

Chapter Two

Desire and Fear: Finding Feminism

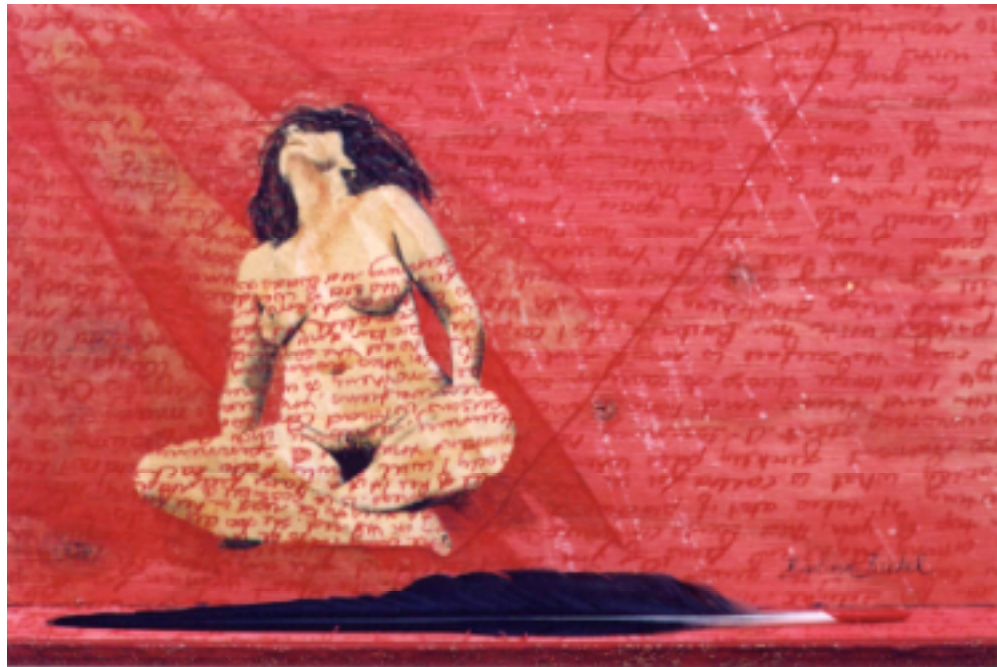


Image 7

Bickel, B. (2004), *Spinning Red Words on Wood*. detail. Vancouver: UBC AMS Gallery.
(mixed media collage on wood on wood. 22 x 12 x 2 inches)

Vulnerable Love Longs

I walk in the sun
with goose-bumps
My body refuses
to receive warmth

Longing understood
Desire not for the person
Desire for the relationship
The joining of passions

Desire and fear
Knowing the destination

The spirit journey is longing
Separation brings it to light
Choose not to close the heart
Leave it open exposed
Vulnerable love longs

Finding Feminism

In this chapter I trace my hesitant journey into feminism. A feminist sensibility awakened and emerged with my art practice. I reflect on my decision to fully express myself in the world through art by sharing two of my past collaborations. I end the chapter by introducing my desire to practice an integral feminism, a feminism that strives to embrace unity in diversity.

The world of art, ritual and academic research may seem to be far removed from life as it is lived on a daily basis. I frequently grapple with the reason that I, as a practicing visual and performance ritual artist, chose to cross the disciplinary boundary into Education, a seemingly foreign location to me. Why and how has Education become a home for me in my desire to articulate my feminist art practice? Why did I not choose Fine Arts as the location for the critical inquiry into my art practice? My experience as a researcher/artist within the discipline of Education is often that of a displaced person. It is within this troubling yet rich location that my research is located.

