

“Girl, look at that body!”: an Art Based
self study on the representation of the
female form and societal standards on
femininity through clay sculpture

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Introduction

- ✦ *In this art-based self-study, I explore the representation of women in sculpture as a framework for a personal exploration of body image and the representation of femininity today.*

✧ Research Questions

How do different societal interpretations of womanhood and femininity affect art and vice versa, specifically sculpture?

How has the depiction of womanhood in sculpture changed over time?

How can I continue to warp and push the ideas/boundaries of what femininity is in my own practice through creating a sculpture inspired by the 'female' form?

Methodology

Literary based research

- Scholarly articles and texts

Art Based Self Study

- Sketches, marquette, and construction of base
- 1 ½ hour work time 2 days a week for construction of figure
- Video timelapse and photo documentation
- Journaling 20 minutes after each work session

Literature Review

The Beginning



Venus of Willendorf

“Many scholars believe the Venus of Willendorf held a religious significance for early peoples, likely linked to fertility rites. Its large breasts and round abdomen may represent the importance of pregnancy and breastfeeding” (Mercadal, 2020).



Antiquity

Self perception of young girls in Classical Greece were manipulated through behavioral instruction at the home, through myths that reinforced social values, and through their participation in rituals that educated them in their communities social and moral beliefs.

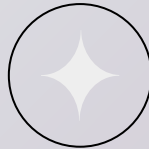


The Middle



Renaissance

Italian Renaissance art constructed the gender roles and beliefs that were expected of women at that time, like modesty, chastity, and motherhood. Renaissance art was a reflection of societal and personal ideals and the women depicted in portraits were not focused on accurately representing the female form, but instead portrayed a set of physical “ideals”.



Neoclassicism/ Odalisque

“But in this lies the crux: Matisse has transposed the fantasy of a sex slave into his living room, positioning female sexual subjugation as part of the every day”(Rinehart,2019). Many of these paintings portray female sexual salvery and many of these models were low income sex workers. Modern rhetoric has shielded viewers from this knowledge.

The 20th Century



Judy Chicago

Judy Chicago created one of the most famous sculptural works representing women called, The Dinner Party. The Dinner Party focuses solely on those born with 'female' reproductive systems, illustrating 39 women and depicting all but one through different plates that represent vulvas. The only plate that did not depict a vulva was Sojourner Truth's. Sojourner Truth was also the only Black woman depicted.



Guerilla Girls

The guerilla girls are a group of women artists and art professionals who fight discrimination. They emerged in the 1980s and aimed to dismantle patriarchal systems within the art world. They have organized events, published literature, and created pieces with the purpose of educating the public about inequality in the art world.

Contemporary artists

Niki de Saint Phalle

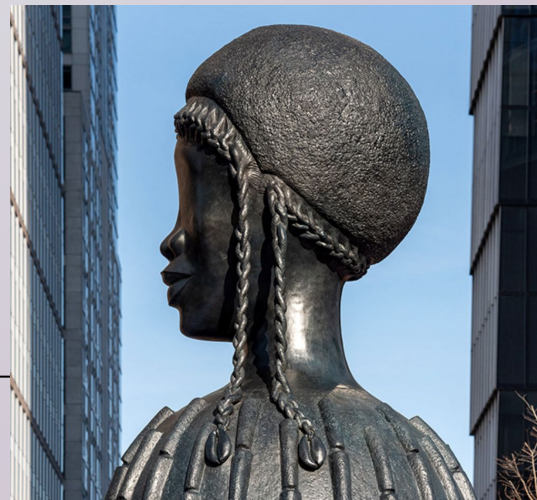
“The artist created her first *Nanas* in 1965. “Nana” is a slightly derogative French term for a young girl. Her *Nanas* are large-scale, brightly-coloured archetypal female sculptures, inspired by the artist’s friend Clarice Rivers, who was pregnant at the time. The *Nanas* were voluptuous goddess-like creatures, triumphant, enduring symbols of femininity and maternity.” (Wolfe)



Contemporary artists

Simon Leigh

“The sculpture is not intended to compliment the idea that Black women are innately strong and invulnerable; rather, the artist hopes to invoke the varied architecture of female bodies, such as those belonging to athletes Caster Semenya and Serena Williams, who are often mocked as being too large or too strong, as though that makes them lesser women.” (Parker)

