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Baby Teeth, Flamingo Feet--All the Flesh That's in Between

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### Author

Galanis, Rosie

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Baby Teeth, Flamingo Feet—All the Flesh That's in Between

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of  
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Rosie Galanis

June 2021

Thesis Committee:

Charles A Long, Chairperson

Anna G Betbeze

Yunhee Min

Amir Zaki

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2021

The Thesis of Rosie Galanis is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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## List of Images

### Image 1 (Pg 14)

*Haunches*, 2020-21

Wood, screws, wire, tape, paper mache, my hair, my mom's hair, horse hair, artificial nails, acrylic and glue

59 x 39 x 80 inches

69 x 36 x 46 inches

### Image 2 (Pg 23)

*Baby Teeth*, 2021

Wire, tape, paper mache, horse hair, artificial nails, acrylic and glue

37 x 22 x 47 inches

24 x 27 x 45 inches

36 x 25 x 43 inches

27 x 21 x 36 inches

### Image 3 (Pg 25)

*Flamingo Feet*, 2021

Wood and steel stools, wire, tape, paper mache, horse hair, artificial nails, nail polish, acrylic and glue

23 x 22 x 58 inches

27 x 26 x 60 inches

### Image 4 (Pg 26)

*Tender Teeth*, 2021

Wire, tape, paper mache, horse hair, artificial nails, nail polish, acrylic and glue

47 x 56 x 100 inches

43 x 43 x 86 inches

This body of work, *Baby Teeth, Flamingo Feet—All the Flesh That's in Between*, began with a poem titled *HAUNCHES*:

Form  
Bottom form  
Legs, Thighs, Haunches  
Thunderous  
Power  
Voluminous, delicate  
Support, movement  
Power  
Ripples, Grooves, Tendons,  
Stretch, Adjust, Move  
Power  
Haunches  
What I see when I look up  
A Mothers legs  
Rippled, speckled thighs  
Power

It grew, as all bodies do, into a form embodying memory, energy, the collective, the powerful and abject nature of the flesh body. It is an exploration of the corporeal female form, the lower half of the body, the haunches, reproductive organs, both the internal and external of these appendages. I view the body as a physical entity, formed in a hyper specific manner, but material in its existence and limitations none the less. The material existence of bodies gives rise to the question of energy, inherent and imbedded within, providing what is considered “life” to an otherwise stagnant form. I am interested in this contradiction, the simultaneous presence of power and strength in the legs of an animated body, while possessing a sense of fragility, able to somehow maintain an ephemeral and seemingly contradictory state. I explore the abject nature of

materials and forms created and exuded from the body, hair, teeth, nails and cysts. I relate this to the experience and perspective of being raised by strong powerful women. In my sculptural work I use scale, form and gesture to recreate these specific feelings. They are feelings I associate with my Mom, Grandma and Aunt.

I spent my childhood going to my Grandparents' eighteen acre ranch in Rainbow, California where they grew exotic fruits and flowers. All the women in my family regularly worked the land, embodying the physical tasks of altering the landscape to provide for themselves and their children. I have distinct visions of my view looking up at them when I was a child. I see myself running through rows of protea plants, blood orange, pomelo, and kumquat trees. I can see myself as a child running through the sloped rocky landscape returning to the comfort of the two generations of women that preceded my physical being. I see their legs, pale like mine, marked with the history of childbirth and creating and entirely new body within theirs. I see the ripples of cellulite on the backs of their thighs, the clusters of blue veins that appear through the veil of aging skin. I see these marks on the body and remember the power and wisdom they evoke. I see these marks and spots as physical manifestations of prowess and strength in the female body.

These memories of feeling strength and power exuding from the bodies of my family, conflate with the experience of seeing the female body in a state of frailty. I remember going on a back packing trip with my Mom, Aunt, sister and



cousin, an all female excursion. We traversed up a mountain to reach our campsite, mid way through the hike we had to stop for my Aunt, as her legs were beginning to falter. I asked her what was wrong and she stated that her legs were beginning to, “give out.” I remember thinking and questioning, how is it possible that her large thighs and calves can simply “give out”? It was in this moment that I saw the complexity and contradiction within the female body. The simultaneous presence of strength and power with the potential for precariousness and fragility. These visceral memories conflate with my personal physical experience of a changing body. One morphing and altering with age, one gaining more visible veins and cellulite, one gaining power and thickness, all while maintaining fragility. A body that I hope will soon create healthy children, internally, passing on this physical and genetic material.

