Moon Between Her Legs

A Senior Honors Creative Project

by

Sara McKinley

Project Mentor

Scott Anderson

Ball State University

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Artist Statement
Sara McKinley
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In my senior project in drawing I wanted to focus exclusively on the female figure and its significance historically, aesthetically, and symbolically in culture, mythology, religion, and art. The strongest symbolic link the female has in many cultures is the idea of cycles. By researching this concept further I collected symbols from several cultures both ancient and contemporary relating to cycles and fertility.

I incorporated a group of symbols from both historical and contemporary references that relate to the passage of time. From art history I took the moon goddess along with the moon and its cycles. Current symbols include the grid of a calendar. Blood is a symbol that represents the menstrual cycle. The Moon Goddess and the menstrual cycle are equivalent to woman and her role as lifeblood of the earth. Fertility and womb symbols appear in the form of eggs, fruit, and flowers. And the constellations in my work are related to goddesses, water, and rebirth.

I have been influenced by other artists such as Jim Dine and his prints of bathrobes, in which he turns this everyday object into a ritual icon. I turn the bathroom mirror into an icon of introspection. In other pieces I was also inspired by the collage art of Kurt Schwitters and graphic art of Agnieszka Szuba.

The materials I used are complimentary to the imagery. Some of the more ancient symbols were textured (either with paper collage or pumice gel) to render a feeling of earth and age. Reflective paints, mediums, and chalk pastels were used to recreate surfaces.

I feel this body of work represents a fundamental connection between humanity and the universe within the cycle of life and the concept of time. As I learn more about the history surrounding this connection I am also learning more about myself. It is a process that I will continue both in my life and in my work.
Acknowledgements

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Introduction

In this body of work, I have focused exclusively on the female figure and its significance historically, aesthetically, and symbolically in culture, mythology, religion, and art. The strongest link the female has in many cultures is the idea of cycles. By researching this concept further I collected symbols from several cultures both ancient and contemporary relating to cycles and fertility to incorporate into my drawings. My goal is to convey senses of both biological cycles and the passage of time, linking the historical role of the female (exclusively) to this universal function.
The Female Figure and The Goddess

I have always been interested in the female figure from an aesthetic standpoint as a catalyst for artistic imagery. I use the female figure to express psychological, metaphorical, historical, emotive, cultural, and political information. I believe this versatility is also true of the traditional use of the female figure in art.

The most ancient symbolic use of the female figure is as a Goddess. The Goddess figure—Mother Earth or the Moon Goddess—is the link to the concept of cycles. “The Moon Goddess represents the rhythms, the beats and the monthly cycles of Mother Earth, and of Woman the Mother. She links Woman, through her menstrual cycles, with the pulse and lifeblood of the Earth” (“Moon Goddess” 1).

The “Venus of Laussel” is a 25,000 year old cavewall sculpture from Southwest Europe. It depicts the Moon Goddess holding a crescent shaped cowhorn with 13 notches in it to represent the 13 lunar months of the year. I have used the Venus of Laussel in both Venus 13 and Mother. Mother also derives its title from the female portrait that is intended to represent a mother-like goddess figure.

The contemporary representations of the female figure in my work are intended to express more psychological issues. The treatment of the figure in Morning Routine, depicting a woman’s reflection as she stands before a bathroom mirror, is intended to convey feelings of introspection. I use the mirror as an icon
for daily routine and introspection in the manner that printmaker Jim Dine uses the bathrobe as an icon of ritual. The blindfold or strip of cloth over the figure’s mouth and the blankness of the eyes are intended to mask the identity of the figure. The figure in *Venus 13* is depicted below the neck to achieve this same masking of identity. The cloth in *Morning Routine* could also represent the silencing or censorship of women. It represents the disappearance of the traditional views of Woman in culture—as a life-giver, a link to the cycles of time, and as a goddess.