My desire throughout this thesis is to relocate and join the life-enriching practices of art, ritual and research, within a paradigm of life long-learning. The historical separation of religion¹, science and art, although important as a movement to differentiate and foster a greater depth of knowledge within each discipline, has left modern society bereft of an integrated knowledge that is capable of a full and healthy embracing of the world in all its diversity (Wilber, 2000). I acknowledge

¹ To include *spirituality* within the word *religion*, I go back to the Latin origin of the word *re-ligio* of “connecting to a time-space-time continuum to one’s own origin” (Jansch, 1976, p. 43), where “it is only through the full *re-ligio*, the interpenetration of integration and differentiation, that human life becomes fully creative” (p. 233).

a/r/tography in this study as a powerful corrective and integrated form of living inquiry. A feminist and spiritual perspective is the overarching lens that informs the writing of this thesis. I draw upon feminist thought and philosophical writing of artists, educators, feminists, and philosophers that support an integrated form of living inquiry that encourages a prophetic² and transformative (Mezirow, 2000; O’Sullivan, 1999) learning environment.

I wrote in my first graduate paper (2002) that “Creating art as a woman became my feminist education. With art serving as the vehicle to transform myself as silent object to empowered subject I felt the strength to begin to use my voice” (p. 4). I come from a Eurocentric, middle class background. My father was a Lutheran minister and my mother a caregiver of foster children. Similar to many women, raised within an environment that taught me to serve and help others, I was not encouraged to look at oppressions that might be operating and limiting me, or others within my own privileged environment.

Feminist art³ was not made visible to me as an Art History and Fine Art student in Alberta in the mid-eighties and early nineties. I studied the “masters” of traditional art history. I was left to discover feminist art years later on my own. I did not call myself a feminist back then. My passion for the human body and what it

² The prophetic teaching role as described by Bullough, Patterson, & Mayes (2002) “has the double role of criticizing and energizing a community” (p. 314).

³ Three more categories of feminist art are described in the Barry & Flitterman-Lewis (1987) article. “Artisanal... work that acts as sub-cultural resistance, ...’separatist’ (artists who do not identify with the art-world) and non-feminist (women artists who maintain that they are people who happen to be women)...” and lastly feminist art that uses “textual practice which exploits the existing social contradiction toward productive ends” (pp. 110, 113, 114).

holds, led me into visibility and into the feminist movement in the mid 1990's. It is my art that began speaking for me, pulling me out of hiding.

In my art practice, as a strategy of evolution, I have alternated between solo and collaborative art projects. This pattern has not been preplanned but has evolved as part of a creative learning cycle of ingestion and digestion. In collaborations I am stretched beyond my personal comfort zones, as well as nourished and challenged by others contributions. In solo projects I look inward and integrate within myself the new areas of growth and return to a self-initiated and self-reflective art. What follows is reflective writing on my journey with two specific collaborations, my first one and my most recent one. In sharing these I hope to give a sense of my evolution as a feminist artist as influenced by collaborative practice.

Men as birthers not destroyers (1992)

I began my first collaborations in 1991 during my last year of art school. I began with no known models or theorizing of what collaboration was. I was compelled to work in this form as I found working with the classical artist/model relationship in school completely unsatisfying as an artist and a woman ready to express myself through art. It was during this last year of art school that I returned to working with the human figure and re-found my passion for it. I had entered art school as an adult at the age of 28, giving myself permission to play and not focus on what I knew how to do well, which was drawing the body. I consciously did not take the classical human anatomy drawing classes. I did not want to have my love of drawing the human body trained out of me. The class work that I did do with the

traditional model, as led by instructors, I found unsatisfying. Outside of classes I had my male lover model for me. The experience of being in a collaborative creative relationship with my model was what I wanted to explore further.

My first collaborative art project began with a desire to explore representations of the human body with the person fully present and active in the creation of the art. I would now call this a partial collaboration (see Chapter Four). I choose to work with men in this project and wrote an article in a local men's magazine,⁴ inviting men to co-create with me in a project that would explore *Men as birthers not destroyers*. The men where invited to explore and choose the pose that reflected themselves as birthers, in this way they co-created the representation of their image (image 8). I worked with seventeen men who modeled and co-created with me. I was very aware of the switch in traditional power relationships in this project. As the men would take off their clothes to begin modeling I would put my painting overalls on. Conversations with the men, regarding this shift in power dynamics, were often part of the process. The men that answered the call wanted the experience of being vulnerable. One man was a figurative artist himself, who worked predominantly with female models. He saw this as an opportunity to know what the experience was on the other side of the power dynamic. I was fortunate that these were men sensitive to the feminist critique of polarized gender roles, who were consciously attempting to break out of their own embeddedness within a wounded patriarchal society.

