

**THE JESUS PROJECT: AN ARTISTIC DEFINITION OF THE SACRED
FEMININE**

A Thesis

by

MIRIANA ILIEVA

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

December 2003

Major Subject: Visualization Sciences

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ABSTRACT

The Jesus Project: an Artistic Definition of the Sacred Feminine.

(December 2003)

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This thesis presents *The Jesus*: a project about the representation of the Crucifixion in Renaissance art. After determining the cultural codes for depicting women, it is established that Renaissance representations of the Crucifixion portray Christ in an extraordinarily feminine and sensual light. The development of the project is documented in terms of the creative process and the conceptual and darkroom experiments involved in the creation of the artwork. Finally, contemporary artworks similar to *The Jesus* are discussed in the context of religious imagery.

DEDICATION

In memory of my grandfather Valtcho Michailov.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

At first sight *The Jesus* (Fig. 1) is a young girl on a cross in a forest. She has a crown of thorns and a wound in her chest just like they say Jesus did. She is calm, serious and does not seem to be bothered by the severe pain she must be experiencing. Like Jesus in Raphael's painting of the Crucifixion (Fig. 2), she seems to be responding to her faith silently, with acceptance. And like him, she is beautiful. She is crucified in the midst of a swampy forest, on a cross that seems to come out of the ground like the trees around it, naturally.



1. *The Jesus*. 2001-03, digital image.

In the past hundred years, creating religious imagery that does not look like an illustration of the bible has been problematic. As art critic Eleanor Heartney points out,

This thesis follows the style and format of *Art Bulletin*.

“[s]ince the rise of Modernism, and especially since Clement Greenberg purged the avant-garde of all non-formalist content, conventional wisdom has held religion to be the enemy of contemporary art. . . . a definitive sign of ignorance, decadence, and reactionary politics. . . .



2. Raphael, *Crucifixion*. c. 1503 Oil on panel¹

In the Postmodern era . . . , an embrace of Christian religious themes and symbols in serious art remains suspect. When these do appear, there is a tacit

understanding that the artist must be employing them in an ironic or deconstructive fashion.”²

What follows is a documentation of the creative process and the conceptual and darkroom experiments involved in the development of *The Jesus*. This is accompanied by a vigorous analysis of the intention behind the project and a brief look at the contemporary and Renaissance works that inform it.

The first section is a discussion of the cultural codes involving representation of men and women in Western art. It is observed that men are represented as active viewers, while women are depicted as passive objects of the viewer’s gaze. It is established that Renaissance representations of the Crucifixion depict Christ’s Incarnation in an extraordinarily feminine and sensual light according to such codes. This is followed by an analysis of the socio-cultural factors that contribute to a feminine subtext within Crucifixion imagery.

The second section discusses Jesus’ femininity in Renaissance art and adds to the discussion the subject of the sexuality of martyrdom.

The third section presents the physical creation of the image including darkroom experiments, painting and silkscreening, and experiments with the presentation of the art piece. It discusses the physical and conceptual problems that arose during the creation of the image, as well as their solutions. These include problems with surface creation and darkroom experiments as well as with the contents of the image in terms of the substitution of Jesus with a woman. The latter brings forth feminist issues, which—with their relevancy to current sociocultural trends—need special attention.

The fourth section discusses the final image both conceptually and in terms of its presentation. The fifth section provides ideas for further development of the project.

FEMININE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CRUCIFIX

Cultural Codes for Masculine and Feminine Representations in Western Art

In 1973, when the women's movement was scrutinizing the representation of women in art, Laura Mulvey's article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*³ denoted the essential difference in the visual representation of the sexes. This difference is in terms of acting and looking. Woman is most often portrayed as a passive and sexualized "raw material for the (active) gaze of man" (25). Today the relationship of man and woman in terms of looking and being looked at is known as "the male gaze". Mary Devereaux defines it as "a way of seeing that takes women as its object. . . . whenever it directs itself at, and takes pleasure in, women, where women function as erotic objects."⁴ Mulvey asserts that "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification"⁵ and that such is the "straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images" (14). In this polarized ideology to be female means to be passive and to be male means to be active (19).