In western culture, Christianity has suppressed the role of Woman in its mythology. Woman is measured to man. The pain of menstruation and childbirth are seen as being punishment for Eve’s sin. “Many taboos of un-cleanliness come from the Christian bible and Christian theology” (Jami 1). And the masculine sun has replaced the feminine moon.
Divisions of Time: The Lunar Calendar and Menstruation

"The Roman Goddess of measurement, numbers, calendars, and record-keeping derived from the Moon-goddess as the inventor of numerical systems; measurer of time" ("Menstrual Cycles..." 7). Calendar consciousness began with women because of how their natural body rhythms corresponded to the phases of the moon. 3000 years ago, Chinese women developed a lunar calendar. The calendar of the Mayans was based on menstrual cycles. In Gaelic and in the language of the Romans the words for calendar and calculation of time were interchangeable with the words for menstruation.

The lunar calendar consisted of thirteen 28-day months. Pagans honored the number 13, and in ancient times the symbols for matriarchy were the night, moon and number 13. In several of my drawings I have utilized these matriarchal symbols.

These symbols are no longer common in western culture due to the efforts of Christians to do away with pagan references. The number 13 was seen as a pagan number, and so Christians changed the calendar to contain only 12 months to a year.
Moon Blood

Menses, the monthly flow of blood and debris from a woman’s uterus from the time of puberty to menopause, is the most inherent observation of cycles for women. “The word menstruation comes from the Greek *menus* meaning both moon and power, and *men* meaning month” (MacLeod 1). In ancient times the menstrual cycle seemed to be followed by myth and magic. Blood has often been used to represent an empowering source of life. The Egyptian pharaohs became divine by ingesting the “blood of Isis,” represented by the hieroglyph *sa* (which was incorporated into my drawing entitled *Blood of Isis*). In Greece and Russia, Easter eggs (commonly used as womb symbols), were painted red and placed on graves to strengthen the dead. This was related to the Paleolithic tradition of coloring grave furnishings red to resemble the Mother Earth’s womb from which the dead could be “born again.” Red eggs can be found in Hen Apple, Mother, Blood of Isis, and Protective Hollow. Eggs are also present as womb symbols in Selene’s Womb and Selene’s Womb II.

As blood and menstruation were popular sources for ancient traditions, they also make for contemporary inspiration. The drawing entitled Fountain of Blood: Shape of a Girl takes its inspiration from the lyrics of a song by Bjork entitled “Bachelorette.” Bjork is an artist who, like myself, has attempted to recognize the past. She has referenced ancient ideas and beliefs, including the importance of women, within her music. I feel that the imagery in the line “I’m a fountain of
blood in the shape of a girl" is a strong and fitting modern notion of the undeniable association between female identity and menstruation. The vein-like treatment of the blood in this piece is also shown in *Hen Apple, Mother, Blood of Isis,* and *Protective Hollow.* The intent of this was to refer back to the notion of woman's role as "lifeblood of the earth."

**Menstruation: The Moon Between Her Legs**

"In the days before electricity, women's bodies were influenced by the amount of moonlight we saw. Just as sunlight and moonlight affect plants and animals, our hormones were triggered by levels of moonlight. And, all women cycled together" ("Menstrual Cycles..." 1). The title of my senior drawing project and honors creative project, "Moon Between Her Legs," comes from a traditional phrase used to describe the time when a woman is menstruating. Although the phrase comes from ancient notions of the connection between woman and the moon, it is still a phrase used today (though from different understandings).

In the same vain that matriarchy was represented by the night, the moon, and the number 13, so too have there been more contemporary symbols in old wives’ tales to represent fertility. An old popular belief was that to conceive a girl, intercourse should be performed on an even day of the month, in the afternoon, on a day with a full moon. My drawing entitled *Venus 13* contains a
calendar with the even days of the month highlighted in pink and a full moon to reference this belief.

**Fruit of the Womb**

I have used common fertility symbols in conjunction with the visual elements relating to menstrual cycles and Woman as Mother. Such symbols include flowers, fruit and eggs. The title *Hen Apple* is another phrase for "egg." And the title *Protective Hollow* is another reference to the womb. All of these fertility symbols are also present in *Wheel of*....