⁴ Bickel, B, (1993), Men as birthers, not destroyers; a painting series of men. *Lodgepole Pine*, 13(1),9.

Bickel, B, (1993) Birthing the masculine. *Lodgepole Pine*, 13(1),9.



Image 8

Bickel, B. (1993). *Ophidian*, in Men as birthers not destroyers series. Calgary: Turacos Gallery.
(oil on wood, 24 x 48 inches)

This project was my final BFA graduation work. It is worth noting that I received no feedback on my project in regard to the process and content behind it. My professors gave me technical critique and at their best supported me by not getting in the way. I feel grateful in retrospect that I chose to enter art school later in life when I could support my own artistic passions and was not reliant on mentorship from art instructors, who were not able or willing to enter these unopened and silent areas of the art making process.

She Knows (2002)

In the *She Knows* project I put out a call for women to join me as co-researchers/co-subjects in a project of uncovering “body knowledge.” I worked with six women. Each woman went through a research process that involved entering two trances facilitated by me, (trance will be discussed in Chapter Four), one at the beginning of the project and one at the end, followed by a photo shoot and two reflective discussions on the art created. The trance and photo images were source material for the art created. The first part of the project, the art making, was a partial collaboration as I created the art. I was a co-subject in the project as well as the artist (image 9 & 10). I went through the same research process, facilitated and photographed by one of the co researchers. The performance ritual involved a group trance, from which the performance ritual choreography came. This was a full collaboration that took place in the gallery setting.



Image 9

Bickel, B. (2002). *Shot Through/Flying Beyond/Keep Stirring*. Vancouver: UBC AMS Gallery.
(mixed media collages on wood on wood, 14 x 14 inches each)



Image 10

Bickel, B. (2002). *Source*. Vancouver: UBC AMS Gallery.
(mixed media drawing on wood, 48 x 24 inches)

The *She Knows* project, in the year 2002, continued the movement that Fenman Orenstein (1987) wrote about in the 1980s, where a feminist art was emerging that utilized ritual as a space to rebirth sacred feminist traditions.

This exaltation of natural energies releases enormous potential so that women may begin to transform themselves into living repositories of sacred knowledge, storing their total history within their bodies, their psychic memory and their art is a natural form of protection against future persecution or annihilation. As bearers of sacred tradition, contemporary feminist artists use ritual to resacrilise the female body, creating a new sacred space for the enactment of those magical rebirth ceremonies that are first coming into our culture through art. (p. 160-161)

Creating and opening sacred space for the enactment of self-empowering art with women can be a transforming experience, as Fenman Orenstein wrote, but it is not always an easy path. In these spaces ancient wounds have the opportunity to be revealed and consequently require strong commitment as well as external support to be moved through.

As the artist, who created the visual art in the group of co-researchers and co-subjects, I was deeply impacted by the uncovered stories of each of the six women. Their journeys influenced and fed the transformation and personal myth that unfolded in my trances. It is within this project that I began to record and work deeply with trance. In the role of artist/researcher I witnessed the willingness of my

co-researcher/co-subjects to draw on their hidden bodily knowledge through trance, which then moved them forward into visibility.

The complexity of research, with the use of trance, and performance ritual, along with a deepened awareness and care for ethics is evident in this most recent collaboration. In the first project an art opening took place but the men were not involved in it. Most of the men chose to be anonymous co-creators. The women in the most recent exhibition were not only part of the art opening, they were acknowledged as co-researchers and were visible co-performers in the performance ritual. Working through the dynamics of each collaborative project and the relationships within them has developed my knowledge and understanding of research, ethics and community-based art.

