

# *Matters of the Heart*

## On the Mysterious Ways of Femininity and Corporeality

Matilda Envall

Master thesis CRAFT! Textiles

KONSTFACK 2022

Word count: 7 862

Tutors: Andrea Peach, Birgitta Burling, Bella Rune, Ulrika Mårtensson Hanje, Maja Gunn



## *Abstract*

This work explores feminine aesthetics, the function of dress and adornment and the meaning of the term body. I have built a landscape inhabited by queer creatures, existing in the borderlands between human, animal and nature. Perhaps they are originating from the bottom of the deepest oceans or the hearts of the darkest forests. They are dressed in abstracted garments and embellished with bows and flowers, forcing them into a feminine position. Do they feel exposed? Or beautiful?

The heart pattern is recurring, in a blurred, bleeding state. This worn symbol has been punctured, in an attempt to open it up for all the complexities of being human.

In this thesis, I discuss writings on gender and the power dynamics of taste in relation to my practice. I also reflect around the artistic process and the search for artistic knowledge beyond the intellectual; a carnal knowledge of the maker.

By switching context from the human realm to abstract bodies, I am exploring gendering in a new light, hoping to bring new insights into what it means to be a woman in the world.

## *Keywords*

Craft, textiles, femininity, dress, embellishments, sculpture, papier maché, heart symbol

# *Contents*

<b>Abstract</b>	2
<b>Keywords</b>	2
<b>Introduction</b>	4
<b>Theory &amp; Context –</b>	
<b>Taste, Femininity, Beauty</b>	6
The Origins	6
The subversive potential	8
Queer femininitis	10
The heart	11
Myth or authenticity?	12
<b>Material, process &amp; method –</b>	
<b>Body &amp; adornment</b>	13
The dressed body	13
A new form of body	14
Opening up experimentation –	
artistic development using sensitivity	17
Between figurative & abstract –	
development of final result	19
<b>Conclusion</b>	23
<b>Reference list</b>	25
<b>Image reference list</b>	26

## *Introduction*

As a young child, aesthetic experiences were powerful enough to sweep me away completely. They overwhelmed me to the degree that I would almost forget about my self, enter a type of no-body-ness and become one with the vision I was experiencing. Typically, this would be triggered by pinks or pastel colours, by an abundance of roses or by gatherings of sheer, transparent fabrics. I would be consumed by the beauty of life and the richness of reality.

As a grown woman, I am still drawn to this type of aesthetic. When I look at the works of Arvida Byström (image 1), I experience a *déjà vu* of that childhood feeling: the otherworldly experience. I can sense a trace of it, like a whiff of your ex-lovers perfume being carried to you by a stray wind ... or like biting into a madeleine. I am constantly tempted to enter this aesthetic realm in my own practice. Pink, shiny and transparent fabrics capture me still. Swarovski crystals and shining glass beads and clouds of bridal tulle entice me in a way I can't resist. Yet, now, with a woman's perspective, I no longer see only beauty in this, but also a peril. The excessively feminine today feels forbidden and shameful to engage too closely with.

The grown up world seems to be in agreement that the pink aesthetics is something you must outgrow, and that it has depraving powers. Pink is loaded with all kinds of negative connotations, it's demeaning, passivising, promotes vanity and unhealthy fixation with appearances (Koller 2008). But if I feel drawn to it still, to entering this forbidden world of fairytale, if I feel compelled to re-enter the girls room. What does that make me? And what powers lies within this aesthetic that the majority seems so wary of?

These are some of the questions that I carry with me as an undercurrent through my practice. Previously I have investigated these themes in the field of fashion design, having long been intrigued by the relation between our bodies and dress, particularly with a focus on femininity. I wonder what happens when we let the presumably dangerous force of femininity come near us, as close as it can get, next to our very skin? When we put on a garment, the textile material is activated; it is filled with purpose and can suddenly claim space in the world. In this work, I have translated the relationship between the human body and textile, into one between textile and a sculptural material. By moving away from the human body I have been able to look at corporeality as well as dress from a new

perspective. I am also letting materials from a female tradition and a female experience take space in a sculptural context.

My intentions with the project have been to explore feminine aesthetics, dress and the term body through making objects in papier maché, wood and textile. By doing so, I have been attempting to embody gendering.

This paper is divided into three parts. In the first chapter, I will provide a theoretical background to the project, putting my practice in context of theories around gender and the power dynamics behind taste. I will also mention *femme* aesthetics and touch upon queer theory. The second chapter focuses on the artistic process. I will discuss my use of an intuitive method using writings on practice based research and explain important decisions leading up to the result. Finally, I will give a brief summary of the work, account for unexpected insights and reflect around the result in the conclusion.





Image 1, Arvida Byström, Arvida Byström for Urban Ears, 2018



# *Theory & Context – Taste, Femininity, Beauty*

## **The Origins**

The stereotypical idea of feminine taste that still pervades our Western, industrialised culture – that trivialized set of aesthetics preferences that we all associate with frills and furbelows, unnecessary (or so it was believed) display and ornamentation, and an excess of gilt and glitter – has its roots in the last century. More specifically, it has its foundations in the period when the concepts of woman and domesticity became, effectively, one and the same (Sparke 1995).

What is feminine aesthetics, then? How do we define it? In her book *As Long as It's Pink*, design historian Penny Sparke argues, as in the quote above, that what we today understand as stereotypical feminine aesthetics stems from the Victorian 19th century and the forming of the industrial society. In this era, industrial progress, business, politics and other areas linked to the public life were tied to masculinity. It was predominately men who were active in leading and dictating the conditions of life in the public sphere, whereas women were tied to the domain of the home. In the growing middle class, women were responsible for the upholding of the home, including decorating it in a way that was representative and pleasurable, as well as staffing it with skilled labour. Sparke means that this led to a feminisation of the term taste – in the act of choosing suitable home decoration and attire for the family, the woman exercised actions of taste - and that this exists in opposition to the masculine concept of design. Men designed and planned for the manufacturing of items, and the women bought them, and arranged them in tasteful displays in the home. However, as women began to earn more money of their own and stepped into the market as consumers in their own right, the financial domination of men was threatened, argues Sparke. She writes that the male design authority responded to this threat by undermining and devaluing the female taste, as a way of stripping women of that emerging financial power as consumers. So that is how we found ourselves with the concepts of good and bad taste, where what has been considered good taste is in line with the mod-

ernistic ideals of purity of design, an absence of embellishments and emphasis on functionality.

