

2016

Topographies of Pain

Kellye Grace Eisworth

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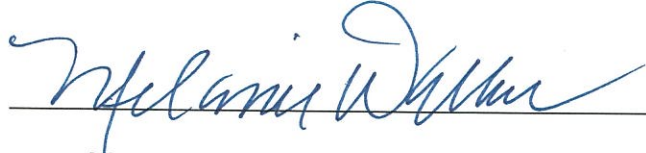
Topographies of Pain

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B.F.A., Louisiana State University, 2012

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the graduate school of the
University of Colorado
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Department of Art and Art History
2016

This thesis, entitled: *Topographies of Pain*
written by: Kellye Grace Eisworth
has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History



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Date

The final copy has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet the acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

*for my father, who taught me everything I know about empathy, love, and forgiveness,
and gave me the courage to love myself and believe that I have the power to achieve
my dreams.*

Acknowledgments

It is important to note that this work would not have been possible without the bravery of my subjects, the insights and advice of my colleagues and mentors, and the support of my family. The people who have helped to shape my creative practice over the past few years are too numerous to count. I am truly grateful for each and every one of them.

To my subjects:

It has been an honor to share in your vulnerability; I continue to be awed by your courage and humbled by the trust you have placed in me.

To my colleagues and mentors:

Thank you for challenging me to consider new ways of thinking and making, to find inspiration in everything, your compassion, and unwavering support during this at times painful process of self-exploration. This list represents those individuals who have had a profound effect on me- in my creative practice, and in life.

Sincerest thanks to:

Molly Ches

Megan Gafford

Holly Hayes

Ariana Kolins

Jen Lesea

Forrest Lotterhos

Vanessa Roberts

Melinda Barlow

Albert Chong

Kim Dickey

Françoise Duressé-Stimilli

Robby Mehls

Laura Shill

Melanie Walker

Abstract

Kellye Grace Eisworth, *Topographies of Pain*

M.F.A., Department of Art and Art History

Thesis directed by: Melanie Walker

Topographies of Pain is an exploration of pain and the act of bearing witness through marks on the body. Whether the result of accident, surgery, or self-infliction, the physical evidence of trauma intimates a deeper internal suffering. These marks serve as maps of individual experience and personal history; memories recorded in the flesh.

Here, the body functions as a site of convergence between public and private life where the past erupts into the present. Sharing this ability to capture and preserve the past, these photographic images echo the function of scars on the body as both evidence and memorial. The photograph is both an acknowledgement of their pain and an affirmation of their survival.

This idea of the body as a site of memory and expressed emotion is particularly potent when viewed through the lens of feminist body politics. Through the inherently violent act of marring the surface of the female form, it is irrevocably differentiated from the archetypal to the singular. In this way, the marked body challenges the cultural construct of the female form as an aesthetic object.

Topographies of Pain grapples with the ethical implications of the act of looking and what it means to bear witness to the pain of others. At once both intimate and aggressive, this relationship is dependent on the willingness of both participants to see and be seen by the other. The photographs work to use this shared vulnerability as a point of connection, collapsing the distinction between self and other where the pain of revealing and the pain of looking at that which is revealed converge.

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I. *Topographies of Pain*: Summary of MFA Thesis Exhibition

Topographies of Pain consists of three distinct types of images; each provides a different lens through which to see the subject of pain and consider the ethical implications of the act of looking. Though all of the black and white images are created using the photographic medium, they are translated through a variety of different materials, including glass, metal, and paper. Subdued lighting enhances the romantic quality of light in the photographs themselves. Foregrounded against black walls, the effective mood is one of somber reverence.

Just as my conceptual interests focus on the body and the physical manifestations of inner experience, so too is the



Figure 1. *Topographies of Pain*, documentation of exhibition

viewer's physical relationship to the images crucial to the understanding of the work. From varying relationships of scale between spectator and subject, to the play between clarity and obscurity created through dramatic lighting, to the materiality of the art objects themselves, every aspect of the presentation is carefully chosen to reinforce the ideas I am exploring in the work. In this way, the physical space and the arrangement of the images within it become as much a part of the work as the images themselves.

II. Maps of Memory: The Body as Landscape

Each of these three components occupies their own space within the exhibition.

The first of these is represented by a close-up investigation of the subject's scars.

Entitled *Intimacy*, this image magnifies the markings almost to the point of abstraction;

the body becomes a landscape, the flesh the conceptual and corporeal terrain to be

traversed. The metaphor of the body as landscape is often used to talk about memory

and past experiences.

Like the land, the body

exists not only as an

active site of

present events, but also

as a record of past

experiences.



Figure 2. Kellye Eisworth, *Intimacy*, photograph on aluminum, 62 x 42 in

In the distant past cartographers used the Latin *terra incognita* to describe the unknown, unexplored, and unclaimed territories of the world. Written in a language we no longer speak, the very word contains within it all of the allure and mystery of the landscapes it describes, "allud[ing] to the possibilities inherent in any exploration, whether an arduous physical voyage or an intuitive mental search" (Mulligan). This is how landscape photographer Steve Mulligan describes the term when speaking about

his own exploration of these kinds of spaces. He says that "by searching out these skewed and esoteric visual enigmas, by skating the fine line between vision and abstraction, I have journeyed into my own terra incognita" (Mulligan). *Topographies of Pain* asks the viewer to be willing to embark on a similar journey into private spaces and unfamiliar experiences.