Embracing Feminism(s)

The feminist art of the 1970s that emerged out of the Women's Movement within North America holds elements, that unbeknownst to me, have informed my feminist art practice as an emerging female artist in the 1990s. As in the Seventies, body art, ritual and the expression of a female self, are all elements that can be found in my art. Feminist art writer, Lucy Lippard (1995), wrote in the mid-nineties that "There is a new surge of body-related identity/sexuality imagery that is reminiscent of the mid-seventies.... The visual parallels between the work from the seventies and work from the nineties is telling". (p. 17) She goes on to state that:

Younger feminist artists continue to think, debate, image, and imagine what "woman" is, what she wants, what her experience is, and how that experience

varies across class, culture, age; how it forms, is formed by, and can change society itself (p. 25).

Women artists in the 1970s, such as Ana Mendieta, Mary Beth Edelson, Hannah Wilke and Judy Chicago among others were creating art that “with its many varied manifestations, [wa]s creating a whole new constellation of charged signs, aspirational images, icons for contemplation, talismanic artifacts, and symbolic rites of passage that constitute the source of a new reality for women” (Fenman Orenstein, 1987, p. 169). Like myself, these artists used multiple modalities (visual art, performance art, writing, and video) to give voice to their art. Their art, along with my own art could easily fall into the category of feminist essentialism as it “...can be seen as the glorification of an essential female art power... that is based on the belief in a female essence residing somewhere in the body of women.... It is an orientation that can be found... associated with mysticism, ritual and the postulation of a female mythology” (Barry & Flitterman-Lewis, 1987 p. 105). In his study of “confessional ritual performance,” which I will explore in more detail in Chapter Four, Tom Driver (1997) recognizes and revalidates women’s consciousness-raising groups of the 70s as an important arena where:

...confessions were performed, providing the support necessary for their articulation and an audience in which the truth of women’s suffering under patriarchal systems could be recognized and meaningful within a liberative process. (pp. 116-117)

I have for a number of years called myself a spiritual feminist. Transpersonal psychotherapist, John Rowan (1997), describes spiritual feminism as political

feminism⁵ that uses “the construction of cultural symbols, images, rituals and archetypes of power useful to women in opposing social oppression” (p. 21). He goes on to write that, “Spiritual feminists developed the concept of ‘womanspirit’ to develop tools such as meditation, personal mythology, natural healing, dreamwork, study of matricentric history and mythology” (p. 21). For many spiritual feminists, as summarized by Carol P. Christ (1979), [c]hange and touch, process, embodiment, and relationship...are at the heart of ...re-imaginings of God and the world.... (p. 1). Through their practices, spiritual feminists challenge dominant pathological patriarchal discourses from a spiritual base.

Raised within a traditional Christian family in a Christian-based Western country, spiritual feminism has been an important ground for me to situate within because of my own lived experience of religious hegemony⁶. bell hooks (2000) in her call for feminist transformation writes that;

More than other religious faiths Christian doctrine which condones sexism and male domination informs all the ways we learn about gender roles in this society. Truly there can be no feminist transformation of our culture without a transformation in our religious beliefs. (p. 106)

Prior to identifying as a spiritual feminist I remained at a distance from feminist literature and feminists. I was afraid at some core level. I feared women who identified as feminist, who I often saw or heard being avoided and ridiculed by

⁵ John Rowan’s description of spiritual feminism as political feminism was the first that I found and read. It was after reading his description that I felt a desire to call myself a feminist.

⁶ The religious hegemony that I have experienced is the dominance of the Christian faith assumed as the sole family spiritual and religious tradition.

others. My introduction to and experiences within female-based spirituality circles gave me the support, strength and healthy sense of longing that I required to begin reading spiritual feminist writing. *Women Spirit Rising: A feminist reader in religion*, edited by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (1979), was the first feminist book that I read which inspired me to read other feminist writing. bell hooks (2000) summarizes well the space that feminist spirituality offered to me:

Feminist spirituality created a space for everyone to interrogate outmoded belief systems and created new paths. Representing god in diverse ways, restoring our respect for the sacred feminist, it has helped us find ways to affirm and/or re-affirm the importance of spiritual life. Identifying liberation from any form of domination and oppression as essentially a spiritual quest returns us to a spirituality which unites spiritual practice with our struggles for justice and liberation. A feminist vision of spiritual fulfillment is naturally the foundation of authentic spiritual life. (p. 109)