In my own practice, I have seen the interests for feminine aesthetics and my love of kitschy taste as two different preferences influencing my aesthetic choices. But, using the argumentation of Sparke, I could understand it not as two separate phenomena but as one and the same. What is considered bad taste or kitsch is seen as such precisely because it is so closely associated with women and female culture. The devaluing of feminine aesthetic expressions is, again according to Sparke, a very conscious strategy of maintaining patriarchal oppression in the cultural sphere of society.

From a personal point of view, I have always considered the ugly, the too much and the bad taste a much more accessible place to inhabit than that of elegance, harmony or minimalism. What is known as Scandinavian design is so closely tied to ideals of a white, upper-middle class lifestyle while it conforms everyone into white, steril box-like homes and greyish shirt dresses. I have tried to escape this by chasing a lack of harmony and disarranged and asymmetric silhouettes in my work. I relate this to the writings of Jack Halberstam, who in his book *The Queer Art of Failure* (Halberstam 2011) proposes that failure can be a successful strategy to escape the oppressing systems of heteronormativity and capitalism. He writes that if achieving success as we know it in our present society requires such a big effort, then perhaps failure is a better option. This celebration of failure speaks to me in a powerful way, for I also long to fail, to fail spectacularly (naturally, in tandem with blood icing horror of the very same). So much of what the pressure of society tells me that I ought to strive for is worth nothing to me, and still I find myself feeling like a failure for not having achieved it. When we deliberately fail at beauty, other aesthetic realms can open up to us.

Zandra Ahl, a Swedish glass artist trained at Konstfack, wrote in a small 1998 pamphlet about taste “*All products have a surface, but some surfaces – styles of expression – are considered better. There is the right one, which has many names; functionalism, neo-simplicity and minimalism are a few. And then there are others, which should have just as many names but which always goes under the name of kitsch.*” (Ahl 1998)

Zandra Ahl has in her own practice continuously been investigating the meaning of good and bad taste and how these can be understood or overturned from a maker's point of view. Elaborating further; Zandra Ahl and Emma Olsson wrote in their 2013 publication *Swedish Taste (Svensk smak)* that “*Taste is dangerous precisely because it is a question of morals, who is a good or a bad person, who is educated or non-educated, how you ought to be or not ought to be.*” (Ahl and Olsson 2013).





Image 2, Zandra Ahl, Blomsterbuketten, 2019



In this provocative book, they called out the people of power in the Swedish design industry and how they were maintaining the domination of Swedish taste, a minimalist style disguised with the term “functionality”. The people interviewed; journalists, magazine editors, chairmen of prestigious design prizes and other institutions, also seemed to have one thing in common: that they did not see themselves as a person of great power over others. They constantly claimed that someone else holds the power to decide what is good and bad taste, television shows on home decoration or the market itself. Ahl and Olsson also describes how the word quality is used instead of taste, making it possible for a curator of Swedish Nationalmuseum to complain over how people are choosing to waste their lives watching TV and eating candy in poorly designed sofas instead of making informed choices of high quality furniture. Relating back to the work of Penny Sparke, it could be understood that the word taste, holding feminine connotations, had become a prohibited word in the public debate on form. The word taste was seen as subjective, and was replaced by words that were seen as neutral and all-encompassing, such as for instance quality.

## The subversive potential

Both Penny Sparke And Zandra Ahl and Emma Olsson, as described above, showed clear examples of the othering of the domestic and of the overly decorated, as opposed to the modernistic and pure self (Spivak 1985). David Batchelor writes in his book *Chromophobia* (2000) that the same can be said about strong colours in opposition to neutrals, predominantly the colour white:

More specifically: this purging of colour is usually accomplished in one of two ways. In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic. In one, colour is regarded as alien and therefore dangerous; in the other, it is perceived merely as a secondary quality of experience, and thus unworthy of serious consideration. Colour is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both.

He continues to describe how the self tries to deny the existence of that which is othered, but fails by their own denial, which in its obsession of it confirms or even highlights its existence. He also explains how the ruling aesthetic secretly fears that which it has othered:

Colour /../ signifies the mythical savage state out of which civilization, the nobility of the human spirit, slowly, heroically, has lifted itself – but back into which it could always slide. For one, colour was coded in the feminine; for the other, it is coded in the primitive. For both, colour is a corruption, a lapse, a Fall.

So the self fears the other, because in the other, there are corruptive powers, uncontrollable and possibly cataclysmic. Clearly the space in the margins holds potential for subversive activities (Hooks 1989). Isn’t it precisely these hidden powers that are so tangible within feminine aesthetics? Couldn’t that be the mystery behind my strong affinity to this material? The subversive potential lies within it, waiting to be put to use, waiting to be let loose to counteract and undermine its dominant force.

An example of how feminine attributes have been used in a subversive feminist setting is the Riot Grrrl feminist punk scene of the early 1990’s. Bands such as Bikini Kill, Le Tigre and Peaches, supported by The Herms, explored expressions of gender while making music in a way that broke down all pre-existing rules of how a woman could perform.