I often consider the notion of genetic material being passed from generation to generation, particularly the idea that biologically female humans are born, formed during the gestational period, with a finite number of eggs. It strikes me that I was formed as an egg inside of my mom while she was in my grandma’s womb, how this pattern repeats endlessly going back to the primordial. I am drawn to the idea of repetition of flesh, of a mother and child being of the same matter and material. In *Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Volume 1: The Way of Animal Powers*, Joseph Campbell speaks of the deceptively false nature of the idea of separation on life. Campbell states that,

“...this expression of the mystery of compassion is an effect of the experience of an antecedent truth in nature, namely, that ‘I’ and ‘that other’ are one. Our sense and experience of separateness is of a secondary order, a mere effect of the way in which light world consciousness experiences objects within a conditioning frame of space and time. More deeply, more truly, we are of one life...”<sup>1</sup>

The notion of being separate is merely a consequence of how our culture and minds create a visual reality. The idea that, “we are of one life,” pervades my studio practice and experience in this physical body. Perhaps this idea, that there is no legitimate separation of bodies and lives, is the baseline for cycles of reincarnation. Not necessarily predicated on the “soul” being recycled into new flesh, but the flesh itself recycling, recombining, and transmuting into new bodies. This is the relationship I feel between mother and child, between myself and my sculptures, there is a continuous thread that is ever present, weaving its way through the amalgamation of flesh and time. In her book *Jambalaya: the Natural Woman’s Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*, teacher and author Luisah Teish cites Jung in an apt description of this notion of the collective body and consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Way of the Animal Powers*. A. Van Der Marck Editions, 1983, 47

“We could therefore say that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forward into her daughter. This participation and intermingling give rise to that peculiar uncertainty as regards *time*.... The conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that her life is spread out over generations—the first step toward the immediate experience and conviction of being outside time, which brings with it a feeling of *immortality*. The individual’s life is elevated into a type, indeed it becomes the archetype.... This leads to restoration... of the lives of her ancestors, who now through the bridge of the momentary individual, pass down into the generations of the future.”<sup>2</sup>

I feel this primordial connection between body and body, body and material, material and energy. These connections are potent and thickly present in my process of making. One artist that I draw upon and relate to immensely in her relationship to her production and studio practice is Alina Szapocznikow. Her work served as a means of breaking down these imagined boundaries between the artist’s body and the material used to make work.

“...she highlights her sculptures as enduring evidence of her process of merging her body’s indexical relationship to the substances she casts, dismissing the boundaries that separate body (composed matter) from the material it manipulates.”<sup>3</sup>

I see the material in my sculptures as an extension of my own body, memory and experience. Much like Szapocznikow used plaster to dissolve the boundaries between her sculptures and body casting exact replicas, I employ

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<sup>2</sup> “Shrine of the Mother.” *Jambalaya: the Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*, by Luisah Teish, Harper One, 1988, 78.

<sup>3</sup> Norton, Margot. *To Exalt the Ephemeral: Alina Szapocznikow, 1962-72*. Hauser & Wirth, 2019.

the tactile manipulation of newspaper and the altering of its physical state to create bodies that relate directly to mine and the viewer. Szapocznikow states that,

“Despite everything, I persist in trying to fix in resin the traces of our body: I am convinced that of all the manifestations of the ephemeral, the human body is the most vulnerable, the only source of all joy, all suffering, and all truth.”<sup>4</sup>

I find myself aligned with this interpretation of the body. Viewers and critics often saw her work only in relation to her experience of being persecuted in concentration camps during the Holocaust. I am interested in her ability, in spite of that horrific experience, to see her personal physical experience as one embodying power, one where positive and negative, where all joy and suffering can exist simultaneously in a life and body. She goes on to state,

“As for me I produce awkward objects. This absurd and convulsive mania proves the existence of an unknown, secret gland, necessary for life. Yes, this mania can be reduced to a single gesture, within the reach of us all. But this gesture is sufficient unto itself, it is the confirmation of our human presence.”<sup>5</sup>

I relate to her convulsive sense and need to create physical forms in direct reaction to her own body. Szapocznikow was often photographed interacting and holding her sculptures close to her body. I work in the same manner, with a strong and direct physical relationship to the sculptures as entities themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> Norton, Margot. To Exalt the Ephemeral: Alina Szapocznikow

<sup>5</sup> Filipovic, Elena, et al. Alina Szapocznikow - Sculpture Undone: 1955-1972. Museum of Modern Art, 2011, 28.