This attempt to name that which is as yet unnamable may seem like an impossible task, especially without any signs to guide you. In her ruminations on the experience of physical pain, theorist Elaine Scarry uses the metaphor of body as landscape to describe the difficulty of understanding the true emotional impact of another person's private experience without the visual evidence that can only be expressed on the body. "When one hears about another person's physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth" (Scarry 1985, 3). Existing on the boundary between interior and exterior, marks on the body "externalize, objectify, and make sharable what was originally an unsharable experience" (Scarry 1985, 15-16). In this way, scars facilitate a point of connection between the viewer and the subject.

Artistic Influence: Mary Lucier, *Noah's Raven*

In her 1993 work entitled *Noah's Raven*, video artist Mary Lucier also uses scars as a way to generate dialogue about memory and the experience of pain. A four channel, eight monitor video installation, *Noah's Raven* features a continuous loop of imagery depicting the effects of man-made and natural disasters on the environment. Through video footage of deforestation in the Amazon rainforest and the 1989 Exxon-Valdez oil spill in Alaska, Lucier explores the way in which the land is impacted by and records the collective cultural experiences of the past.

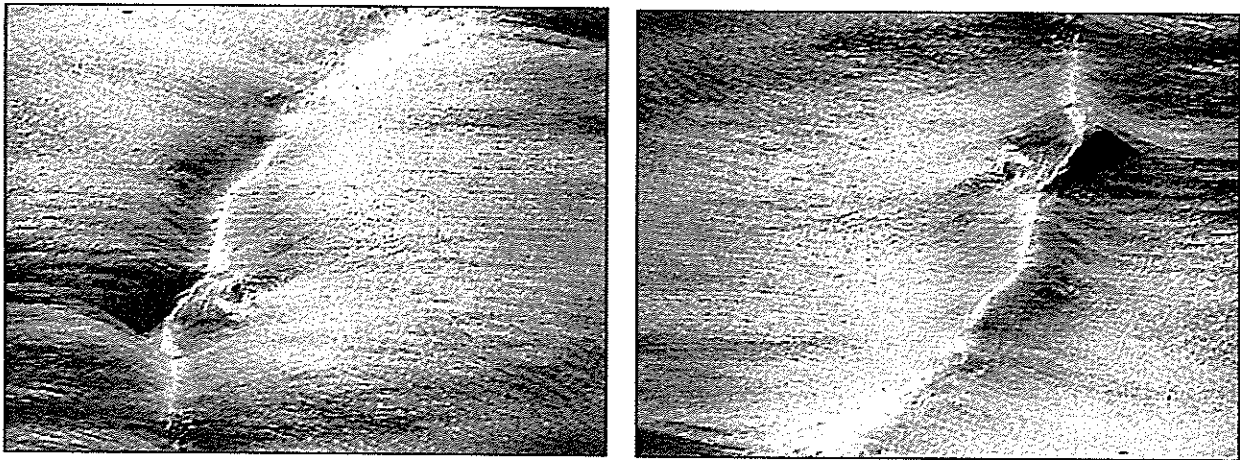


Figure 3. Mary Lucier, *Maps of Time: Mother*, video still

Juxtaposing these documentations of destruction with video footage of her mother undergoing surgery during her battle with cancer and the scars left behind, she draws a parallel between the collective memories recorded through the land and the personal histories inscribed upon the body. This juxtaposition asks the viewer to consider the global with all of the intimacy of the personal. In her work, Lucier flips the metaphor of the body as landscape to instead investigate the lands in terms of the body. This switch transforms sites into subjects, forcing a shift in perception.

In *Topographies of Pain*, the photograph *Intimacy* depicts the marks of an open-heart surgery. The rounded forms of the breasts and the shadows they cast become mountains and valleys; the jagged scar flows through the space in between like a river. "The contours of the body reveal their delicate geometry in this portrait of a person as a *location*, an imaginary landscape we are invited to inhabit" (Barlow 1997, 6). Here, the lens of the camera is focused so tightly on the scar that the subject's breasts are only partially revealed to the viewer. Though feminist concerns are not explicitly addressed in Lucier's work, there are also congruencies between our use of the female body as the subject of our explorations of the body as a site of memory and trauma.

Though the subject and their experience are unknown to us, the evidence remains. These marks on the body allow us to map the geography of pain with the possibility of leading us to a greater understanding of this intimate, internal space. Reflecting on her own work, Mary Lucier states that "the scar tissue (i.e. memory) presents a visible sign which enables us to track the traumatizing event, following its map backwards in time to the source where the wounds are always fresh and the scabs of recovery and forgetfulness have not yet formed" (Barlow 1997, 6). Through marks on the body, the intimacies of the past begin to bleed through.