I remember my older sister having a huge poster of Le Tigre on the wall above her bed when I was a young girl. I remember looking for long moments at that poster, asking my sister if it was painted or photographed? The combination of mediums and the novel digitally treated photograph was something I had never seen before and that puzzled me in its ambiguity. The same thing can be said about the gender expressions of the band members. I remember the pink background and the female build of one of the members contrasting with the hint of a moustache above their lips. Is it a boy or a girl? Is it painted or photographed? I was born in 1990, and thus grew up in the 90’s. This was the time of the third wave of feminism (Gemzöe 2015), a time where radical feminist grassroot activist groups were formed around Sweden, when feminist punk bands of the Riot Grrrl-movements were active, but also the times when Spice Girls were dominating the global music scene with their over the top girlyness and the catch phrase girl power. In Sweden, influential books such as Nina Björks *Under det rosa täcket*





Image 3, Le Tigre, cover art This Island, 2004

(1996) and the more easily accessible and provocative Fittstim (Skugge & Olsson (ed.) 1999) were released. My older sister was an active feminist, politically engaged in the local left party youth club and even played the drums in her very own local punk feminist band. Naturally, growing up surrounded by books, posters and music showing femininity in a subversive setting had an influence on me. When I am looking at a piece of maximalist feminine aesthetics, I am seeing a part of my own childhood. Is that one of the reasons why it feels like home to me?

## Queer femininities

Femme-inism chooses femininity and femme-inism doesn't believe in free choices (Dahl, 2014)

The excessive femininity that I always return to needs to be understood not only from a feminist perspective, but also from a queer one. Playing with feminine expressions of gender is in a queer context understood as being (or doing) femme. Femme originally emerged as a part of a binary relation to butches, as a way of describing lesbian love and lesbian ways of being a woman, but today the term is more fluid and stands on its own. A femme today does not need a butch lover to confirm her identity as femme. Swedish ethnographer and femme herself Ulrika Dahl has written extensively on queer and particularly femme culture. In her book *Skamgrepp* (2014) she proposes that what firstly defines femme-hood is that it is being chosen. It is not something put upon oneself by society or pressure from others, but an act of resistance and a way to honour the feminine. In a chapter about female drag, she describes this activity as making of copies without originals; performing womanhood over and over again, over-achieving it and thereby undermining the myth of the true womanhood inherent in every woman. In an essay in an anthology on queer methodology, Dahl poses this beautiful question: “*When our lipstick speaks together, through this co-production of knowledge, can femme (science) reproduce femininity with a difference?*” (Brown & Nash (ed.) 2016). In this quote, Dahl summarises her ambitions of working in collaborative practices, of embracing feminine expressions and performances and by doing so making a subversive action within society.

In the work to the right, by Gabriella Loeb, I believe the female drag aesthetics are speaking bold and clear: by turning up the volume of the feminine,



Image 4, Gabriella Loeb, *Trigger Happy*, 2018



we end up with a work that questions the premises for its very existence and demands unwavering attention from its audience.

In the book *Rosa: den farliga färgen* (2011), Fanny Ambjörnsson writes in-depth about the colour pink and its relation to the feminist and queer movement. She describes the colour as a signal for gathering of contemporary feminist resistance, a tool to find others with similar feminist views. (Ambjörnsson 2011 p. 184) She has also interviewed a number of queer activist about how they relate to the colour pink. One of them describes how she enjoys using things that appear infantile, that are perceived as feminine or belonging to the world of young girls, and using them in a powerful way. (p. 198).

I experience femme expression as a way of escaping to try to fit into a role of being a woman that I feel is inaccessible to me. Relating back to what I mentioned earlier about how ugly is a much more welcoming space than beauty, a space almost anyone is free to enter, the cute, preadolescent femininity feels more accessible to me than fitting into the image of the grown woman.

## The heart

The heart symbol relates strongly to this preadolescent feminine space which I am so interested in, and it has been given plenty of space in this project. Apart from being linked to the young girl's aesthetic, expressing naivety and gentleness, many would consider it the embodiment of bad taste and kitsch. Still, it has grown increasingly common in our collective mind, through its presence on social media apps. In her master thesis in visual communication from Konstfack 2019, Camille Thomas describes her research into the heart symbol and its use by tech companies and in political propaganda from the left to the far-right, putting it in the context of the secret trade of personal data. Thomas writes:

The heart symbol is used as a button on countless websites and apps. The constant call for our attention to feed large-scale companies seems to weaponise our emotions. Has love been capitalised, packaged and sold in such ways that it is the only feeling we are left to claim online, in the form of the heart symbol? (Thomas 2019)

Thomas presents the example of the Swedish far-right party *Alternativ för Sverige* and their use of the heart in their visual communication. Here we see that the heart symbol can turn a message promoting racism and ethnic cleansing into care and devotion for your country, showing the heart symbol's manipulative powers.

Having been brought up in an environment heavily influenced by new age and alternative spirituality, I am also considering the place the heart symbol has in the visual culture of these movements. While this religious practice lacks overall holy writings, rules or codes of conduct, the concepts of light and love seem, from my own experience, to function as a form of holy affirmation and god-like energy. The heart symbol can resemble a holy image, or an icon. My own father, greatly influenced by the alternative spiritual movement in the 1970's, was an amateur graphic artist, and the heart symbol became his signature motif throughout his practice, making oil paintings, drawings and paper art.

In these alternative spiritual contexts, I have witnessed a lot of fundamentalist thinking, oppression or even violence being hidden beneath a facade of perfection, light and love. Also here, the heart symbol is an enabler in the manipulative, fundamentalist communication where people say love, but act with cruelty and egoism.

Even so, the heart symbol is also a potent way for us to express love and affection to our loved ones. Especially during the pandemic times, when we were unable to see family and friends, the emoji heart has been used to convey the care we have been wanting to express across far distances. Here, the heart symbol is swelling with all the warmth and care humans share in our close relations. When I visited *Skogskyrkogården* on the Swedish All Saint's Day, a day when Swedes traditionally place lit candles on graveyards to honour their deceased loved ones, I noticed a collection of small candles having been arranged into the shape of a heart on a humid stone bench. Through this glowing heart, the love for someone lost shone bright red in the black fall night. Here, there was nothing kitschy or worn out about the heart. On the opposite, the heart symbol proved powerful enough to transcend even the most rigid of boundaries; the one between the living and the dead.