In using the process of paper mache, I caress strips of newspaper layered and soaked with wheat paste over a wire form, I feel every contour, groove, ripple and gesture that exists in every new body I build. I recognize the open cavernous space that exists inside each sculpture as a result of building with a paper mache process. I am interested in the artificial nature this produces in the forms and the reality of physical existence that they simultaneously discard and adopt. I find myself straying farther and farther from the idea of a “truth to material” in my sculptures. Artist Mike Kelley explores the history of idealizing materiality in the history of sculpture,

“...either by treating three-dimensional objects as analogous to the painting support, or by producing three-dimensional embodiments of painterly, gestural distortion. By and large, modernist works continue on with the “Greek prejudice”- the neoclassical misconception that classical Greek sculpture was uncolored. Modernist essentialism understands this colorlessness as one of the “truth[s] to materials” it defended- the truth of archetypal, not specific representation. Thus, a bronze stone sculpture is left unadorned to reveal its “true” coloration. Or, if the female form is alluded to in a Hans Arp or Brancusi, for example, reference is not made to a specific body, but to the form of femininity in general. Truth arises from the base material, gives rise to archetypal meaning, and issues in timeless truths. The sign for the timeless is monochrome, It isn’t until surrealism, and later pop art, that the truthfulness of an image is examined in relation to daily experience, either as a psychological, determined phenomenon, or simple as the by-product of culturally produced cliches. Truth is not a timeless given but a socially constructed fact.”<sup>6</sup>

Kelley identifies truth as artificially and socially constructed. The basis of classical sculpture as the peak of three dimensional expression, is based on

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<sup>6</sup> Kelley, Mike. *The Uncanny*. Walther König, 2004, 80.

how these materials exist in the contemporary present, ignoring how these works were meant to be perceived in their own present. Kelley goes on to state that, “Even though we now know that Greek statues were painted when they were made, their present function as a popular sign of taste and order will not allow this fact to be recognized.”<sup>7</sup> It is quite unfathomable that classical carved sculpture was painted, covered a veneer meant to further articulate the life of these objects. I am interested in this idea of the painting of a veneer, representing a body through painting a three dimensional form. I seek to have my work coexist as painting and sculpture, body and surface, artificial and real. Kelley relegates this vein of sculpture to its role of mediocrity in stating,

“Color is thus set as a difficult conjunction between sign and signified, a problem that is negated in painting because it operates in two-dimensional mental space- which is why painting has been king of Western art history, with sculpture relegated to the role of its idiot cousin. Naturalistically colored dolls, mannequins, automata, and wax portrait figures are not included in the generally accepted version of Western art history, and polychrome religious statuary is on the lowest rung of the art hierarchy.”<sup>8</sup>

I find myself making the exact type of sculpture that may be identified as “the idiot cousin” of painting. But I question these standards and seek to render them arbitrary and false. For me, painted paper mache sculpture evokes the physical presence of a body, I see the hierarchy of art as a socially constructed ideal that needs to be rendered false.

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<sup>7</sup> Kelley, Mike. *The Uncanny*. Walther König, 2004, 82.

<sup>8</sup> Kelley, Mike. *The Uncanny*, 78-79.

I free myself from these historical shackles by transferring my energy into these new vessels, imbuing what might be considered inert materials and objects with history, memory and form, things that all bodies possess and are composed of. I am compelled by the physical expression of my affection for these bodies. I hug them, pressing my body into theirs, feeling how our contours can fit together, how we are of the same flesh, metaphorically and physically. Every time upon reentering my studio space, I caress each sculpture I am working on, reintroducing myself to this body, greeting it in its current physical state. I meet them where their energies are at, interacting with and gaining an understanding of what they need from me in order to fully emote the memories and forces within their material forms.

“Szapocznikow is seen in archival photographs posing playfully with the sculptures and ‘wearing’ them close to her body. While one can read the souvenirs as voraciously multiplying cancerous forms, they can also surely be understood as remnants, insistent evidence of the enduring force of the body, remembrances of a life.”<sup>9</sup>

I yearn for this same physical closeness to my work as Szapocznikow, one where material and artist are one and the same. This closeness and the blurring of boundaries between generations of bodies, has the ability to evoke a fecund mix of vulnerability, power, and materiality.

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<sup>9</sup> Filipovic, Elena, et al. Alina Szapocznikow - Sculpture Undone: 1955-1972, 42.

