’s vision for the book she was about to write was radical — like her activism and character it stepped outside formal expectations into a realm of charged, inspirational brio. Jane believes art is an essential partner in activating social imagination for change, and incredibly, she invited me to translate the feeling of her narrative into images. Two years later, I had her manuscript in my hands. At the time I was living for a season in Los Angeles, in the tropical-desert of an Echo Park sublet. All that summer I sat alone outside among the cactus and bougainvillea and allowed Jane’s story to sink inside of me, infusing my heart with her concise intelligence and knife-sharp wit. It was easy to envision pictures from those words. I had only to channel the fierce honesty of her observations and meet it with my own. Jane Doe shows us how to rise and take a stand.

Working with Jane’s beautiful, brilliant manuscript was a challenge I was deeply honoured to accept. I tried with all of my instinct and insight to create images for her text that live between the lines, lifting and whispering to parts of the mind that might be further awakened through the visual. The Story of Jane Doe was an incredible collective effort, and it is my hope that some of these images served as charged conduits to inspired understanding.

Themes of subversion and resistance have always compelled my imagination, and feel really great to explore. I have been invited to contribute to some wonderful alternative feminist publications over the years, such as Girls Who Bite Back³, edited by Emily Pohl-Weary and Scheherazade⁴, edited by Megan Kelso. These were compilations of woman artists and writers on subjects of heroism, story-telling, friendship, and strength. I learned too from my own books, Witness My

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My practice now includes performance, painting, and sculpture as well as drawing. In 2002, I discovered the medium of porcelain through a hobby-workshop I took in Seattle, Washington. This workshop was led by eighty-six-year-old Vivian Hausle and focused on creating romantic female figurines, in the Royal Doulton style. I have always been drawn towards the mystery of decorative detail. Seduced by decorative detail, I realized these dolls were a perfect foil to confront and examine societal assumptions around fragility and the feminine. Using the historically charged medium of porcelain — which is loaded with a range of female class associations from “refined good taste” to “granny’s kitsch” — I set out to harness the spellbinding power of ornamental beauty to explore issues of violence, silence, restriction, and the sexual subjugation of women. The figurines found their own agency,

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by insisting on disorder and vulnerability. Porcelain is the strongest of all ceramics, and its vitreous transparency compliments difficult revelation.

The response that this series engendered caught the attention of institutions like the National Gallery, who moved to acquire my work. I feel that the acquisition of these figurines by public collections across

Canada is a victory for all women and, in particular, for female artists. It is crucial for works of art by women that give explicit voice to feminist perspectives on violence, sexuality, and identity be supported by our museums. My narrative has been included, and joins those of other women in history who have laid down their stories. I have an abiding hope that tomorrow’s youth, when viewing this work on public display, will
feel included, curious, and most importantly, the courage to put their own voices forth into a diverse cultural dialogue.

In 2008, I was approached by the Art Gallery of Ontario with a commission to create two new porcelain sculptures in response to their collection of seventeenth-century Italian bronzes on Greek Mythology. Their invitation was to create new works that might reflect on and converse with these antiques. These works are now installed in the newly renovated Historical European section of the AGO.

I began the commission by researching the myths represented by the bronzes, in order to select which ones I would like to work with. The project was an opportunity to re-examine ancient history from an imagined perspective of the women so often subjected to rape, abduction, and the role of the victim within the stories. I selected the Rape of Proserpine and Perseus Slaying Medusa. My goal was to create a radically alternate reading of these myths, as a feminist intervention within the museum.

In the Greek telling of Proserpine’s story, she is a young woman helplessly abducted by Pluto, the God of the Underworld. The omnipotence of Pluto’s desire overrides any question of Proserpine’s will or identity: she is no more than an object to be taken. Proserpine is abducted from the fields where she is working with her mother Ceres, the Goddess of the Harvest. In order to return to the underworld with his captive, Pluto must pass through a sacred glade tended by the water nymph Cyane. Cyane tries to rescue Proserpine, but her attempts only provoke Pluto into destroying her glade in a rage. The devastation of the nature she was steward of, and her failure to save the young woman, cause Cyane to literally dissolve into tears, replenishing the very pool that had been destroyed.

When planning The Rejection of Pluto, I wanted to remove the helpless quality of inevitability from the events. These women could not be inherently ineffectual. In my version, they own their strengths, express their resistance, and enforce Pluto’s responsibility for his actions. Here, as Pluto emerges through Cyane’s pool, three women are united to meet him. They reflect and reject his intentions, from mirrors placed on symbolic areas of their bodies.

Ceres represents the power and resilience of age, her face a mirror that shines with the flame of intelligence. Proserpine represents the emotional position of the child, the witness and subject of our adult abuses of power. She holds out her slashed arms in a calm display of the effects of trauma, forcing the viewer to consider her vulnerability. Between them sits Cyane, a figure of mature sexual potency. The full
strength of her fertility and erotic autonomy refracts all negative intention to harm or possess. Pluto, embodying human greed and violence against the entire natural world, and our futile need to control it, does not stand a chance.

In researching the second bronze, I discovered Medusa as a young woman had also been raped, by one of the lesser gods of the sea. It is written that the beauty of her hair “overcame him.” For her “crime” of stolen virginity, her seductive locks were transformed into a nest of snakes as punishment. A classic blame-the-victim narrative, you can read the long-established contemporary rape myths throughout this entire scenario.

Ultimately, Medusa and her Gorgon sisters were reduced by circumstance to isolated monsters living on a remote island in the sea. There is a sense in the stories that they were much happier there, alone together!

Perseus, in pursuing romance, was given the impossible challenge to behead her for no other purpose than to prove his heroism. Medusa was a resource to be plundered, in the service of furthering his personal
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goals. She represents the unknown, the foreign, the marginalized — the Monster.

In *To Colonize the Moon*, I seek to draw attention to the relationship between environmental destruction and colonization. My response to the classic Medusa myth asks us to consider our fear of the unknown, and the repercussions of our need to villainize and dominate what is foreign to us. My Medusa is a woman of indeterminate race, her disembodied portrait a testimony to the repercussions of violence. Her head sits on a cairn of little brown bats and honeybees as maligned creatures facing their own destruction. Perseus as a child becomes a metaphor for the selfish compulsiveness that leads us to exploit nature, acknowledging our very human capacity for greed. The hero stands to destroy himself by the very outcome of his short-sighted victory.

Cultivating our creative powers as women adds strength to all of our lives and stories. Art can allow us to imagine change. Describing experience through acts of imagination can be a powerful way to strengthen the voice of the marginalized.

I believe it is crucial to envision preferable realities, and to lay those


ideas down like train tracks. One day this line will support a train of thought to hold the collective force of all our dreams, with the weight and momentum to carry them into the future.