## Myth or authenticity?

In an article on the use of pink in graphic design and marketing, Veronika Koller (2008) describes how she used a questionnaire to get access to people's associations with the colour pink. She learned from her informants that the majority had a negative view, where 10% named it their least favourite colour. Among the negative connotations of pink expressed in the survey was that it is "*too sweet*", or portrays a "*false femininity*". I found this very interesting. If pink is a mark of a false womanhood, one immediately asks what constitutes real womanhood? How do we tell the difference and how do we escape being fooled?

In the beginning of this masters course, I started studying femininity and truth through a vintage dress. In vintage garments, I think that we are provided the possibility to access knowledge and experience of past generations, through the touch of owners past. I wanted to explore this garment as a container of memory and meaning. I wondered, can the empty garment tell us something about the nature of womanhood through the ghostly lingering presence of owners past?

I wore the dress, studied its material and composition, I photographed myself in it, performing everyday tasks but also posing in a manner that the dress seemed to expect me to. I treated the photographs for textile printing, prepared silk screen frames and printed mixed fibre fabrics in different techniques. As the different print techniques affected the different fibre types separately, a layering of information was created in the textile images. In the display, I hung the pieces to create a further layering effect. (Image 6). I was interested in the layers of meaning to my own and others' feminine identity – how the essential, the myth and the performed are entangled in layers of truth.

There have been different views on womanhood during the different waves of feminism, from the first waves' focus on legal rights, to the competing views of the second wave (radical) feminism: the essentialist view that the root of patriarchy is built on biological differences between men and women, and the constructivist idea that the differences between the sexes is a social and historical construct (Gemzöe 2015). In 1990, Judith Butler released her influential work *Gender Trouble*, where she criticises contemporary feminism's division between gender and sex, as well as what she calls the heterosexual matrix. This meant that the feminist analysis of society was formed according to an idea that all men



Image 5, Author's own, *Gaps and Ruptures*, 2021



and all women are engaged in the binary relationship of heterosexuality, completely erasing all queers from feminist theory. Butler also introduced the term performativity, as a means of describing the way we all act and thereby recreate gender in our daily lives, performing the act of our assigned gender roles. (Butler 1990) Butler means that there is no essential core to gender, but that it is created through our socially constructed actions.

Either way, the subject of femininity holds great potential to engage with in artistic works. Finding absolute truths in matters of philosophy is an impossible task, so there will hardly ever be an answer sheet as to whether there exists some type of essential femininity or not. For the work of a maker, or a poet, answers do not need to be provided. Rather, I would argue that ambiguity and insecurity is a good place from where to start an artistic work, for it can imbue the maker with an openness, with a listening towards the material.

## *Material, process & method – Body & adornment*

### **The dressed body**

The human body has always been highly present in my work, as I previously have studied fashion design. When switching context to textiles, this key factor was lost, leaving a void. The textile material in a garment is activated when a human body interacts with it, providing human warmth and a form on which the textile can take place in the room and move around with agency. As Kate Soper writes in her essay *Dress Needs*, there is an intimate connection between a human and their clothing (Soper 2011 p. 24). Our garments can hold treasured memories and wearing them can make us feel anything from powerful to uncomfortable or exposed. As fashion theorist Joanne Entwistle writes, discussing the work of philosopher Merleau-Ponty:

Our body is not just the place from which we come to experience the world, but it is through our bodies that we come to see and be seen in the world. The body forms the envelope of our being in the world and our selfhood comes from this location in our body and our experience of this. (Entwistle 2001, p.44).

As an extension of this, dress accompanies us as our constant companion when engaging in society and human relationships. It affects our own sense of identity and the way others see and understand us, and acts as an extension of our bodily presence. A garment is always marked by the human body, even in its ghost-like absence in a garment not in use. We shape dress, but dress also shapes us, in part by creating and upholding gender norms (Entwistle 2000 p. 140). However, as discussed above, it also holds the potential of challenging and de-stabilising said norms. This particular relation between the human body and garments interests me greatly. However, I was intent on exploring other formats than the garment or a fashion collection. So how could I achieve this activation of the textile in a different form? How could I involve the textile in conversation with a form or material apart from itself without involving a human body?



## A new form of body

I made an intuitive decision to start working with wood, carving chunks of dried wood using a chisel and a hammer. The shapes were decided on intuitively and were allowed to grow without much use of pencil sketching. Instead I let my thoughts take shape directly in the material. I carved for a bit, then took the piece out of the work bench to observe it from different angles and deciding how to progress. In my mind lived images of human limbs; body parts entangling and twisting together. I also made dents into the materials where I intended to place textile bands and strings, as if the textile were shaping the wood like a real body, a soft one made of flesh and blood.

After the carving and treating of the wood I dressed the objects with textile material. I used elements bearing connotations to underwear, formal and bridal wear and decorative accessories, using techniques such as smocking and printing on tulle and satin. These are materials from a female tradition and a female experience of adorning yourself, maybe creating your own garment for a festive occasion. During weddings and occasions when we dress formally, norms around gendering are enhanced (Entwistle 2000). There is a greater difference between what we expect a man and a woman to wear in comparison to everyday life. The performative notion of gender is more clear than ever.

When I add pieces of clothing and adornments to my fabricated bodies, I am gendering them – forcing them into a feminine position. Are they comfortable or exposed? Their corporeality is also enhanced by the connotation to human dress.

When I put a piece of dress on one of the shapes, it instantly becomes more alike a human body, even though in its formal being it might be rather abstract and even incomprehensible in shape.