I have anchored my research within feminist discourses. In my desire to historically ground myself, I have read a variety of feminist writers situated within a wide spectrum of feminist discourses, from radical, and essentialist to psychoanalytic, postmodern and materialist to spiritual and transpersonal. Within feminist writing the questioning and reframing of gender, body and knowledge, has assisted me in my own understanding and work of challenging mind/body dualisms. The deconstruction of power and language has influenced and assisted the destabilization of my own embeddedness within limiting constructs of power and

knowledge. The significance of female-based spirituality and the questioning of religious hegemony has opened and continued to expand my own spiritual practice.

My passion as a feminist artist, creating re-presentations of the body, has been to make “visual art [that] expresses the altered world of a trance/dream state and reflects a female vision within non-confining time and space” (Bickel, artist statement, 2001). My art walks the fine line of reminding and encouraging women “To open her body in free, active, open extension and bold outward-directedness “ and in so doing runs the risk “for a woman to invite objectification.... The threat of being seen is, however, not the only threat of objectification that the woman lives. She also lives the threat of invasion of her body space” (Young, 1998, p. 271).

As a visual artist whose practice can involve risk and who’s work calls for close observation (witnessing) and re-telling of that observation (testimony), feminist psychoanalytic theorizing as written about by Shoshana Felman (1992) has opened a larger theoretical location to ethically locate my work as an artist, researcher and educator. Felman wrote:

...in the age of testimony-teaching, ...must in turn *testify*, make something *happen*, and not just transmit a passive knowledge, pass on information that is preconceived, substantified, believed to be known in advance, misguidedly believed, that is, to be, (exclusively) a *given*. (p. 53)

She encourages teachers to be willing to “*live through a crisis*,” to witness the testimony and testify in return. She recognizes and validates the artist for already doing this “*performative*” act, “to enable, *change* “ (p. 53). Feminist writing calls forth the artist as visionary and instigator of world change, to remember history and

traumatic herstory, thus supporting the importance of the creative and artistic work in the pursuit of world change (Rich 1993, 2001; hooks 1995, 2000; Lorde 1984, among others). Not coming from the traditional discipline of Education, I have especially appreciated the passionate and challenging educational stances of educators outside of the field of Education such as Shoshana Felman, bell hooks, and Adrienne Rich.

It is troublesome to note the lack of communication between populist, academic feminists, and spiritual feminists. I have rarely found spiritual feminists referred to in the texts of populist and academic feminists. Congruently, spiritual feminists cite only a very small number of the populist and academic feminists in their writing. I find myself in the gap between these important feminist discourses. Finding myself in between contributes to and offers a partial explanation for my historical struggle to ground and take a firm stance as a feminist.

Adult educator, Angela Miles (1996), offers a vision of “integrative or transformative feminisms,” that I have not found taken up by other feminists⁷. I greatly appreciate that she is offering a feminist perspective that has the desire to find a core value that can transcend the differences but not eliminate them. She explains that,

The alternative value core of integrative feminisms in all their variety is the holistic, egalitarian, life-centered rejection of dominant androcentric, dualistic, hierarchical, profit-centered ideology and social structure. These

⁷ I can only speculate that one of the reasons for this might be because she has given a name to a new form of feminism. bell hooks in my mind posits an integrative feminism as well but she does so without claiming a new name for it. Her work in contrast is much more visible than Miles.

feminisms refuse the oppositions that patriarchal relations presume and structure between the personal and the political, public and private,... individual and community, society and nature. Committed to developing new political forms that reflect their holistic values, they attempt to integrate these oppositions as part of their struggles to build a new world. (pp. xi – xii)

American philosopher, Ken Wilber (1997) writes about “integral⁸ feminism” He too offers an integrated critical vision to the fragmentary tendency of feminist schools.