**The Wheel**

My drawing entitled *Wheel of*... takes its inspiration from the Wheel of Fortune card of the Tarot deck. The wheel is like the cycle of life, or any cycle in its circular origin. The images on the wheel in my drawing are repeated from the other drawings in my body of work and include symbols of fertility, menstruation, and time. The phases of the moon surround the wheel, and in the center is Woman. Woman is the source of that which surrounds her.
In the Stars

Surrounding the central image in Wheel of... I have placed several constellations: Andromeda, Libra, Virgo, Aquarius, and Phoenix. I use Andromeda (the Princess), and Virgo (the Virgin), to represent Woman. Aquarius is the Water Bearer. Water is a traditional symbol of rebirth, and Woman is often figuratively compared to a water vessel. The Phoenix is also used as a symbol of rebirth, thus continuing the notion of the cycle of life. Libra is the Balance, and I feel that cycles pertain to maintaining a balance.

Artistic Influence

Selene's Womb II was inspired in part by Picasso's Blue Nude. In Morning Routine, my use of the mirror as an icon of routine and introspection comes from Jim Dine's notion of treating the bathrobe as an icon for ritual in his prints. For my pieces in which I use paper collage I looked to collage artists such as Kurt Schwitters and Hannah Höch. I also consulted work by contemporary artist Agnieszka Szuba when designing the background seen in Selene's Womb—using the idea of incorporating organic objects atmospherically around a figure.
The Process

The process by which I have created this body of work involves the use of mixed media. I felt this was necessary to render surfaces and also to relate to the age of the symbols being used. I also looked to artists who dealt with mixed media or collage techniques in their work for inspiration.

Most of my work begins by creating a wash on the paper by dripping thinned acrylics on the surface and sponging up the excess pigment with soft tissue. I then draw over the wash with mixed media, sometimes allowing the wash to show through.

The drawings are usually rendered in dry media such as pencil, wax colored pencil, chalk pastel, and conté. After rendering with the dry media I apply overglazes and opaque passages in acrylic paint. I use a combination of matte and gloss mediums with acrylic paint to achieve the desired effects. I also apply gloss medium to areas that I want to mimic reflective surfaces, such as glass mirrors. In Morning Routine, I chose to attach pieces of acetate for the smaller mirror surfaces as a collage element.

Another reflective material I used is acrylic interference colors. These paints tend to shift hues just slightly in different lighting. I incorporated this material in the moon in Venus 13. In addition to interference colors, I also incorporated pumice gel to Venus 13. I did this to create a course, sandy, or stone-
like surface in my rendering of the Venus of Laussel, mimicking its original cavewall texture.

The four smaller drawings: *Hen Apple, Mother, Blood of Isis,* and *Protective Hollow* utilized paper collage techniques. I began by soaking paper in thinned acrylics, crumpling the paper, and then laying it out to dry. This creates a crag-like texture on the paper. I then ripped the paper and used the shapes to decide the placement of the pieces as I collaged them onto separate sheets of Manila paper. I developed the imagery and composition as I assembled the pieces. Once these surfaces were in place I then drew on top of them with chalk pastels and added glazes and copper acrylic paint.

I feel that most of the textured surfaces in my work indicate more ancient or natural symbols. While the reflective surfaces compliment the mythological, psychological, or contemporary imagery.
**Final Thoughts**

This body of work has allowed me to further investigate and explore these ideas surrounding the feminine principle of cycles. My intent has been to increase my own understanding while making others aware of these concepts. So many of the empowering aspects of women have been suppressed in western culture. My hope is that the research put into the symbols I have used will have a positive influence on the public. My treatment of the female figure in this project was not focused on being the traditional object of beauty. Rather it was used to celebrate Woman’s power to give life, to harmonize with the celestial body of the moon, and Her revered position in past cultures.

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Venus of Laussel. c. 22,000 BC. eMuseum Store. 3 May 2004.

1. *Selene’s Womb*, 22”x30”, mixed media

2. *Selene’s Womb II*, 22”x30”, mixed media

3. *Morning Routine*, 22”x30”, mixed media

4. *Venus 13*, 22”x30”, mixed media

5. *Wheel of...*, 22”x30”, mixed media

6. *Fountain of Blood: Shape of a Girl*, 22”x30”, mixed media

7. *Hen Apple*, 18”x24”, mixed media

8. *Mother*, 18”x24”, mixed media

9. *Blood of Isis*, 18”x24”, mixed media

10. *Protective Hollow*, 18”x24”, mixed media