The method used here, of first making the hard body shape, then planning and making the textile pieces according to the shape of the body, and lastly putting them together, is kept throughout the work. The works are very much affected by this duality, the contrast in material and expression, but at the same time the resulting works will be read as an entity. I see a tension between the dual and the whole, almost arguing over how we as viewers should perceive them. Again quoting Kate Soper and her article *Dress Needs*, the decoration of the body has existed for as long as human societies. Soper questions the common view that wearing clothes for the sake of warmth and protection is more of a natural need than dressing for decorative purposes. (Soper 2011 p. 24). Adorning our bodies for an aesthetic experience might be as ancient as human history itself, so one can question whether it really makes sense to divide the body and dress into two separate categories. As Soper continues: "*what exactly counts as clothing - where does the body end and the accoutrement or decoration begin?*" (Soper 2011 p. 24)

Image 7, Author's own, *Matters of the Heart*, 2021





Image 8, Author's own, Matters of the Heart, 2021



## Opening up experimentation – artistic development using sensitivity

After these initial wooden works, I was quite confident with the textile parts, but more unsure of the hard shapes. This called for further experimentation. I found the meeting between the two materials interesting; the coarse wood against the soft, carefully treated textile. I was curious to try out the textile against the matte and often slightly rough surface of paper clay, or papier maché. I made a large number of trials, in scales from palm-sized to pieces close to a human scale. I used hen wire as a structural base and starch glue induced newspaper to cover it with. By dissolving strips of newspaper in water and adding starch glue I created a brown-grey paper masse with which I covered the objects. I also experimented with different types of surfaces, such as plaster, fabric, cardboard, as well as making more wooden works.

In the process of experimentation, a few different ways of working with the bodies emerged. The writhing or entangled body (image 10), the joint body; where two or more parts are held together (image 11), a body marked by differences in density; a heavy core with limbs growing out of it (image 12, an abstract body shaped by the textile the way underwear can shape the female body (image 13) and the figurative, borrowing from the human body (image 14). These different ways of dealing with the idea of a fabricated body came to me as I was working with the material and not through an analytic process of writing or reading. It has been a very important goal in this process to not make pre-disposed decisions of what the work should look like, but to trust the process of improvisation. My experience is that I make the strongest works when I dare to be in a place where the nature of what I am doing is still unknown to me. As Rebecka Solnit writes in her essay novel *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, "*Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go.*" (Solnit 2005, p. 4). Painter and theorist Tiina Nevanperä proposes in her dissertation from Aalto university the term sensibility as an explanation for how she approaches her artistic work. She writes around intuition;

I find creating intuitive methods based on reasoning at least to some extent problematic, because it would mean to plant ready-made images, representations and structures in one's head and actually chain creativity up, while not allowing for enough room neither to fantasy nor carnal knowledge that are ceaselessly unfurling in making /.../. Making and painting truly start when neither any idea nor intuition is recognisable any more, when one has entered the sphere of making with one's whole sensibility. I want to let the painting talk. This is where thinking starts. (Nevanperä 2017, p. 35)

I have been attempting to get close to my material using what Nevanperä here calls sensitivity - taking the shapes seriously in their embodied being, not as an illustration over something outside of themselves. When doing so, I experience this as a dialogue between me and the material, two embodied existences meeting each other; using what Nevanperä calls the carnal knowledge. In a conversation in *Bomb* magazine with fellow sculptor Vincent Fecteau, Phyllida Barlow says:

I understand sculptural language as being connected to our own physical behavior in relationship to the physicality of things that are not ourselves—be they other selves or inanimate objects. (Bomb Magazine 2014)

This is what I believe the field of craft can offer in present society, where this carnal experience with materials around us is in many areas lost. As crafters, we use our carnal knowledge to understand and shape the world around us. When working with the different concepts of bodies described above, I am also using my carnal knowledge, and not only my intellectual capacity. The writhing can be understood as a menacing, snake-like presence – us humans being programmed since thousands of year to discover the dangers of snakes moving through the terrain. The entangled, writhing shapes could be writhing in pain, but due to some outer force or something within themselves? In the shapes where limbs are reaching out from a core, we can feel in our bodies how we would reach up for the surface when we have been under water for a bit too long, a pressure over our rib cage, the light of day sparkling above us. When the works are installed, the mind of a dancer is perhaps the most efficient to understand the shapes. To be able to spatially analyse objects and how they relate to the room around them, and to be able to empathise with them, to feel their postures in your own body.





Image 9, Author's own, Entangled, 2021



Image 10, Author's own, Joint, 2021



Image 11, Author's own, Density, 2021



Image 12, Author's own, Compressed, 2021



Image 13, Author's own, Infinity Ass, 2021



## Between figurative & abstract – development of final result

A key question that has been with me for a large part of the process is the question, posed by me in a piece of writing in the fall term: *Are [the bodies] more important as metaphors for a human body or as bodies of their own?*

For the final result in the examination exhibition, I decided to make a more focused collection of forms as opposed to the experimentation with many different types of shapes. While there is some elements of entangling and writhing in the final presentation, it is primarily the density track that has been the base of the works; the body as a heavy, dense core with limbs growing out of it, reaching out into the world. I created a number of variations of shapes out of this definition, with the aid of digital sketching (image 16) and small scale hen wire sketching (image 15). For this group, I attempted to let them exist in an area of ambiguity, between abstract and figurative. They are close to abstraction, but also bear connotations to living things, such as bowels in some instances, or tentacles, or a nest of snakes. I have been striving for them to keep a certain degree of mystery, being in between human, animal, plant and fossil. The grey and beige colour has been with me throughout the process, being a natural result of using newspaper for papier maché. This hue associates to stone and fossil, further bringing the objects into the unknown, elusive in time and space. They could be unidentified animals, perhaps originating from the bottom of the deepest oceans or the darkest forests. Queer bodies, originating from queer places far away.