I believe, we need constantly to keep our eye on both the profound similarities as well as the intricate differences..., and resist the urge to sink our discussion in an ideological fervor to promote one at the expense of the other. (p. 200)

Moving beyond my resistance to draw upon a male-defined model for feminism, I find within myself a desire to locate within an integral feminism. I am supportive of the goal/task of transcending fissional discourses with the criticality that Miles encourages in her model of integrative feminisms, but without the “rejection” that she recommends. This for me is incongruent with an integrative vision. Feminism began with a focus of rights for women (although this did not include all women) and gradually broke into diverse areas in what could be, in part, a healthy process of differentiation. Some of these new feminisms were also critiquing

⁸ Integral as defined by Wilber (2002): “*Integral*: the word means to integrate, to bring together, to join, to link, to embrace. Not in the sense of uniformity, and not in the sense of ironing out all the wonderful differences, colors, zigs and zags of a rainbow-hued humanity, but in the sense of unity-in-diversity, shared commonalities along with our wonderful differences: replacing rancor with mutual recognition, hostility with respect, inviting everybody into the tent of mutual understanding. Not that I have to *agree* with everything you say, but I should attempt at least to *understand* it, for the opposite of mutual understanding is, quite simply, war. (p. 15)

and responding to the blind spots of earlier theorizations. Hirsch and Keller (1990), as cited in R.M. Fisher's (2000) master's thesis on 'conflict' pedagogy, wrote:

Discussions within feminist theory today are racked by intense conflicts. While feminists have in principle tended to agree that difference is a more productive theoretical and political category than either universalizing consensus or divisive opposition, in practice, actual differences within feminist discourse have tended to separate [enemy] camps...At this moment... some of these conflicts have proven so divisive that they seem to foreclose rather than stimulate debate, even at times appearing to threaten the very viability of contemporary feminism as a political and theoretical venture (pp. 3-4). (pp. 4-5)

Sociologist Joyce McCarl Nielsen (2002) draws upon Wilber's "four quadrant integral approach,"⁹ which is the base of his integral feminism vision, and suggests that in this new millennium the potential for a fourth wave of feminism is evolving from the "fissioning" of feminisms. She speculates on an inclusive feminist location within culture:

Some even refer to 'postfeminism' signaling not so much an end to feminists thinking as we know it, but rather a shift away from the fundamental questions raised by earlier feminists and toward a more pluralistic, relativistic, dynamic, fast-changing, inclusive collage of feminist expression

⁹ Ken Wilber's (1997) four quadrant integral approach looks at and traces individuals and communities "not only in its intentional [1] but also its behavioral [2], social [3], and cultural [4] manifestations, thus highlighting the importance of a multidimensional approach for a truly comprehensive overview of human consciousness and behavior.... cherishing cultural differences, but set in a truly universal context (p. 35).

in the cultural (rather than the social structural) realm.... [the] goal of an integration, a synthesis, a fusion of feminist theory has not been fully realized. (Nielsen, p. 11)

The shift to an integral post-postmodern¹⁰ feminism that synthesizes feminist spirituality, my first feminist home, with the feminisms that I have been reading, studying and coming to understand these past two years, is very appealing to me. I believe, an integral feminism has the potential to resolve questions and hesitations to fully locate within the many feminisms. I would like to contribute, as an integral feminist a/r/tographer, to a healthy synthesis/collage of feminist theory that will, as bell hooks writes in her book *Feminism is for Everybody*:

...ensure the continued relevance of feminist movement in our lives...to courageously learn from the past and work for a future where feminist principles will undergird every aspect of our public and private lives.

Feminist politics aims to end domination to free us to be who we are– to live lives where we love justice, where we can live in peace. (pp. 117-118)

This chapter covers a large historical time-span and a lot of ground in an attempt to give the read/viewer a sense of my feminist background that impacts and supports this autoethnographic thesis. I briefly touched on the ethics and aesthetics of art making as social change and described two of my past collaborative art projects. I ended this chapter by locating myself as an integral feminist. In Chapter Three I

¹⁰ I draw this term from Ken Wilber's work. He describes post-postmodernism as a reconstructive postmodernism that is a corrective for the loss of ethicality found in the shadow side of deconstructionism within postmodernism.

further explain a/r/tography as my methodology and situate it within the pedagogical performative act of anti-pedagogy.