These two different representations are visually codified in the posture of the portrayed figure and in the direction of his/her gaze. Susan Bordo describes how these visual codes also govern contemporary advertisements.⁶ According to her observations "the classic formula for representing men is always to show them in action, immersed in whatever they are doing, . . . utterly oblivious to their beauty (or lack of it)" (139). If men are not shown in action, then they are staring at the viewer, showing off their strength and expecting the viewer to turn away her gaze in acceptance of their dominance (Figs. 3-4). By contrast, women are portrayed looking at themselves fully

conscious of their physical appearance, or displaying themselves and looking away from the viewer (Fig. 5), in submission to the viewer's dominance (139-140).



3. Calvin Klein Advertisement 1⁷



4. Calvin Klein Advertisement 2⁸



5. Calvin Klein Advertisement 3⁹

Is Christ's Image Feminine?

Similar to the image of women, Renaissance paintings of the Crucifixion portray Jesus as submissive, passive, graceful; gaze turned away from the viewer; pure and exposed. This use of the visual language usually reserved for the portrayal of women also occurs in the depiction of men in certain contemporary advertisements.

In 1995 Susan Bordo came across a Calvin Klein underwear advertisement (Fig. 6) while flipping through the *New York Times Magazine*. She describes the event of looking at the model:

something “feminine” about the young man. . . . He doesn't stare at the viewer challengingly, belligerently, . . . facing off like a street tough passing a member of the rival gang on the street. . . . this model's languid body posture, his averted look are classic signals, both in the “natural” and the “cultural” world, of willing subordination. He offers himself non-aggressively to the gaze of another. Hip cocked in the snaky S-curve usually reserved for depictions of women's bodies, eyes downcast but not closed . . . Feast on me, I'm here to be looked at, my body is for your eyes.¹⁰



6. Calvin Klein Advertisement 4¹¹

In the same manner as the model, Jesus invites our eyes to ravish his emaciated body, his humility and acceptance of his situation. This is quite natural as the purpose of

images of the Crucifixion is to invite the believer's gaze and to satisfy the religious hunger of the one, who is searching for the signs of his suffering: the signs that promise Salvation and Redemption.

As Pamela Jones points out, the reason for Catholic sacred art was "a belief in the indelible power of visual imagery and a concomitant concern with channeling and exploiting viewer responses in the service of the 'true' faith."¹² The purpose behind both the advertisement and the Renaissance Crucifixion paintings is to convince the viewer to stare at the figure. In both cases looking at the figure gives something to the viewer: sexual gratification in the first case and spiritual consolation in the second. What is astonishing is that both sexual gratification and spiritual consolation are achieved through portraying the figure in the artistic language in which women are represented. What is even more astonishing is that it is this particular language that sexualizes both model and icon¹³. The power of images of the Crucifixion lies in their dependence on the viewer's engagement and their emotions provoked by the image; sort of like the axiom which David Hickey cites in his essay on Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*: "the meaning of a sign is the response to it."¹⁴

CHRIST'S FEMININITY ON THE CROSS

The Feminine Aspects of the Crucifixion in Renaissance Art

Discussions of Christ's femininity occur in more orthodox venues than Calvin Klein advertisements. Many scholars of art history have noticed feminine traits in Renaissance depictions of Jesus. In his essay on the recent exhibition of photographs of Christ at the Israel Museum, Nissan Perez notes: "at the height of Renaissance art one cannot avoid noticing the use of excessively feminine traits in depictions of Jesus. Not only the musculature or the shape of the limbs, but also, and especially, the poses and gestures suggest the presence of the female body behind the painting."¹⁵

Christ's beautiful body is helpless on the cross, eyes averted from us so as to facilitate our investigation of his suffering; his body receiving the pain almost passively, although there is nothing derogatory in passivity, "[i]nviting, receiving, responding—these are active behaviors, too . . . It's a macho bias to view the only *real* activity as that which takes, invades, aggresses."¹⁶ Narrow ribcage, long limbs with little muscle (Figs. 2, 7), more like a Cindy Crawford than a Hercules. The loincloth like "gorgeous flutter flaring forth from the center"¹⁷ (Figs. 8-9). Sad calmness of acceptance in the eyes rather than violent anguish, which seems more appropriate for the incredible torture. Body curved in the S-shape of a classical Greek sculpture (Figs. 2, 7), whiter than the bodies of the two thieves and much calmer (Figs. 10, 11); accepting the pain, receiving our stare with compassion, nurturance and wisdom which authors Marie-Daly and Rae refer to as "feminine" virtues as opposed to "power over."¹⁸