Image 14, Author's own, Digital sketch, 2022

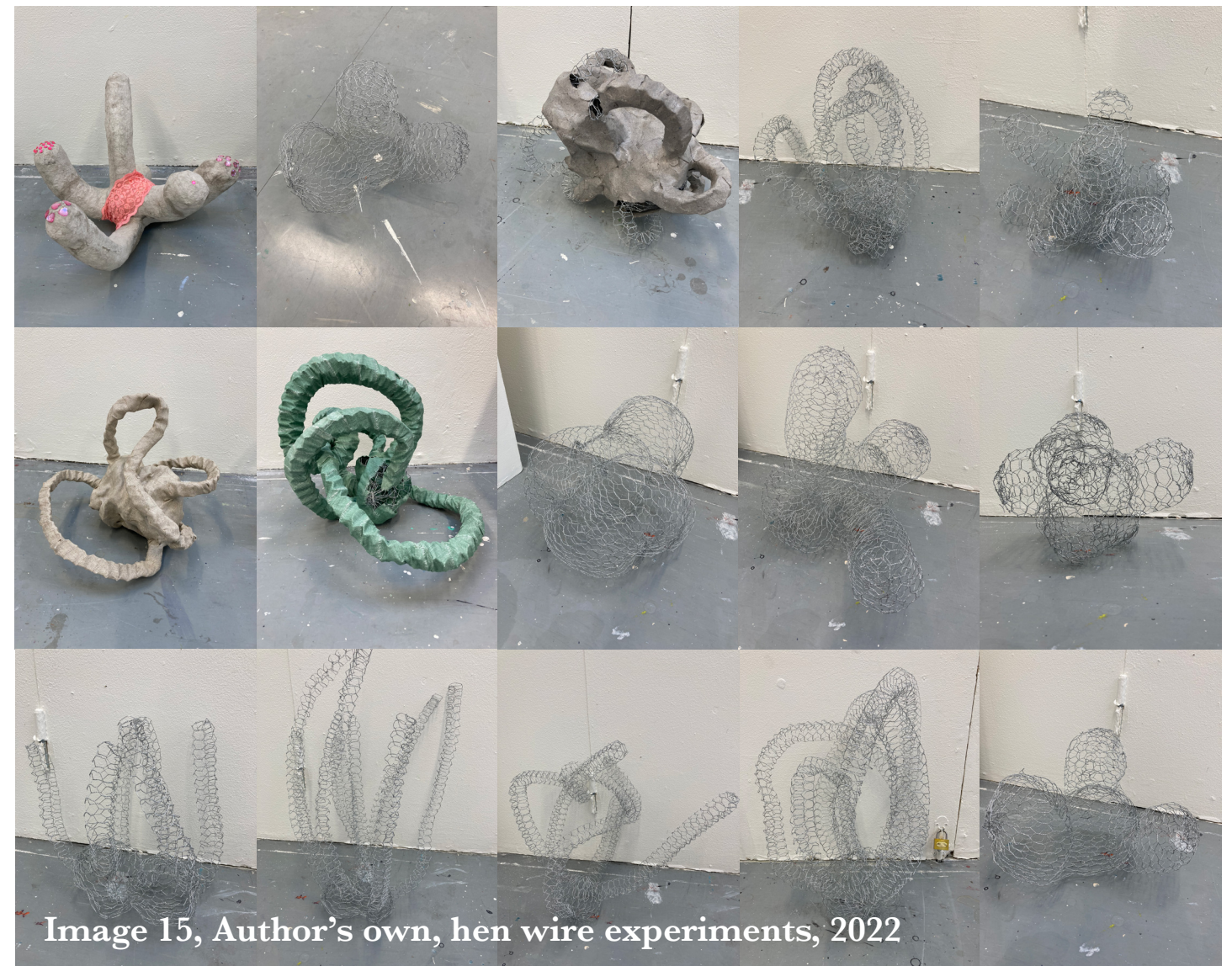


Image 15, Author's own, hen wire experiments, 2022





The papier maché material has greatly influenced the project. The shapes are a result of what is possible when shaping hen wire, and the papier maché expression will be a big part of the final installation. This material has strong associations to hobby activities and DIY craft. In Swedish, a good term for it could be *pyssel*. I have noticed that the hen wire, in particular, provokes reactions from viewers. Some wish that I would cover the hen wire up, others that I keep them visible. Nobody have responded neutrally to it. Even though papier maché does not have a strong tradition as an art medium, it has been shown in exhibition contexts (images 17-19). Even so, viewers might be surprised by such cheap materials. It could also be that the visible hen wire structure makes the objects look unfinished, conflicting with the norms of craft education. I relate back to chapter one and the implications of the word quality (page 7), discussed in writing by Emma Olsson and Zandra Ahl (2013). I imagine that the idea of artistic quality and value of material will have an impact on how my work is perceived. Although my initial intention was to cover the hen wire up, I am now hesitant to do so, as I am intrigued to learn more about the reception from viewers.

Image 16, Sara Möller, *Between the Shell*, 2022





Image 17, Phyllida Barlow, Folly, 2017



Image 18, Vincent Fecteau, untitled, 2019



For the textile pieces, I also wanted a variation of material and expression. The bodies are in different states of undress, from heavily sexualised to more modest. Bows and fabric roses are adorning two of the pieces, lace underwear are dressed on another. One is wearing an elaborate, gathered tulle dress while another got a version of a satin dress, form-fitted to its entangled tentacles. The pieces are finished with sewing techniques according to the garment which they resemble, be it underwear or formal wear.

The materials are chosen in line with the garment type they are representing and range from polyamide mesh and lace, tulle, polyester duchesse to viscose and silk satin. All of these materials carry with them different meanings and histories. Silk, having for centuries been a symbol of wealth and prosperity, for me connotes to essential femininity and the divine female. Whereas polyester and polyamide are products of the creation of plastic, a material revolution that has changed so much of our physical reality and made a great impact on our living environment. As they are created with the purpose of imitating silk, they have treacherous qualities, disguising themselves as something other than their true being. I see polyester femininity as fake, performed femininity, the female to female idea of womanhood and feminine gender expressions. The mix of materials in the final pieces are chosen more for their properties than for their conceptual meaning, but the mix also manages to express the complexity of femininity that I am so interested in. Is there such a thing as essential femininity? Can we tell the difference between the silk pieces and the polyester ones?