Materiality and Relationships of Scale

In the exhibition of *Topographies of Pain*, the photograph hangs on a wall alone. Filling it completely, the image confronts the viewer at an immense and imposing scale. The display of this image at such a large scale aims to create a bodily experience for the viewer while further emphasizing the abstract nature of the photograph. Just as markings on the body serve as maps of personal history, the terra incognita of this human landscape alludes to the idea of journey and experience. Unable to see the complete image and the intimate details of the form simultaneously the viewer is forced to become aware of their own body in relation to the image as they move within the space in order to gain a new perspective of the subject. The viewer's relationship to and understanding of the subject changes as they get closer. Printed on aluminum, the slightly reflective surface of the material allows the viewer to see their own image superimposed upon that of the subject, also serving to make the viewer conscious of their relationship with the subject depicted. As the viewer reads these human topographies, the marked body speaks.

III. Scars in Context of the Body

The adjoining wall features a collection of photographs of various sizes in simple black frames. The viewer is again confronted with imagery of marred flesh. Many of the images overtly reference the female body, while others remain more ambiguous. Subtle clues, however- the adornment of jewelry and elaborately painted fingernails, the gestures and body language of the figures- also suggest that many of the subjects are female.

Placed in front of a black background, one can see legs, arms, and torsos bearing the scars of the past. These images provide the viewer with a greater understanding of the work. Though this setting provides few clues as to the subject's identity, the larger context for the scar and its relationship to the body as a whole is revealed.

The visual manifestations of many different experiences of pain are represented in these images. Pain enters into our lives through many different channels. Though this emotion is universally felt, each individual experience of pain is unique in its origin and its impact. *Typographies of Pain* aims to lend validity to all the ways in which we experience pain and can be scarred by the past, whether cosmetic, accidental, self-inflicted, or naturally occurring.

Exhibition Design: Salon Style

Modern gallery conventions dictate that photographs should be displayed eye-level with the viewer in a linear arrangement on the walls. This layout is intended to allow the viewer to experience each work of art separately while affording each photograph equal visibility. However, this linear design (whether intended or not), imposes a rigid structure that limits the viewer to seeing and interpreting the work through a single implied narrative from one image to the next.

When designing the layout for *Topographies of Pain*, I rejected this approach in favor of a hanging method more closely resembling that of the Paris art salons in the late 1800s. In this “salon style” presentation, artworks cover the walls from floor to ceiling in order to waste as little space as possible. This approach appealed to me because it does not direct the viewer’s reading of the work to any specific conclusion and transforms the wall into a more visually active space. However, I also felt that the traditional salon style of hanging placed

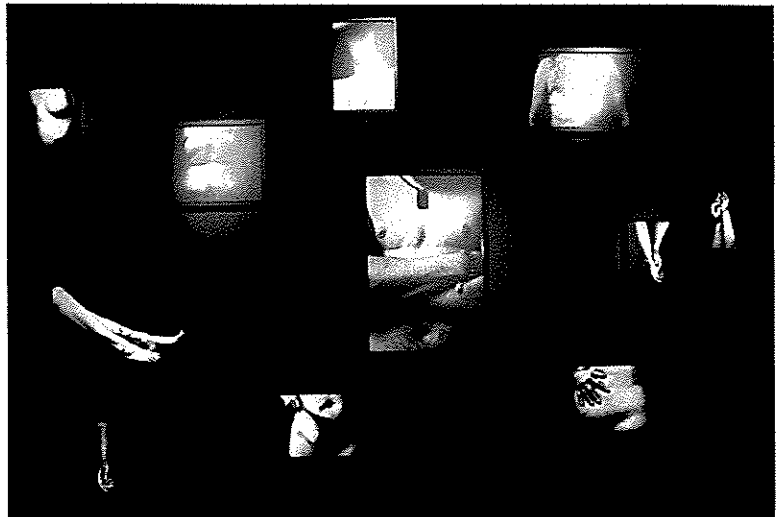


Figure 4. *Topographies of Pain*, documentation of exhibition

the images too close together, making it easy for the viewer to get lost or become overwhelmed.

In both of these modes of presentation, little room is left for the viewer to form their own interpretations and enter into a personal dialogue with the work. In order to better facilitate a connection between the subjects and the viewer, I felt that additional space was necessary. In the exhibition of *Topographies of Pain*, the photographs are neither hung in a single row nor crowded together to fill the space completely. Instead, a selection of photographs is interspersed across the wall, literally expanding the space for the viewer to enter. No two photographs in the exhibition are the same size; the spacing between them is erratic, as is the height at which they are displayed. This lack of uniformity or structure creates an environment that invites more active engagement from the viewer. Contained in simple black frames and foregrounded against black walls, the seamless transition from one image to the next encourages the viewer to see the images as a group, allowing them to form various relationships between the individual pieces organically.