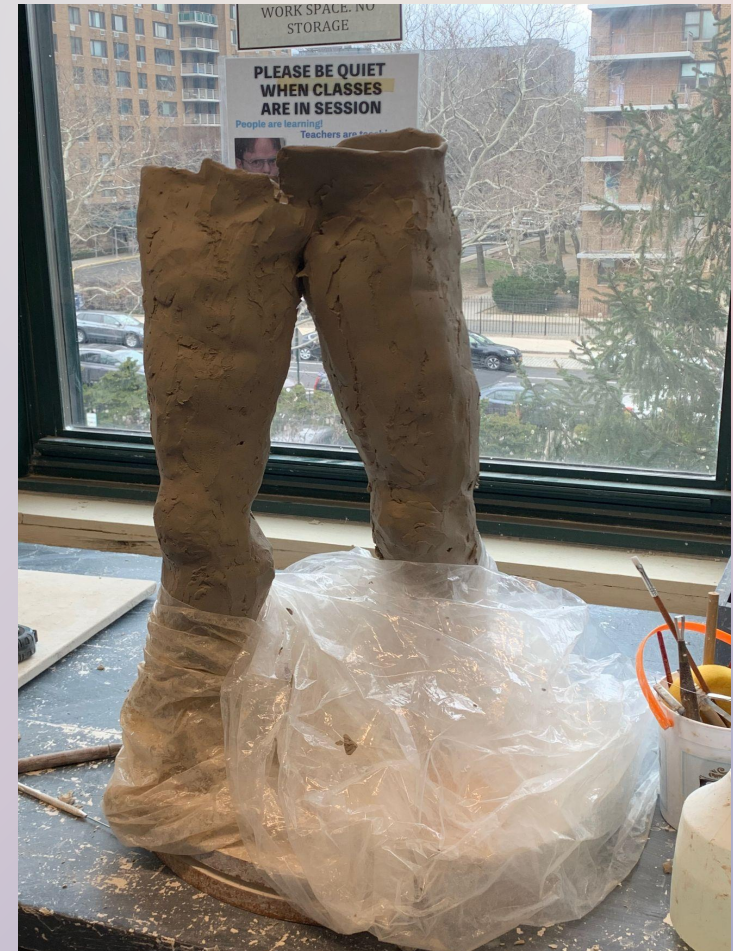




Art Based Self Study



Original sketch influence, Marquette, and creation of base



Construction of legs, 3 1 ½ hour work days

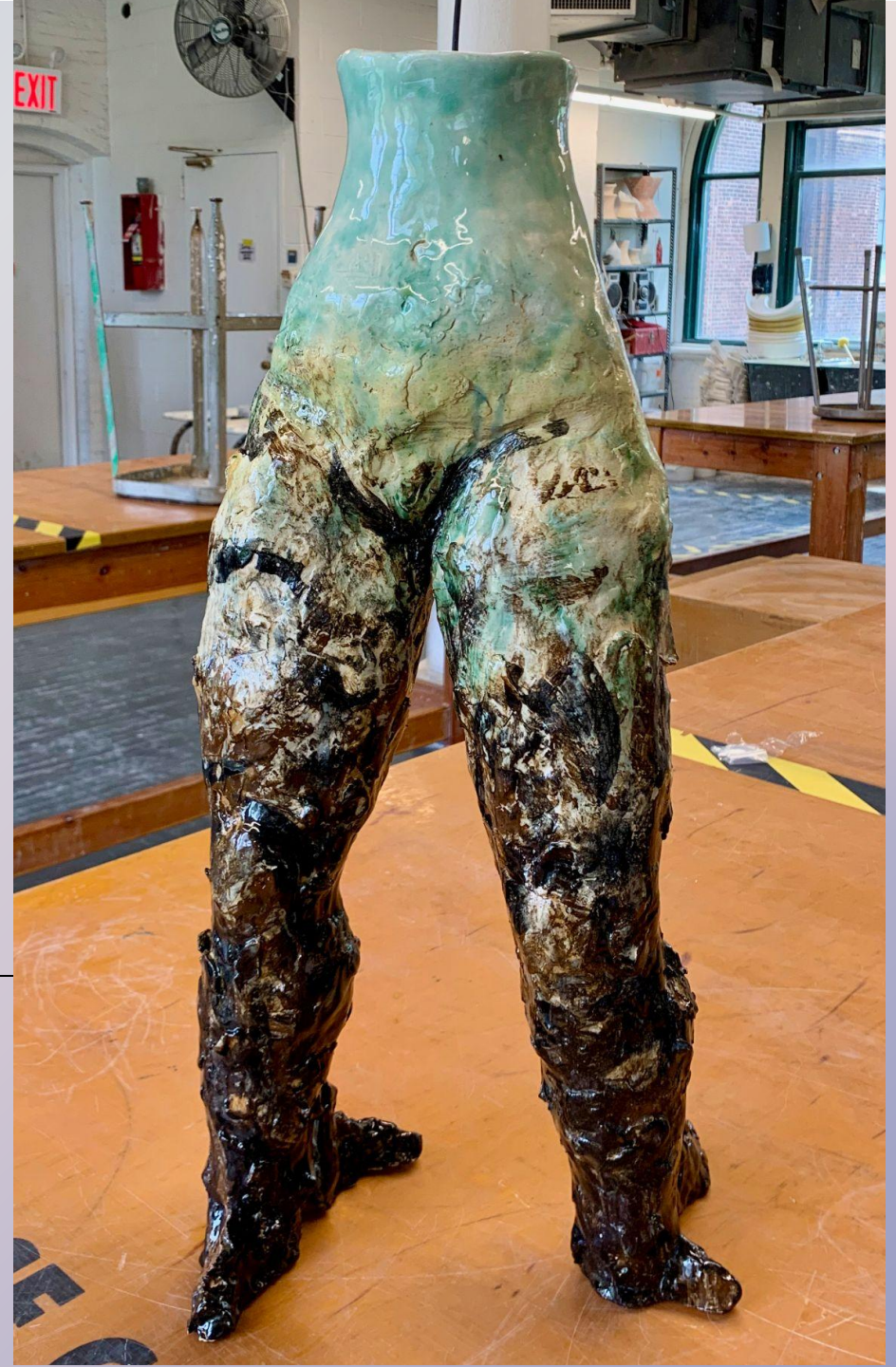


Construction of hips using myself and friend as a model, decision to rework thighs by slicing into quads and push out clay from the inside



Finishing construction on bust, recreation of feet, and glazing process

Final Product



Data Analysis



Body Image

I was constantly thinking of body image while I was creating this sculpture because it became apparent that it was up to me to represent the female body. I was unsure of how to do so and how much I wanted to adhere to current beauty standards. Because there is no 'one' female body, or definition of femininity, it was difficult to choose what physical characteristics to add to my sculpture. I decided to create a figure that represented what femininity looks like in today's world without falling into traditional stereotypes. Femininity today no longer is restricted to those born with female sex traits but is a of how one wants to represent themselves.

This process also brought up a lot of childhood memories, including those dealing with feelings- both comfort and discomfort- around my own body.

Fertility

Representation of Fertility has been present in the arts ever since people started depicting the female form. The Venus of Willendorf is perfect example of how long fertility has been a defining characteristic of females throughout humanity. Fertility has been defined by wide hips, female sex traits, and breasts. Categorizing women by these characteristics can be detrimental to those who do not have these body parts or are unable have children and can be used to undermine their womanhood. This is why while creating my figure I opted out on emphasizing the vagina and decided to omit breasts all together.



Femininity

The gender binary enforced by Western patriarchal standards that depict femininity as solely stemming from sexual characteristics such as the breasts and vaginas is beginning to unravel. The definition of femininity has expanded to include a variety of different bodies and characteristics. Similar to artist Simone Leigh, who depicts a variety of different types of female bodies, I aimed to create a muscular and soft form that does not adhere to the stereotypical ideals of femininity.



Clay Processes

When creating my figure I used a common technique called coil building. I slipped and scored the coils together to secure them to one another and then smoothed it with a rib tool to compress the clay molecules together. I was able to choose where to lay my coils in how I wanted to shape my figure. After letting my clay dry to a leather hard state I was able to remove clay in unwanted areas using a carving tool and attach clay in areas I wanted to adjust. When my figure reached a final state I was happy with I had to let it dry complete and put it through bisque firing before glazing.