The rich and complicated ideas associated with flesh are often explored in the work of Donna Haraway, a Professor at UC Santa Cruz in the History of Consciousness and Feminist Studies departments. In an interview between her and Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, in the book *How Like a Leaf*, Goodeve asks Haraway,

“Would you define flesh?” to which Haraway responds, “My instincts are always to do the same thing. It's to insist on the join between materiality and semiosis. Flesh is no more a thing than a gene is. But the materialized semiosis of flesh always includes the tones of intimacy, of body, of bleeding, of suffering, of juiciness. Flesh is always somehow wet. It's clear one cannot use the word flesh with out understanding vulnerability and pain.”<sup>10</sup>

I align myself with the idea of flesh and the body comprising all experience. It contains all intimacy, pain, suffering, joy, the inescapable fragility and perspiration of fluid, it is everything. My works spawns from what Haraway would refer to as an, “...insistence on a kind of non-hostile relationship to the mortal body with its breakdowns.”<sup>11</sup> I embrace the contradictions that are inherent in the fleshy body. Bodies are in a state of constant flux, one that flourishes and resides in the tension between growth and decay, pain and ecstasy, life and death. Haraway is comfortable in this liminal space of thinking.

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<sup>10</sup> Goodeve, Thyrza Nichols. *How like a Leaf: an Interview with Donna Haraway*. Routledge, 1999, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Goodeve, Thyrza Nichols. *How like a Leaf: an Interview with Donna Haraway*. Routledge, 1999, 116.



In her seminal work, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway goes into the notion of a cyborg as

“...a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation...The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurablely tight coupling...From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.”<sup>12</sup>

In my work I explore these boundaries, the self imposed Western human boundary between bodies, between human and animal. I am interested in why people are averse toward being in these states of “partial identity” or are not comfortable having, “contradictory standpoints.” I see my physical experience, the only experience I can attest to, the only one I have a memory or history of, as being wrought with contradiction and partiality. It is in these contradictions that the permanent and inherent state of the transitoriness of life arises.

Haraway employs a quotation of Henri Bergson from "*Form and Becoming*" in *Creative Evolution* that states, “What is real is the continual change of form: form is only a snap shot view of a transition.”<sup>13</sup> The only certainty of physical and

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<sup>12</sup> Haraway, Donna. Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Henri Bergson, "Form and Becoming" in *Creative Evolution* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1998. © 191 1): 302.

material existence is change and transition, the knowledge that our forms are impermanent, our lives are a mere “snap shot of transition” and transmutation.

Haraway explores this notion of transition and physical transformation throughout *How Like a Leaf*. She states,

“I was and am still very interested in the history of form and the processes of the genesis and shaping of form. It is in embryology and developmental biology that one studies precisely this. They require you to think about the history of form through time in relation to whole organisms. They are not about studying a static moment but are about biological process over time and the genesis of shape.”<sup>14</sup>

Form and shape in the context of the human body are at the forefront of my studio practice. This idea of the development of human body and form relates to the interest of ontogeny within my work. Ontogeny refers to the growth and developmental structural changes that occur in an individual organism. I am interested specifically in the development of limbs, how various animal species develop in an identical manner, their bodies only beginning to differentiate and take shape in the later stages of gestation. Haraway delves into these questions of the development of bodily forms, she speaks of the,

“...interest[ed] in the early pattern formations of the fertilized egg, in its divisions that determine these processes. What triggers them, and how does a cell know what to differentiate into? How does a cell know it's at the head end instead of the tail end? What triggers these differentiation events?”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Goodeve, Thyrsa Nichols. *How like a Leaf: an Interview with Donna Haraway*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Goodeve, Thyrsa Nichols. *How like a Leaf: an Interview with Donna Haraway*, 20.

Haraway questions the knowledge cells possess in how they grow and develop. How can this microscopic material entity know to develop into a leg, a foot, a toe? She widens her perspective of this phenomena when she goes on to state,

“From an organismic perspective, the central and unavoidable focus of biology is form. . . . Form is more than shape, more than static position of components in a whole. For biology the problem of form implies a study of genesis. How have the forms of the organic world developed? How are shapes maintained in the continual flux of metabolism? How are the boundaries of the organized events we call organisms established and maintained?”<sup>16</sup>

To me, these boundaries are permeable, existent only in the limited perspective of the Western human. Shapes are not “maintained in the continual flux” they are themselves in a state of continual change. The similarities of various animals in the stages of gestation speaks to the murkiness of ardent boundaries between humans and other biological forms. One example of this dissolution of boundary is the relationship of a hoof to the human toe. The hoof is truly an elongated toe, similar in structure to the human toe, essential for standing, taking powerful strides and traversing the land. This is explored in the sculpture *Haunches*, an amalgamation of human and animal. It exists as the powerful thighs and calves of a woman, transitioning to hooves with human hair cascading from these appendage forms.