Almost all Renaissance crucifixions have the purpose of arousing love, human compassion and religious sentiments in the viewer. There are a few exceptions which aim



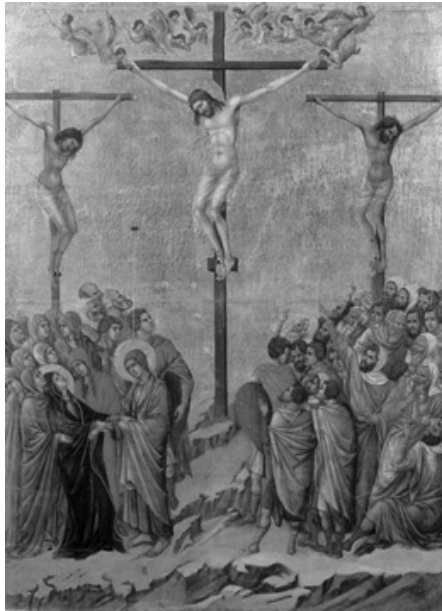
7. Pietro Perugino, *Crucifixion*. c. 1485.¹⁹



8. Roger van der Weyden, *Crucifixion*. c. 1440, Oil on wood.²⁰



9. Lucas Cranach, *Crucifixion*. 1503, Oil on wood.²¹

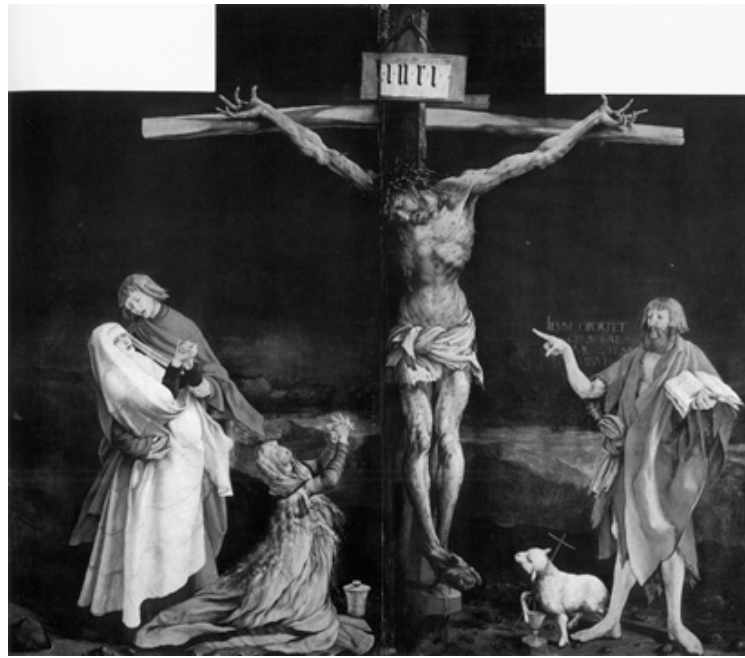


10. Duccio, *Crucifixion*. 1308-11, Tempera on wood.²²



11. Antonello da Messina, *Crucifixion*. 1475, Oil on wood.²³

at a very different kind of emotional response and depict a human rather than an idealized Christ. These are exemplified by Matthias Grünewald's *Crucifixion* of 1515 (Fig. 12) and Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ* of 1521-22 (Fig. 13). Grünewald concentrated on the horrors of the Crucifixion, its violence and repulsiveness. He presented God incarnate as a human being fully susceptible to death and suffering. Holbein's Christ is depicted "as a very dead mortal. . . . of the same stuff as you and I and, as such, prone to the same failings."²⁴ The *Dead Christ* seems to be putting God incarnate and us, humans, on the same level and to demand of us, the viewers, to clarify where we stand in relation to God: whether he may be made of the same stuff as we, or whether we are made of the same stuff as him (40). As Christian Eckart points out "[t]he viewer is implicated . . . in the moral and ethical resolution, interpretation and instrumentalization of the works themselves" (41). In contrast to the intellectual engagement that these two works demand of the viewer, the idealized portrayals of Christ in Fig. 2 and Figs. 7-11 do not require interpretation. Their content is communicated simply by pious observation.