The colour scheme is kept strictly between red and white, with all the possible pink hues between them. Often the colours appear in smudged and blurry hand painted hearts. As a way of dealing with the complexities of this symbol, I am making it bleed. If I can puncture it, let it bleed out its pride, question its conviction that it can carry all of the positive emotions humans have for each other, perhaps I can make it loose its manipulative powers. I am hoping that the bleeding heart can open up for a greater authenticity, embodying not only the positive parts of human emotions but also the darker ones. I'm making an attempt to open it up for all the complexities of human existence.

The objects will be installed against the backdrop of a grid, creating a sharp contrast against their organic and feminine expression. I relate the grid to construction, modernism and an overall masculinity; its hard angles framing the installation. I see the installation as a digital landscape inhabited by queer creatures from the borderlands between human, animal and nature.



## *Conclusion*

In this essay, I have been describing the process of my degree work and discussing it with the aid of writers on taste, gender, femininity and femme-hood. My deduction is that femininity is ambiguous and eludes definition. It has potential of being both essential and performed, and thereby challenged in multiple layers of meaning, and this elusive character makes it fascinating to engage with artistically. There is an openness here, a vast landscape open for exploration.

In this piece of work, I have been exploring it by making sculptural objects. I have been working primarily with hen wire, starch glued fabric and papier maché, making sculptures that I have dressed in textile garments and accessories. I have been exploring feminine aesthetics but also the term body, finding a space in the middle ground between figurative and abstract. The objects bear connotations to plants or animals but also have a mysterious quality, where it is not completely clear what we are looking at. This strange and maybe humorous expression adds a further skewing of the feminine attributes. I like my work to balance on the edge of beauty and ugly, repulsive and seductive, and I think these queer bodies succeed in that.

In the second part of the paper, I have described my working process. I have a great interest for artistic processes with an experimental approach; to start an investigation without knowing your end point. There has been some friction between this approach and the demand of the academic context when I have been asked to explain and describe my work before I had the answers. This has led me to question the relevance of my thinking around artistic processes. I found some support in the writings of Tiina Nevanperä which proposes to approach the artistic work with sensitivity (Nevanperä 2017, p. 35). Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's body-centered (Entwistle 2001, p.44) approach can help us to understand what Nevanperä calls the carnal knowledge; understanding artistic work through your own body. I see it as entering a dialogue with your material using not only your intellect or vision but also your bodily experiences. Being practiced in carnal knowledge is the crafter's skill; a particular way of relating to the material realm around us that is growing increasingly rare in our present society.

Towards the end of this project, I realised that much of my current thoughts around artistic processes are reactions to my bachelor studies. I was taught to have a transparent design process where every decision could be rationally accounted for, named to de-mystify the design process. Inspired by writings

on industrial design processes, this pedagogy is efficient in an academic context, as it helps you to motivate your choices and explain your working process. However, I find that it tends to result in works that are slightly sterile and industrial. I also saw how it created a lot of insecurities in my peers, who did not dare make one single decision if they were not able to motivate it, which I think can be a general danger when artistic education turns increasingly academic. We lose valuable resources if we ban other types of intelligence than the intellectual one from our working process. Poetry, intuition and sensibility as well as lived and carnal knowledge are powerful forces that run the risk of being neglected. My attempt with this master course has been to re-mystify the artistic process by bringing these resources back into my work.

Another important goal with this masters course was to try out new formats for my work. I have previously been torn between working with traditional fashion collections and more experimental work, and here I wanted to explore my practice without the expectations of producing a fashion collection. The object based work that came out of it was somewhat of a surprise, as I was anticipating to work more with performance or installation. However, engaging with objects has opened up for new reflections on how I as a maker relate to my work and installing them has brought a new spatial understanding. I look forward to seeing how I will use these new skills in my future practice. Looking back, I realise that I was so determined to explore new formats that I stopped myself from doing any work based on the human body. I think this was unnecessarily harsh. By its absence, I have re-discovered how much the human body means for my practice, and I would love to bring it back in future works. A continuation of my present work could be to move the papier maché shapes onto the body, morphing it into new shapes. The body in between human, animal and plant would be interesting to explore in a garment based approach. It would also be interesting to let a human body take place in the installation, engaging empathetically with the objects by taking on the same position that I have forced them into.

I would also like to reason around a question that has more or less tormented me for a large part of the project. Why make objects? Is this a purposeful method of investigating gendering? Is the translation from the human body needed, or is it more of a detour? By switching context, I am displaying gendering in a different light, skewing the environment around it in order to see it more clearly. Those things which we find most natural, common, the ones closest to us, perhaps needs a particular space for us to be able to reflect around their being and meaning. A white cube setting offers space and stillness, an opportunity to look



at a piece of material with air around it. To take your time and contemplate it, which you would probably not do with a piece of commodity that is around you everyday, such as a garment. In this project, I am offering this space for dress and for feminine adornments, but also for the body. By displaying these two elements together; the body and the dress, I am merging them into one entity. They can be read as one, which I do not think could happen with the human body and dress. Returning to Kate Soper (2001), even though the history of human self-adornment is ancient the common view is still that the body is something natural while dress belongs to culture, something we apply on to the body. Dress in a sculptural context has potential to explore the presumed duality between the body and the garment. I see many possibilities for further investigations here.

I would like to end with a quote on femininity by Sigmund Freud, who during his practice was continually intrigued and tantalised by its, to him, incomprehensible nature (Björklind 2021). In an article on femininity, Freud wrote: *If you want to know more about femininity, enquire from your own experiences of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information.* (1965) It still seems up to us working in the realms of art and poetry to provide a deeper, listening and materialised view of what femininity can be.