The Vessel

I decided against creating a bust for my figure, instead turning the top half of her body into a vessel in order to address the idea that a person can still be feminine without having to have breasts. The physical qualities of a vessel thrown on the wheel focuses on the surface and the execution of the form itself. I wanted to emphasize this through the bust of my figure but also contradict it with the tree-bark texture of the legs.

Combining traditional practice of wheel throwing with an unconventionally shaped vessel was one of the ways I explored this contradiction.



Texture

Texture is a very important role in translating meaning in ceramics. I knew I wanted to step away from smooth surfaces. At first I wanted to carve into my figure and create a bark-like texture, but after practice on my marquette I knew I was going change routes. I began experimenting with adding a wet greenware, almost slip like, clay in chunks and dragging it along the legs of my piece. I slowly began to build this texture closer to the feet and calves of my figure and then lessened the texture as I traveled up the piece. The reason I did this was because I wanted the vessel portion of my figure to be as smooth as possible. When working with clay and when creating a vessel the goal is usually to create a smooth and clean texture. This is mirrored in patriarchal societies' response and ideal for the texture of female body- smooth, hairless white skin- which leads to women forever being pressured to reach an unattainable standard.

I wanted to combine this idea of femininity being soft and smooth with it also being rough and sharp.

Findings



Ideas of perfect body standards change over time and can affect how one sees themselves.



Clay is a historically a common material for male sculptors who created idealized sculptures of female bodys. For female artists to use the same materials as clay to create their own bodies, grants women autonomy over their bodies and how they want to show themselves to the world



Artists, specifically female artists, can embrace their bodies through using themselves as a model for their work, therefore rejecting conventional patriarchal beauty standards.



Unrealistic beauty standards can sometimes lead to women being unsure as to whether they exist for their own approval or the approval of others.

Conclusion

Throughout this self guided study, I have learned that representation of women is constantly changing based on the ever shifting societal beauty standards and norms. Since embarking on this project, I have become more aware of which standards I am portraying or omitting in my work and how that may affect my own perception and the perception of future generations opinions on what makes a woman. I look forward to continuing this process both in my personal artistic practice and in my role as an educator.