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<sup>16</sup> Goodeve, Thyrza Nichols. How like a Leaf: an Interview with Donna Haraway, 49.



(Image 1)

*Haunches*, 2020-21

Wood, screws, wire, tape, paper mache, my hair, my mom's hair, horse hair, artificial nails, acrylic and glue

59 x 39 x 80 inches

69 x 36 x 46 inches

I create hybrid forms in my sculptures, which serves to disintegrate the line between animal and human, instead focusing on raw power and peril that exists within flesh. I relate this to philosopher Georges Bataille's notion of the big toe as being the most "human" part of the body. He states that,

"The big toe is the most human part of the human body, in the sense that no other element of this body is as differentiated from the corresponding element of the anthropoid ape (chimpanzee, gorilla, orangutan, or gibbon). This is due to the fact that the ape is tree dwelling, whereas man moves on the earth without clinging to branches, having himself become a tree, in other words raising himself straight up in the air like a tree, and all the more beautiful for the correctness of his erection. In addition, the function of the human foot consists in giving a firm foundation to the erection of which man is so proud (the big toe, ceasing to grasp branches, is applied to the ground on the same plane as the other toes)."<sup>17</sup>

I am interested in the limbs and phalanges as the most powerful aspect of a body. The liminal qualities of the physical existence of the body also speak to Bataille's writing on base materialism.

"If one thinks of a particular object, it is easy to distinguish matter from form, and an analogous distinction can be made with regard to organic beings, with form taking on the value of the unity of being and of its individual existence. But if things as a whole are taken into account, transposed distinctions of this kind become arbitrary and even unintelligible."<sup>18</sup>

I often find such distinctions between materials arbitrary. I see bodies as compositions of material, with energy and power being a result of specific

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<sup>17</sup> Bataille, Georges, et al. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Bataille, Georges, et al. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*, 45.

microscopic combinations. I think of my work as a physical experience, physical in both production and in the experience of the viewer. I want to create work that causes a visceral and physical sensation, one through which we can contend with our existence as physical bodies. In Mike Kelley's *Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny*, he speaks to the physical sensation that art is capable of evoking in the viewer.

“The uncanny is apprehended as a physical sensation, like the one I have always associated with an “art” experience- especially when we interact with an object or film. This sensation is tied to the act of remembering. I can still recall, as everyone can, certain strong, uncanny, aesthetic experiences I had as a child.”<sup>19</sup>

In order to achieve and emulate the physical sensation that I experience in making these bodies or sculptures, I employ ideas of the abject and the uncanny through a potent mix of form, gesture, scale and material. It is vital that the scale of my sculptures always be considered in comparison to the human body, both mine and the viewers. Kelley speaks about the importance of scale in relation to the viewer and how much it affects physical experience and relationship to the art.

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<sup>19</sup> Kelley, Mike. *The Uncanny*. Walther König, 2004, 73.

“It is important to me first of all, that the objects displayed maintain their physical presence, that they hold their own power in relation to the viewer. I decided, therefore, to exclude miniatures- smaller than life-size statues, dolls, toys, figurines, and the like-from the exhibition...I *am* interested in objects with which the viewer empathizes in a human way- though only as long as the viewer, and the object viewed, maintain their sense of being there physically.”<sup>20</sup>

Scale possesses an immense influence over how a work is perceived. Like Kelley, I am interested in evoking feelings of empathy and even affection within the viewer. In making works that are all in relation to the human body, my aim is to jolt the viewer in an awareness of the experience of physically existing as a fleshy body in this world. Haraway also explores ideas of scale in the biological world.

“I'm fascinated by changes of scale. I think biological worlds invite thinking at, and about, different kinds of scale. At the same time, biological worlds are full of imaginations and beings developed from quite extraordinary biological architectures and mechanisms. Biology is an inexhaustible source of troping. It is certainly full of metaphor, but it is more than metaphor.”<sup>21</sup>

The body exists in varying levels of scale from the microscopic cell to the macro “wholeness” of the body and beyond, stretching to both polar opposites of scale. In my work I remind the viewer of this dichotomy. I aim to wake the viewer out of a state of complacency in considering their bodily existence. I remember vividly as a child questioning the “normalcy” of physical life. I remember

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<sup>20</sup> Kelley, Mike. *The Uncanny*, 75.