12. Matthias Grünewald, *Crucifixion*. 1515, oil on Wood.²⁵



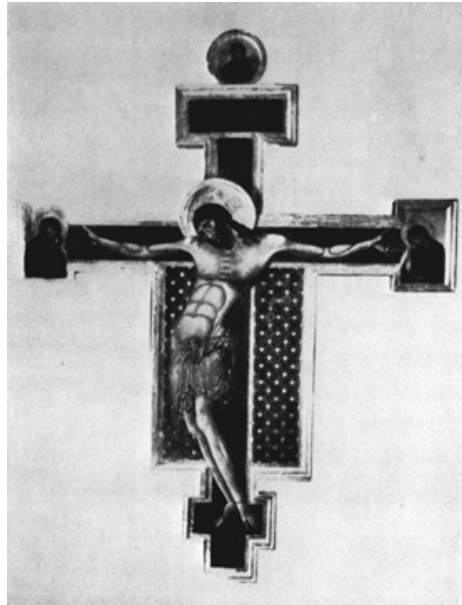
13. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Dead Christ*. 1521, oil on wood.²⁶

Early Examples of Sensual Christs: Cimabue's Christ

One of the earliest examples of sensuous representations of the Crucifixion is Cimabue's painting of around 1260 (Fig. 14). Christian Eckart describes Cimabue's Christ as a revolutionary shift from the "earlier hieratic, inert, flat and didactic representations of Christ [which] have given way to a dynamic one that communicates

more directly and viscerally with the viewer.”²⁷ He argues that this painting imposes sensual experience:

The delicate, sensuous, flowing form of Cimabue’s Christ would have necessarily elicited strong emotional responses and feelings of empathy in the viewer not possible with earlier Crucifixions. . . . an engaged viewer would have been obliged to a sensual, even erotic, identification with this Christ. . . . an expression of belief and faith beyond the precincts of heart and mind and into the body of the viewer/believer. More contentious to suggest here is the notion that the relative liberalism of the moment provided permission for Cimabue and others to reintroduce the feminine, an element of expression suppressed in their work for centuries in medieval Europe. (35-36)



14. Cimabue, *Crucifix*. 1268-71, tempera on wood.²⁸

Beauty and Eroticism

In medieval thought, Christ’s physical beauty was a symbol for his spiritual perfection. Renaissance artists inherited this attitude and for masters like Michelangelo,

it was natural to equate physical and inner beauty. As Jane Allen notes, “[f]or Michelangelo nudity, the unadorned human body, was a symbol for the naked soul.”²⁹ From this follows that impeccable beauty means flawless soul, as the one of Christ.

As Perez puts it, “[t]he tradition of imaging Christ is also closely related to the will to envision and describe perfect and absolute beauty, as he is to be the ultimate perfection embodied in human form.”³⁰ Ultimate beauty, however, is hard to separate from erotic beauty, and so “divinity, mysticism and eroticism often become one” (23).

It is interesting to note that, as Perez suggests, painters must have employed female models to pose as Christ and that this preference could be attributed to the artists’ connection to medieval mysticism in which women were identified with Christ’s body and men—with his soul³¹.

The idea of representing Christ through a feminine body is not as readily acceptable in modern times. Leo Steinberg argues that we have sunk into a “modern oblivion” regarding symbols that were perfectly clear to Renaissance artists.³² He attributes this weakness to the dissociation of modern Christianity with its pagan roots. In a book entitled *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*,³³ Steinberg examines the plethora of paintings in which Jesus’ groin is exposed or erect, or touched by the Virgin, Jesus himself, or other saints. Steinberg notes that these highly sexualized motifs point to the mythical and pagan roots of Christianity. He suggests that the erect penis is a metaphor for Resurrection (106); that the Child’s manhood—the manhood that He, the virgin born from a virgin will spill in order to “dissolve our sin with his blood”(66) —has to be examined and confirmed (66-72); while the penis of

Christ's dead body signifies his triumph over "both sin and death; his sexuality vanquished by chastity, his mortality my Resurrection" (106).

Steinberg presents an interesting theory on the reason for the elaborate execution of Christ's loincloth in paintings such as Roger van der Weyden's *Crucifixion* of 1450 (Fig. 8) and Cranach's *Crucifixion* of 1503 (Fig. 9). He explains that the cloth, which flutters "as a wind gauge where no breath is stirring,"(93) resolves a compositional problem. Between the horizon line and the cross beam there is an emptiness that the loincloth conveniently fills, animating the otherwise empty sky (92-93).