Creating Empathy: The Role of Text in *Topographies of Pain*

Text provides another important lens through which to view *Topographies of Pain*. Titles such as *Pain*, *Intimacy*, and *Courage* subtly allude to the concepts explored in the work. Though themes such as beauty, pain, intimacy, courage, pride, and identity are present in all of the images, each concept has been paired with the image I felt most embodied it. In this way, the titles function to draw connections with both the specific photograph they describe and the series as a whole.

Each photograph is also accompanied by a list of materials that focuses on the processes used to make the mark on the body. One of the most gripping examples of

this is a photograph entitled *Evidence*. The materials list for the gruesome scar on her leg includes one titanium rod, four titanium screws, staples, stitches, and skin. These materials list emphasize the corporeal reality of the subjects depicted and aim to provide a point of connection between the viewer's own bodily experience and that of the subjects, while the titles aim to solicit empathy for their emotional impact.



Figure 5. Kellye Eisworth, *Evidence*, archival pigment print

When seen as a group, these textual elements provide greater insight into the subjects and their experiences. However, they ultimately prompt more questions than provide answers. Like the layout of the exhibition, this sense of ambiguity invites active participation from the viewer and asks them to see the ways in which all of these themes are connected.

IV. Self Portrait: Subject & Object of My Own Gaze

Although my investigations into the experience of pain feature a variety of different subjects, much of my work is guided by my own intimate understanding of the experience of pain and being seen as other. When I was thirteen I was admitted to a psychiatric hospital where I was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. Unable to cope with my volatile emotions, I tried to assuage the psychological pain in a physical way; I cut myself. As a result my body is covered with scars, a public display of my personal suffering.

The unpredictable dramatic shifts between manic and depressive mood swings associated with my bipolar disorder also created a personal sense of powerlessness. My decision to physically harm myself was an attempt to regain some sense of control. Performing this secret ritual provided a way for me to translate complex psychological and emotional suffering into a direct physical pain that was much easier deal with. Through watching the wounds heal, healing became a visual process for me.

Secret

Among the photographs in *Topographies of Pain* are images of my own body entitled *Secret*. In them I offer my arms to the viewer, revealing my secret and putting myself and the evidence of my suffering on display. It is accompanied by a record of the marks I methodically engraved into my body; *65 cuts, 4 burns, and skin*.

Social etiquette dictates that we should not look at such things or, more accurately, should not be *seen* looking. However, these photographs of my scarred arms invite the

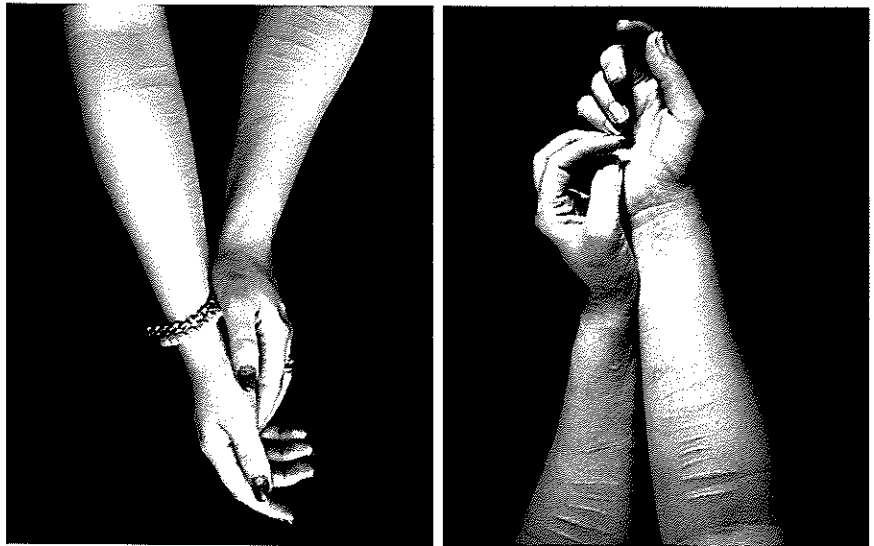


Figure 6. Kellye Eisworth, *Secret*, archival pigment prints

viewer to stare directly, openly. By placing these images in the context of the gallery, *Topographies of Pain* creates a space that is both safe and vulnerable in which the viewer can consider these difficult questions.

V. Looking vs. Seeing: The Power of the Gaze

The desire to gaze is a natural instinct. The sensation of seeing and being seen is an inherent part of the human condition, permeating every experience we have. One of the most deleterious forms of looking is voyeurism. A voyeur is a person who takes pleasure in anonymously observing others while in the act of doing something "usually considered to be of a private nature" (Hirschfeld 1938).

Voyeurism is traditionally thought of as a passive experience; that is, that the viewer's gaze has no effect on the thing at which they are looking. From this perspective, the spectator cannot be held accountable for the things they witness. However, I think this impossible. I would argue that any act of looking contains within it a possessive quality over that which is being looked at. The relationship created between viewer and object is inherently tied to relationships of power. In fact, these power dynamics are embedded in the very language used to talk about this experience of looking.