<sup>21</sup> Goodeve, Thyrsa Nichols. How like a Leaf: an Interview with Donna Haraway, 82.

thinking, “Everyone is just ok with this? We all just walk around as if this is normal...?” For all long as I can remember I have existed in this liminal space, forced to contend with the motions of contemporary life, all while being simultaneously skeptical and in awe of our existence as physical entities.

When creating sculptural bodies, I confront viewers with notions, ranging from the ideal to the decrepit, of their own physical existence. Kelley speaks of this phenomena when applying artistic tropes and methods to the body.

“When applied to body parts, basic or compositional exercises, like up vs. down or in vs. out, come off as cruelly tongue-in-cheek. These simple organizing gestures cannot help but remind viewers if the actual morphology of the body- and of their *living* bodies in particular. Everyone knows how the body is organized an how many of each part he or she has; this is a given and is never thought about. To become aware of these particulars, one must imagine oneself unwhole, cut into parts- deformed or dead.”<sup>22</sup>

While I do not subscribe to the idea that using the body as material automatically speaks to being deformed, becoming aware of the experience living in ones body is at the forefront of my practice. I relate more to how artist Maria Lassnig considered the bodily experience in her work. Like Lassnig I am interested in,

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<sup>22</sup> Kelley, Mike. *The Uncanny*, 82.



“...portraying not how the body *looks*, but how it *feels* to be inside one. In her effort to capture bodily experience – its flaws, functions, gestures and moods – she sometimes worked lying down alongside the canvas, or leaning against it, even sitting on it. She never worked from photographs, but relied solely on inner sensations...her body shapes are unnaturally distorted and tinted, yet weirdly alive and familiar: perhaps we recognize their humanity by virtue of their telltale embarrassment.”<sup>23</sup>

In making my work, I do not seek to identically replicate the flesh of the human body, I am more interested in viewers identifying with the awkwardness of existing as a human body. I am interested in the physical sensation and feelings that arise in what may be considered to be inanimate materials that comprise my hollow painted paper mache sculptures. Kelley remarks on this category of feeling,

“These feelings seem related to so-called out-of-body experiences, where you become so bodily aware that you have the sense of watching yourself from outside yourself. All of these feelings are provoked by an object, a dead object that has a life of its own, a life that is somehow dependent on *you*, and is intimately connected in some secret manner to your life.”<sup>24</sup>

I seek to create this intimate connection that Kelley identifies in his work. The boundary between what can be considered dead and alive is minuscule at most. One way in which I speak to the thin veil between living and dead, between acceptable and abject is through the use of hair in my work. I employ both human hair and horse hair. I seek to explore and skirt the line between

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<sup>23</sup> Williams, Gilda. “How Embarrassing! – Tate Etc.” *Tate*, [www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-37-summer-2016/how-embarrassing](http://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-37-summer-2016/how-embarrassing).

<sup>24</sup> Kelley, Mike. *The Uncanny*, 73.

sensuality and disgust. Hair is seen as a marker of femininity and beauty while still attached to the body, while in a state of emergence from the hair follicle. Yet at the moment it detached from the body it becomes a source of repulsion. There are various materials produced by the human body that illicit such a reaction, hair, teeth, nails, spit, urine, things the body created internally, that through being expressed from the main body, adopt an heir of complete and utter revulsion. In *“On the Aesthetics of Ufology,”* Kelley explores the idea of this boundary and the implications that arise when materials make the leap across this divisive threshold,

“The anthropologist Mary Douglas appears to concur with Sartre when she points out that filthiness is not a quality in itself but a by-product of a boundary disruption. However, the notions of ‘boundary’ that she suggests operate on several levels: ‘Matter issuing from them [the orifices of the body] is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body.’ The problematic nature of these materials lies not so much in their phenomenological qualities (as Sartre would say of the slimy) but that they are confusing materials, being both part of you and separate from you.”<sup>25</sup>

I find this confusion between “being both a part of you and separate from you,” highly intriguing and conceptually rich. I seek to blur this boundary in using real hair in combination with ubiquitous materials, the false or artificial nature of the painted paper mache forms is in direct contradiction with the real hair that emerges from them. They have ponytails waiting to be played with and

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<sup>25</sup> Mike Kelley, extracts from *“On the Aesthetics of Ufology”*(1997), in Kelley, *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John Welchman (Cambridge Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2004), 106.

caressed, to be smelled and touched, to connect body to body, form to form, to disintegrate the imagined boundary between body and material.