Whether a solution of a compositional problem or a romantic interpretation of the Crucifixion, the wavy white fabric softens the curves of Christ's already effeminate thighs. It floats like a cloud around his body and is suggestive not only of the Ascent, but also of Christ's feminine sensuality.

Martyrdom and Sexuality

Although Jesus' Crucifixion certainly holds more importance to the New Testament than the suffering of Saint Sebastian (Figs. 15-16), it is the latter whose portrayal appears to be the more sexualized of the two. Andrea Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian* (Fig. 15) is depicted "as a gorgeous young man, who is charged with life and erotic energy even as he twists against the impact of the arrows shot into him."³⁴ Eleanor Heartney describes Saint Sebastian's physical beauty as a metaphor for his spiritual perfection.³⁵ In his discussion of Saint Sebastian's portrayal in art, Edward Lucie-Smith associates the arrows piercing the saint with the phallus:

Curiously enough . . . it is representations of male saints which offer more abundant material for the study of sadistic imagery in painting than representations of female ones. St Sebastian, for example, is one of the most frequently represented personages in Christian art, and the scene chosen is most usually that in which we see him bound and pierced with arrows (the role played by the arrow as one of the most candid of phallic symbols . . .)³⁶



15. Andrea Mantegna, *St. Sebastian*. c.1459, oil on panel.³⁷



16. Antonello da Messina, *St. Sebastian*, c.1475-76, wood panel.³⁸

The phallic symbolism of the arrows casts femininity on Saint Sebastian. The same effect is achieved in numerous paintings of the Crucifixion in which the long spear of a Roman soldier touches Jesus' chest.

Another prominent martyr whose agony is undistinguishable from ecstasy is portrayed in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptural ensemble *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (Fig. 17). Here Saint Theresa's depiction is, "as many commentators have pointed out, a remarkably accurate portrayal of a woman in the throes of sexual climax."³⁹ Eleanor Heartney's theory on this depiction is that Bernini resorted to ordinary human

experience in order to give the extraordinary religious experience of Saint Theresa a “human face” (58).



17. Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*. 1645-52, marble.⁴⁰

As Perez notes, it is widely known that Saint Sebastian is a favorite symbol of the gay community, parts of which have also embraced the image of Christ:

Post-modernism adopted diversity and plurality and advocated acceptance. Such open mindedness made it appealing to groups such as the gay community, which, pushed to the fringes of society, finds a voice and expression through artistic creation far from the angry eye of the Church. . . .

The stigmata of Christ become the moral and psychological wounds of the ostracized who bear the cross of their sexual preferences. Christ then becomes their saviour, and galvanizes them in their Via Dolorosa amidst the puritan straight culture.⁴¹

Masochism and Martyrdom

What follows is not a hypothesis of any kind but a compilation of ideas that is meant to show that the notion of Christ's femininity can be discussed outside of art history and that scientific analyses can and are being applied to it. Here the Crucifixion is viewed as a historical event and references are made directly to the historical person Jesus and not to his representation in art.

In 1941 Theodor Reik, one of Freud's students, defined masochism as a phenomenon which "has come to mean also a particular attitude toward life or a definite type of social behavior: of enjoying one's own suffering or one's own helplessness. The word has outgrown its narrower sexual meaning and has become desexualized."⁴² It is in this context of social masochism that Reik defines martyrdom and points out that these two phenomena have a lot in common: "The study of psychological and psychoanalytical literature shows that most scientists [that is twentieth-century psychologists] are inclined to hold religious martyrdom to be a form of sexual masochism" (349). This can be observed in paintings depicting the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian (Figs. 15-16) and in paintings and sculpture of the Passion of Christ (Figs. 18-19). Here the expressions of the martyrs show inseparable agony and ecstasy. As Perez points out:

Martyrdom, suffering, sacrifice and death are at the roots of a delicately balanced impossible coexistence of the sacred and the profane. . . . The ecstatic religious images often oscillate on the edge of the exceptionally thin line between the voluptuousness of spiritual love, and sensuality and sexual lust, and their reading is open to interpretation. Most of the works of art, including photographs, unfold the extremes of desire and passion, carnal versus divine love . . .⁴³