Merriam-Webster defines the act of looking as "to exercise[ing] the power of vision upon" (Look). Synonymous with the gaze, it is, by definition, a possessive /controlling act. This type of gazing transforms the act of looking into one of objectification, shifting one's perspective of another person from a person into an object. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes objectification as a process in which the subjects are stripped of their sense of agency and become interchangeable objects that can be possessed or owned. When individuals are seen as objects, it is assumed that there is

no ethical violation in disregarding or even denying their feelings (Nussbaum 1995, 249-291).

In contrast, the term “to see” is defined as “to notice or become aware of; to perceive the meaning or importance of” (See). In most contexts, the words “look” and “see” are considered to be interchangeable. However, there is a shift in meaning between the two. Though this shift is subtle, it is significant. Seeing suggests an acknowledgement and validation of the object of the gaze.

These power dynamics have been the subject of the work of many theorists. In his essay *Do Not Look at Y/Our Own Peril*, Mark Ledbetter speaks eloquently about the ethical implications of spectatorship, stating that “we are voyeurs by nature, and voyeurism is necessary to ethical encounter. Certainly to look, in private or in public, has the potential of violation. But to look and see empathetically is in turn to be violated, to be vulnerable, and violation, if not indictment? culpability? empathy?, is at the heart of the ethical moment” (Ledbetter 2012, 4). Here he uses this shift in vocabulary to underscore the difference between objectification and the act of bearing witness.

The Ethics of Looking

Whether acting as a passive voyeur or an active participant, the presence of the gaze is impactful. This act of looking can be a source of both power and oppression, pleasure and pain. It can serve as either a point of connection or as a point of disparagement. The crucial difference between these two forms of spectatorship is that the latter acknowledges their culpability in the things they witness while the other does not. In the role of the spectator, "to believe that I am within the 'frame' of what I see invites somatic participation. I am complicit in and with what I observe. Seeing within the frame undermines any distinction between subject and object. Such words of binary distinction lose their meaning" (Ledbetter 2012, 5). During this kind of ethical exchange, the act of looking is no longer a singular performance, but rather a collaboration between two equally important players dissolving into one shared experience.

Traditionally, the term voyeur is used in a very specific way to describe a person who takes pleasure in watching others engage in sexual acts without being aware that someone is watching. However, I find it to also be the most appropriate term to use in this context because, like spying on the explicit act of sex, turning one's gaze to the pain of another person is an equally violating invasion of an intimate space.

VI. The Body as a Site of Control and Power

Through the process of developing this project, I have come to realize that all of the ways in which our pain manifests itself, regardless of the initial cause, are also inextricably tied to the relationship between the body and notions of power. Existing as a site of convergence between public and private, the body is the vehicle through which our private experiences are put on display for others to interpret. As noted by anthropologist and social theorist Mary Douglas, “bodily control is an expression of social control...[and] there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension” (Douglas 1970, 78). Whether communicated through temporary adornments like clothing or jewelry, to indelible scars engraved into the flesh, the visual language of the body is the most immediate and direct influence on our perception of one another. As noted by theorist Christine Braunberger, “scars are symbols demanding to be read” (Braunberger 2000, 1). These interpretations happen within public spaces and are always contextualized within cultural constructs. Even though the ways in which our bodies become marked is an intensely personal experience, it can never be divorced from this social context and the power dynamics contained within it.

The Female Body as Aesthetic Object: The Constructs of Femininity

Though voyeurism is inextricably tied to the issue of power, the gaze has more deleterious connotations when directed at the female form. This idea of the body as a site of memory, expressed emotion, and objectification is particularly potent when viewed through the lens of feminist body politics.

In a patriarchal society like our own in which men enjoy privileged positions of power, voyeurism is typically considered a masculine activity directed at a female subject. Even the common term for the voyeur- "peeping Tom"- is male gendered. Beyond colloquialism, Merriam-Webster's official definition of looking also seems to insinuate a certain level of dominance over that which is being looked at.

Speaking from this context in *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*, theorist Rae Helen Langton proposed that when directed at female subjects, objectification becomes not only a process of reducing a person to an object, but reducing them to a form whose value is determined solely based on their physical appearance (Langton 2009, 228-229). Through the inherently violent act of marring the surface of the female form, it is irrevocably differentiated from the archetypal to the singular. In this way, the marked body challenges this patriarchal construct of the female figure as an aesthetic object.

Like all other aspects of society, men also dominate popular culture and forms of entertainment. Pleasure in the visual arts is therefore structured around a masculine perspective. This patriarchal structure results in what film theorist Laura Mulvey describes as the male gaze- a privileging of heterosexual male desires that leads to the proliferation of objectifying images of women (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey suggests the only way to dismantle this patriarchal system is by eliminating this objectifying form of voyeurism. In *Topographies of Pain*, the display of bodies marked by the past aims to do this by encouraging the viewer to form a point of connection with the subject through the memories of their own painful experiences, allowing the act of looking to become an empathetic encounter with the other.