## *Reference list*

- Ahl, Zandra and Olsson, Emma. (2013). *Svensk smak: myter om den moderna formen*. Stockholm: Nilleditions
- Ambjörnsson, Fanny. (2011). *Rosa: den farliga färgen*. Stockholm: Ordfront förlag.
- Batchelor, David. (2000). *Chromophobia*. London: Reaktion Books Limited.
- Björklind, Charlotta. (2021). *Könets undflyende väsen. Kvinnan i psykoanalysen*. In Johansson Wilén, Evelina and Sjöstedt, Johanna (ed.) *Vad är en kvinna? Språk, materialitet, situation*. Göteborg: Daidalos AB. Pp. 153-173.
- Bomb Magazine. (2014). Phyllida Barlow & Vincent Fecteau. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/phyllida-barlow-vincent-fecteau/> [2022-03-17]
- Brown, Kath and Nash, Catherine J. (ed.) (2010). *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Björk, Nina. (1996). *Under det rosa täcket: Om kvinnlighetens vara och feministiska strategier*. Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand.
- Butler, Judith. (1999). *Gender trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Dahl, Ulrika. (2014). *Skamgrepp: Femme-inistiska essäer*. Stockholm: Leopard förlag.
- Entwistle, Joanne. (2000). *The fashioned body, Fashion, Dress and Modern Social*, Cambridge, Polity Press. Second edition, 2015.
- Freud, S. (1965). *Femininity, from New introductory lectures on psychoanalysis [1933]*. New York: Norton.
- Halberstam, Jack. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hooks, Bell. (1989). *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness*. Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, 1989, No. 36, pp. 15-23
- Koller, Veronika. 'Not Just A Colour': pink as a gender and sexuality marker in visual communication." *Visual Communication* Vol. 7 iss. 4 pp. 395-42, 2008. DOI:10.1177/1470357208096209
- Nevanperä, Tiina. (2017). *In the Flesh of Sensibility: Unravelling Incompleteness with Art*. Phd diss. Aalto University.
- Skugge, Linda & Olsson, Belinda (ed.) (1999). *Fittstim*. Stockholm: DN förlag.
- Soper, Kate. (2001). *Dress Needs: Reflections on the Clothed Body, Selfhood and Consumption*. In Entwistle, Joanne and Wilson, Elizabeth (ed.) *Body Dressing*. New York: Berg. Pp. 13-32.
- Sparke, Penny. (2010). *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*. Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.
- Spivak G. C. (1985). *The Rani of Sirmur: an essay in reading the archives*. *History and Theory*, 24(3): 247-272
- Thomas, Camille. (2019) *In the Name of <3* Master thesis. Stockholm: Konstfack.



## *Image reference list*

Image 1. Arvida Byström, Arvida Byström for Urban Ears, 2018, photography. Accessed at May 26th 2021. <https://www.arvidabystrom.se/work/urban-ears>

Image 2. Zandra Ahl, Blomsterbuketten, 2019, installation of glass objects, The Glass Factory. Accessed at May 26th 2021. <https://www.theglassfactory.se/press/presbilder/presbilder/2020-06-05-blomsterbuketten---zandra-ahl.html>

Image 3. Le Tigre: This Island, cover art 2004. Photographer unknown. Accessed at March 17th 2022. <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/4706-this-island/>

Image 4. Gabriella Loeb, Trigger Happy, 2018, Armani satin, grandmother's lace, plexiglass, 61 x 66 x 14 cm. Accessed at May 26th 2021. <https://gabriellalob.com/TRIGGER-HAPPY>

Image 5, Author's own, Gaps and Ruptures (detail), 2021, glass beads, plastic, polyester/viscose fabric.

Image 6, Author's own, Matters of the Heart, 2021, carved basswood, sublimation printed polyamide tulle, sublimation printed polyester duchesse, swarovski rhinestone, 30 x 30 x 20 cm.

Image 7, Author's own, Matters of the Heart, 2021, carved basswood, sublimation printed polyester, 30 x 20 x 20 cm.

Image 8, Author's own, Matters of the Heart, 2021, carved basswood, sublimation printed polyester, 30 x 20 x 20 cm.

Image 9, Author's own, Entangled, 2021, hen wire, cotton fabric, starch glue, smocked polyester fabric, 40 x 30 x 20 cm.

Image 10, Author's own, Joint, 2021, carved basswood, polyester organza,

glass beads, 20 x 15 x 5 cm.

Image 11, Author's own, Density, 2021, hen wire, newspaper, steel wire, modelling clay, polyester reade made bow, 20 x 20 x 20 cm.

Image 12, Author's own, Compressed, 2021, hen wire, newspaper, starch glue, plaster, elastic, bra closure, 40 x 30 x 30 cm.

Image 13, Author's own, Infinity Ass, 2021, papier maché, sublimation printed polyamide fabric, 35 x 35 x 35 cm.

Image 14, Author's own, Digital sketch, 2022.

Image 15, Author's own, hen wire experiments, 2022, hen wire, cotton fabric, starch glue, approximately 40 x 40 cm.

Image 16, Sara Möller, Between the Shell, 2022, papier maché, Berg Gallery. Accessed at March 17th 2022. <https://www.berggallery.se/exhibitions/63-sara-moller-between-the-shell/>

Image 17, Phyllida Barlow, Folly, 2017, installation, wood, cement, fabric, The British Pavillion, The Venice Binneale. Accessed at March 17th 2022. <https://www.artificialis.eu/?p=4653>

Image 18, Vincent Fecteau, untitled, 2019, papier maché, resin clay, acrylic, cardboard, 55 x 64 x 58 cm. Accessed at March 17th 2022. <https://matthewmarks.com/artists/vincent-fecteau/lightbox/works/46388>