Kelley speaks to the confrontation of physical existence that sculpture illuminates, specifically in figurative sculpture, attempting to form a reason for prevalent discomfort and skepticism that exists both in art objects as well as things, "...which had an "uncanny" aura about them...nonart objects that has a similar quality, such as medical models, taxidermy, preserved human parts, dolls, life masks, and film special-effects props."<sup>26</sup> I am interested in making work that takes these contexts and types of objects into consideration, not merely trapped in the canon of Western art history. Kelley goes on to assert that,

"this is probably why, in the modern era, figurative sculpture is held in such low esteem, for this primitive fear cannot be erased from it. The aura of death surrounds statues, The origin of sculpture is said to be in the grave; the first first corpse was the first statue. And early statues were the first *objects* to which the aura of life clung."<sup>27</sup>

Is there a way for recognition of the impermanent and fleeting nature of the physical body to coexist with the idea that mortality is not necessarily negative? Why can't humans accept the positive and negative aspects of experiencing life as an animated lump of flesh material, is being a lump of flesh really so bad?

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<sup>26</sup> Kelley, Mike. *The Uncanny*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> Kelley, Mike. *The Uncanny*, 88.

I often think of lumps and the body, the tenuous distinction between seemingly disparate parts and types of flesh within the body. I often consider the ease with which flesh can mutate. The memories of my physical experiences have led me to this sculptural work and creating bodily forms on a one to one scale with my body. I move around and physically transmute energy into the sculptures, constantly assessing my relationship to the form. I am reconciling these formative memories of the female body with the experience of my body approaching the same state of aging and reproduction. My experience with ovarian cysts is another pivotal experience in my relation and contending with physical manifestation of the female form. I have had two separate surgeries to remove two large hemorrhagic cysts that developed in my right ovary. The surgeon entered through my belly button to remove these forms, what could have been the physical material that formed a human. I had what are called Dermoid Cysts, they contained fat, hair and blood. They were around 15cm and 7cm in diameter, and I often think of how long I housed these forms within my own body, how tissue can mutate and form, how they had the building blocks of a human baby.

My husband Kenneth and I often joke that all they were missing was some baby teeth. These experiences of having lumps of flesh removed from my internal organs, thinned the veil between what is and is not of my corporeal body. For all intents and purposes these cysts were extensions of me. They possessed many of the materials necessary to create a fully formed human, yet



(Image 2)

*Baby Teeth*, 2021

Wire, tape, paper mache, horse hair, artificial  
nails, acrylic and glue

37 x 22 x 47 inches

24 x 27 x 45 inches

36 x 25 x 43 inches

27 x 21 x 36 inches

they didn't quite make it. They only lived as parts of a whole, mutated and existing without the predilection to function outside of my body. If these eggs had not stuck to my ovary and grown in the wrong place, I wonder what these lumps might have become as fully formed bodies. What would their teeth and hair look like, what would it have felt like to hold and caress them? I will never know, as they were the continuation of flesh that was not able to survive outside of my body.

In developing this body of work, I subconsciously created the various life and body stages of one body, one being, perhaps what my little baby cysts would have existed as in another world. The sculpture *Baby Teeth* marks this being as an infant transitioning through being a toddler into a young child, growing and arranged from shortest to tallest. Each tooth has a small pony tail sticking straight up from its head, alluding to the tiny ponytails parents create atop their baby's head prior to them having a full head of hair.



(Image 3)

*Flamingo Feet*, 2021

Wood and steel stools, wire, tape, paper mache, horse hair, artificial nails, nail polish, acrylic and glue

23 x 22 x 58 inches

27 x 26 x 60 inches

*Flamingo Feet* serves as the teenaged version of this person and body that never quite was. She has long flowing hair and painted red nails, beginning to experiment with how she presents herself and her body to the world, coming

into her own identity as a feminine being, as a young woman. The body culminates and reaches adulthood in the work *Tender Teeth*, an amalgamation of body parts and experiences that have reached adulthood as a woman with long powerful legs, long dark hair and long manicured nails. This work emerges from me as a simultaneously singular and collective entity and body, one that explores the potential of what the flesh of my body can become.