Referencing the Aesthetics of Traditional Studio Portraiture

Throughout the series, the emphasis on creating overly aestheticized images of women's bodies mimics these stereotypical representations of the female figure to elevate my subjects to the status of beauty associated with these types of "high art" while also challenging the traditional popular conceptions of beauty and highlighting their flawed nature.

One of the photographs in *Topographies of Pain* is titled *Beauty* and depicts the figure of a woman. With the frame fixed tightly on her torso, she raises her arms and thrusts her chest towards the camera. We are granted an intimate view of her exposed breast, but denied the ability to see her face. Posed in front of a black background and removed from context, the figure is once again transformed into an aesthetic object which

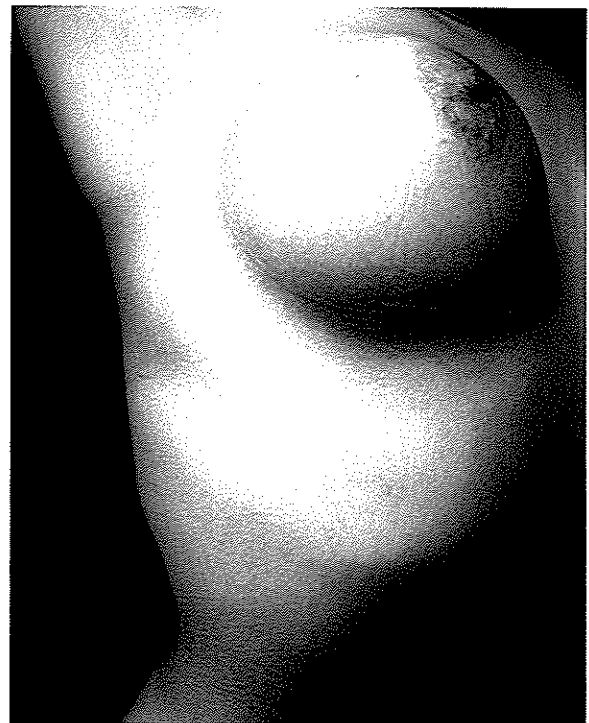


Figure 7. Kellye Eisworth, *Beauty*, archival pigment print

no longer occupies space in the corporeal or real world.

Unlike some of the other images in the series, the scar is subtle. At first glance the subject doesn't seem to have any relevance to the central issues addressed in my work. Upon closer inspection, however, the small scar lining the bottom curve of the breast becomes more apparent. This mark is the result of breast augmentation. Like all

other forms of cosmetic surgery, it is intended to enhance a woman's outward beauty by altering the body.

In the image we can also see the faint outline of the woman's bra. Together these marks are emblematic not only of the artificiality of these perpetuated ideals of beauty but of the underlying psychological pain and damage they inflict; the pain of adhering to the constraints placed on the female body is literally imprinted into the flesh.

Defining Gender

Because *Topographies of Pain* centers around the female body specifically in the context of its relationship with these social constructs, here the term "female" is not intended to be viewed from the limited perspective of biological or assigned gender. Instead, this term is used to indicate anyone who can relate to the experience of being perceived as female and, in turn, forced to occupy or conform to the role of femininity within the institution of culture.

In this regard, there is one image that is decidedly different from the rest. Entitled *Identity*, the visual markers of gender are masculine. The subject assumes a self-assured posture; their arms, crossed in front of their chest, are covered in hair. Underlining each pectoral muscle is a scar. These scars are a result of "top surgery" – a procedure in which individuals alter the appearance of their chests to better reflect their gender identity. By changing their outward appearance, these individuals loudly reject the influence of socially dictated gender roles; the marks left behind symbolize a process of self creation.

Like all aspects of outward appearance, society attempts to assert control over the body by ascribing its own meaning to the marks we bear. "In a culture built on women's silence and bent on maintaining silence as a primary part of the relationship between women's bodies and cultural writing, the rules have been simple. The written body may only speak from a patriarchal script that tries to limit women's voices and bodies to supporting roles and scenery" (Braunberger, 2000, 1). However, people who intentionally alter their bodies defy these preconceived narratives to tell



Figure 8. Kellye Esworth, *Identity*, archival pigment print

their own story. This is one example of the ways in which your body can be not only a symbol of oppression, but a vehicle of empowerment.

Artistic Influence: Joel Peter Witkin - The Beautiful & The Grotesque

When directed at a specific entity, the term spectacle takes on the meaning of “an object of curiosity or contempt” (Spectacle). Joel Peter Witkin is a photographer who explicitly addresses issues of spectacle and contempt in his work. Employing classical Renaissance painting conventions, Witkin creates vanitas-esque still lifes featuring grotesque subject matter such as human corpses and severed limbs. Though these abhorrent displays are attention-grabbing, the act of looking is the real subject of the work. The highly romanticized presentation of these macabre figures pushes the boundaries between the beautiful and the grotesque through images that are simultaneously attractive and repulsive. It is this tension, and the discomfort it provokes, that make this work powerful.



Figure 9. Joel Peter Witkin, *The Kiss*, silver gelatin print

When put into a feminist context, this dichotomy has even more complex implications. Because the marked body disrupts the idealized notion of femininity and forces the viewer to confront the subject's personal trauma, these bodies are often seen as unattractive, even difficult to look at. This is especially true when the body lacks the stereotypical markers of femininity. This transference of pain from subject to

spectator challenges the stereotypical process of objectification, demonstrating that the female body has a latent power to subvert these dynamics of control. Within this patriarchal structure, the female body is both coveted and feared.



Figure 10. Kellye Eisworth, *Courage*, archival pigment print

Within *Topographies of Pain*, the photograph *Courage* is an example of this subversive power. In it the subject faces the camera. Focused on her upper torso, the camera documents the intricate floral designs tattooed on her chest- beautiful images used to cover the scars from a double mastectomy surgery in place of breast reconstruction. I named this image *Courage* because the subject's intentional rejection of cultural expectations of what a woman should be is a courageous act. In her choice not to erase the evidence of this painful experience through breast reconstruction, but to instead embrace and redefine the marks left behind by adding her own interpretation of beauty through tattooing, the subject uses her body as a site of empowerment over these uncontrollable events. Her willingness to allow the viewer to bear witness to her pain through these photographs is also an act of courage.

Speaking about works of art made by female artists and featuring the disruptive female body as subject, art critic Melinda Barlow describes this process of creation as a way of "reclaim[ing] the female body... forging a new iconography of authentic female beauty radical in its ability to shock, its refusal to protect us from our own fear, its insistence that we gaze upon it instead of look away" (Barlow 1993, 11).

The formal beauty of Witkin's black and white photographs, though they are grotesque, conveys a sense of reverence for his subjects. In my own photographs, I use the romanticized aesthetic qualities characteristic of his images in a similar way. This approach is not intended to negate the pain represented in the images or temper the discomfort felt by those who bear witness to it, but rather to lend validity to my subjects' right to be seen and to the idea that beauty can exist outside of traditional cultural ideals.

VII. Exploration of the Photographic Medium

In the most general terms, the phenomenon of spectacle can be defined as “something exhibited to view as unusual, notable, or entertaining; especially an eye-catching or dramatic public display” (Spectacle). Throughout history, the marked body has been one such source of visual spectacle. Theorist Kerri Horine describes the display of these bodies as “a visual revelation of the private occur[ring] publicly, whereas at the same time, it challenges what is commonly known or understood. It is a spectacular performance of becoming and a space that deconstructs its own boundaries. To make the boundaries between male/female, self/other, internal/external...not so distinct means to de-stabilize power structures on which binary opposition rests” (Horine 2011, 32-33). *Topographies of Pain* aims to deconstruct all of these boundaries in hopes of facilitating an empathic encounter.

The Violence of the Camera

The act of putting other people on display is rife with ethical dilemmas. In order to question the viewer’s ethics of looking I must also acknowledge my own culpability as the creator. Just as the presence of the viewer’s gaze is impactful, so too is the presence of my camera. In her seminal book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag speaks eloquently about this issue, stating that “the act of photographing is more than passive observing. Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening. To take a picture is to...be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune”.(Sontag 1977,

12). The risk of exploitation is inherent in every exchange between photographers and the subjects they photograph- this is especially true when the gaze is directed at painful subjects. However, I believe that the impact of my camera's presence is ultimately positive.

Photographs as a Form of Empowerment, Not Objectification:

The Power of Visibility

The act of sharing the intimate and personal experiences from your past is inherently scary. Because of this, I felt that it was important to go through the experience of self-exposure myself before I asked others to put themselves in a position of heightened vulnerability.

In making *Topographies of Pain*, I found not only the act of photographing, but the experience of being photographed, to be empowering. The process of creating these photographs allows me to symbolically take control in a manner that is infinitely more useful and constructive than self-harm. In the words of Ingmar Bergman, "I have always had the ability to attach my demons to my chariot. And they have been forced to make themselves useful" (Bergman). These self-portraits provide a new way for me to make my pain and the process of healing visible in a different way. Through this catharsis I am able to create not only new understandings of myself but to more firmly create and reshape my own personal narrative. In the same way, *Topographies of Pain* aims to provide a way for the subjects to reclaim their bodies as their own and accept the marks they bear as symbols of beauty, strength, and survival.

VIII. Returning the Gaze

The third and final component of the exhibition is my attempt to give these subjects a voice and allow them to be seen, not only as bodies marked by the past, but as complete people. In the middle of the space, a series of vitrines hold a collection of close-up portraits printed on glass plates. Not all of the subjects were comfortable showing their face; however, the inclusion of these images provides an important



Figure 11. Kellye Eisworth, *Untitled*, ambrotype

opportunity for the subjects to return the gaze of the spectator.

Artistic Influence: Sally Mann, *What Remains*

Centering around themes of death, photographer Sally Mann's series *What Remains* documents human corpses in various states of decay. Taken at a federal forensic anthropology facility, many of these are the unclaimed bodies of individuals who were not able to be identified. While these images are the central focus of the work, a series of close-up portraits of the artist's children form the conclusion of *What Remains*. These photographs of her children are a testament to the care and consideration she gives not only the dead, but also the living. In *Topographies of Pain*,

the portraits have a similar aim to bear witness not only to the pain of the body but also to the person who inhabits it.