(Image 4)

*Tender Teeth*, 2021

Wire, tape, paper mache, horse hair, artificial nails,  
nail polish, acrylic and glue

47 x 56 x 100 inches

43 x 43 x 86 inches



The experience of having these cysts relates to the idea of flesh as recycled, mutated and transmuted, me consisting of my Mom's flesh in much the same way. Many of the ideas in my work relate to memories of my childhood and Mom. I remember playing with hair and teeth, being surrounded by various ideas of the materiality that comprises teeth. My mom has always possessed the strong inclination to keep things, all manner of things and objects. There was one glass case full of such curios and knick knacks, it served as a place where the family phone resided, corded in place to the wall. But within that glass case, in small ornate boxes, was all sort of items from my Mom's life. There were graduation tassels, money acquired from places throughout the world, but what I recall playing with the most were the teeth. One of the small boxes was filled with human teeth, a mixture of baby teeth and adult molars that had been pulled. It never occurred to me to be repulsed by these items, I saw them as extensions of the body, not necessarily abject but fecund with history and memory from the body that produced them. I think of the affection of a mother keeping the teeth that fell out of their child's body, it is a gesture of love. This specific gesture is explored in the piece *Baby Teeth*. I created molar like forms in the scale of a human child, with small ponytails extruding from the top of them. I see the teeth as children, transmutations of the body that manifest as offspring.

Another memory that permanently inhabits my mind and practice is the act of playing with hair, both as a means of affection and fun. For the majority of my life, my mom has had long flowing gray hair cascading down her back. One

of my favorite activities was what I called “playing” with her hair. I would brush her hair with her eponymous Mason Pearson hair brush, watching and feeling each strand glide through the bristles. Each stroke of the brush releasing the scent of her hair conditioner, an intoxicating smell. I would experiment with braiding her hair, tying it back with a scrunchy, moving her part to the middle and sides. This notion of gently stroking and playing with someone's hair exists as the same type of gesture as keeping baby teeth, it is a physical representation of love, expressed through the most abject parts of the body. Each piece in this body of work possesses a ponytail to be played with and caressed. The hair changes in color over the representation of time, starting off light and blonde as a baby, growing into a deep brunette, only to ultimately transition back to a light tone of silvery gray, a color that shimmers and flows with wisdom and experience. It is only in retrospect that I am able to identify how pivotal these experiences were to my current studio practice. Haraway highlights the importance of personal background and experience, one I feel translates directly into art making.

“The history one is born into is always so naturalized until you reflect back on it and then suddenly everything is meaningful-the multiple layers of insertion in a landscape of social and cultural histories all of a sudden pops out.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Goodeve, Thyrsa Nichols. How like a Leaf: an Interview with Donna Haraway, 5-6.

There are various histories that I experienced that arise in my studio practice. There are immensely pivotal memories I relate directly to the experience of making, they are direct remnants of memories with my Mom.

When I was a child, my Mom was commissioned by a family Dentist named Dr. Scott Jacks, to make hybrid sculptures of teeth, toothbrushes, and toothpaste tubes to decorate the waiting room of his dental practice. I have vivid memories of her making what I consider to be hybrid, or as Haraway might identify them, cyborg objects. My mom used foam core to create bodies: teeth with eyes and smiling mouths, toothbrushes with dancing hands and feet, toothpaste that had a face and presence as a body. She employed a combination of glittery sticker material and acrylic paint to evoke a life in these mutant forms existing somewhere between two and three dimensionality. These forms permeate my subconscious, informing what sculpture can be, how it can simultaneously represent and become form. I am sure she considers these forms to be merely something she was paid to create for a dentist and his office, for me they constitute the baseline in which I view painting and sculpture, two forms of making that need not be so ardently separated.

I remember the first sculpture I made. I was five years old, and for no reason other than the experience and joy of making, my Mom helped me create a paper mache flamingo. It was made of varying items and materials, cardboard tubes for the legs, a popcorn container for the main part of the body, chicken wire for the neck and a paper cone for the face and beak. It was a simplified version of

a flamingo, a hollow paper mache body painted in acrylic attached to a wood base. This way of making is identical to my methodology in sculpture and making work. *Baby Teeth, Flamingo Feet—All the Flesh That's in Between*, is a culmination of these pivotal experiences that create my bodily and physical perception presently. While this work pulls from the idea of a beginning, how a body mutates and forms in a mother's body to then separate and perhaps go on to create more and more bodies, it is certainly not indicative of an ending. I see this body of work, not as an ending culmination of these ideas, but as another beginning, the fertilization and creation of a through line that defines me, my work, and studio practice as an artist.

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