When the work was exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington D.C., these portraits were displayed in a long table in the center of the room. In *What Remains*, the inclusion of the faces at the end is meant as a symbol of life and vitality used to counterbalance the morbidity of the subject matter in the other images. The distance created between the various components of the show by physically separating these images from the others functions in similar ways in both *What Remains* and *Topographies of Pain*. By allowing the viewer to experience them on their own, they can



Figure 12. Sally Mann, *Untitled*, ambrotype

investigate the body and the individual as two different yet intertwined aspects of living.

Materiality: Wet Plate Collodion and Relationships of Scale

The portraits in *What Remains* were created using a 19th century photographic process, wet-plate collodion, which records images onto glass or metal plates. This method of making photographs takes its name from a material originally used to seal wounds on the battlefield during the Civil War. In *Topographies of Pain*, the portraits are

also created using the process of wet plate collodion. Like Sally Mann, I was drawn to the historical significance of the material as a tool to facilitate healing.

I was interested in the other historical contexts of collodion as a photographic process, such as its use to take portraits of affluent people as well. When seen in this context, the marred surface of the image creates another interesting way of considering where the beauty of a subject lies and reinforces the idea of elevating these subjects to the status of beauty.

I also began to form connections between the themes I was exploring in the work and the materiality of the objects I was creating. These glass plates, called ambrotypes, are the only images that don't strive for technical perfection. The delicate emulsion sits on top of the glass plate like a skin; their surfaces are easily marred.



Figure 13. Kellye Eisworth, *Untitled*, ambrotypes

In contrast to the large aluminum photograph, these photographic objects are quite small. This shift in scale serves an important function. These images can only be read when the viewer closes the distance between the subject and themselves, entering into an intimate space in which the act of looking becomes a process of discovery. Ranging from objects that can fit in the palm of your hand to faces that

echo that of the viewer's, the use of the wet-plate collodion process and the small scale of the images imbues the objects with a sense of preciousness. Like the metal print in the first component of the exhibition, the ambrotypes also provide another reflective surface on which the viewer's own likeness, in the act of looking, is reflected back at them.

The Absence of Text

The images in this chapter of the work are conspicuously absent of text. The anonymity of the subjects, removed from both the context of the markings on their bodies and the individual histories they represent, provides a focus not on the individual identity of the subject, but rather the concept of identity in and of itself. In the process of trying to identify the subjects- of asking *who*, exactly, this experience belongs to- the viewer is forced to identify with them as well.

Where Gazes Meet: The Relationship Between Subject and Viewer

These intimate portraits reveal the faces of the people depicted in the earlier photographs. Though the faces are expressionless, the subjects make direct, unflinching eye contact with the viewer, a literal return of the gaze. As the objects of the gaze peer back at their objectifier, the viewer is directly implicated as voyeur.

Through this encounter with the other I ask the viewer to ask to question what it means to try understand someone else's experience of pain in the hopes of facilitating a stronger sense of empathy between subject and spectator. "I wish to explore the ethical integrity of voyeurism. To put it simply, I want us to watch, to gaze, to see, to

stare from the moment, every moment, silently and hidden, openly and bravely and in turn to be indicted by and participate in what we see. This participation takes place in the moment that we loudly blink and in turn are seen by the object at which we stare or gaze. The return of our gaze may well be unconscious, ethically necessary, and of our own making. Of course, we may simply find ourselves eye to eye with the other. Either way, embarrassed, shamed, invited, we then become intimately involved, emboldened, and embodied in and with the moment we see, the gaze's undoing" (Ledbetter 2012, 1).

IX. Conclusion: Vulnerability and Courage

This introspective investigation into my past has been an emotionally difficult process. Creating artwork about these experiences of pain only draws further attention to them. The visible evidence of this personal trauma has a profound effect on the way I am perceived by those around me. Consequently, I am reluctant to share my story with others; in doing so, I put myself in a position of heightened vulnerability. This feeling of vulnerability is an inherent and necessary part of my artistic practice.

I believe that the willingness to be vulnerable is closely related to the idea of courage in many ways. Derived from the Latin *-cor*, meaning heart, the original definition of the word courage was “to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart” (Brown). In the process of making this work I have come to understand that the only way I can lead the viewer to an experience of true empathy is by allowing them to share in my own experience of pain.

At its root, vulnerability is an act of courage; out of courage comes empowerment. In the face of terrifying vulnerability, I find my voice and the ability to tell my story. By speaking the truth, my own inner strength is revealed. I hope that my work can be a source of catharsis not only for myself but also for everyone who has bravely stripped themselves bare in front of my camera. Just as our scars serve as a testament to our past, the photographs are a testament to our relationship with that past. By displaying our bodies openly and proudly, we show that we refuse to be ashamed of or defined by our past.

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