It should be noted here that some painters were interested in the sexuality of martyrdom to such an extent as to use this subject matter as an excuse for art with sexual ulterior motives. Such appears to be the case with Guido Cagnacci's *The Young Martyr* (Fig. 20) in which "the figure, shown without any conventional attributes which might enable us to identify her, but surrounded nevertheless with instruments of torture, seems devoid of any devotional purpose, and intended merely to excite a sexual appetite of a particular kind."⁴⁴



18. After Guido Reni (1575 - 1642), *Head of Christ Crowned with Thorns*. N.d.⁴⁵



19. Unidentified (Spanish), *Ecce Homo*. 17th Century, polychromed wood.⁴⁶



20. Guido Cagnacci (1601-1681), *Young Martyr*. N.d.⁴⁷

Reik devotes a chapter entitled “The Paradoxes of Christ” to the possibility that Jesus exhibited masochistic behavior:

The paradox in some of his [Jesus’] sayings resembles the most sublimated form of the impression which we generally derive from the phenomena of masochism. . . .

The story of his life in its voluntary and gentle acceptance of suffering, of his death and his resurrection points in this direction. He bore his punishment in order to ascend to heaven, he paid the highest price so as to become God

Himself. He gained eternal life by death, he entered the glory of God by disgrace. He conquered through being defeated. He was victim and victor.⁴⁸

Jesus himself comments on the masochistic nature of the path to the divine: “For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother’s womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.”⁴⁹

John Crossan has translated this passage poetically and more understandably as follows:

Birth castrates some
 Owners castrate others
 There are also those who castrate themselves for the Kingdom of God⁵⁰

Crossan’s comment on this aphorism is that it “does not necessarily commend celibate asceticism but uses castration as a metaphor, directed especially and deliberately at men, for all the abandonment of normalcy that the Kingdom of God demands” (169).

If we accept that Christ was a masochist, then by extension he is placed in a feminine context. In an analysis of masochism and femininity Reik states: “Masochism as an instinctual aberration and as character seems to disagree with the idea of masculinity and to be more in harmony with the idea of the woman. Freud expressed the same opinion by saying masochism sustained an intimate relationship to femininity.”⁵¹

Reik’s psychoanalyses of Jesus’ martyrdom hint at the inner femininity of God’s Incarnation and complement the feminine features of his body in Renaissance art. While in certain medieval mysticisms in which men were identified with God’s soul, “gentle acceptance”⁵² and tolerance of punishment may have been signs of masculinity, in the twentieth century these character traits have certainly been associated with women and

have become a sign for the opposite of masculinity. Whether masochistic or simply tolerant, God's Incarnation seems to relate more to femininity than to masculinity in both its inner and bodily forms.

METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Choosing the Model and the Setting, and Shooting the Image

As explained in the previous two sections, Jesus' physicality and even inner qualities as represented in Renaissance art reveal much more femininity than masculinity. To give an explicit and unambiguous treatment of this idea an image representing Jesus as female was created. What follows is an outline of the creation of the image and the considerations take into account when ensuring that the image realizes the idea of Jesus' femininity as fully as possible.

As Nissan Perez notes, nowhere in the Holy Bible is there a description of the physical appearance of Jesus and so "for the last two millennia artistic licence has enabled many to imagine and create their own interpretation of Jesus Christ."⁵³ However, it has been mostly during the last two centuries that artists have considered his physical appearance outside of the generations-old visual and artistic traditions. Before that, until about the nine hundreds, Jesus' Middle Eastern roots were ignored and his portrayal was loosely based on the canonized Western vision of male beauty: "fair complexion, long hair and beard, light-coloured eyes" (20). Kenneth Clark calls the set of features used in the depiction of Christ's body "a sort of ideograph", "a controlled and canonized vehicle of the divine" (11).

These features appear in most artworks of the Renaissance period and even of earlier times. The rules that are not mentioned in this description are the ones which reveal the inner beauty of Christ's Incarnation such as his purity and humbleness. As outlined in the previous section, these characteristics are long limbs, slender torso, gentle

and symmetrical facial features. These two sets of visual rules provided the basic guidelines for constructing an image that emphasizes Jesus' feminine sensuality.

The ideal model for the shoot would have been the twin-sister of Jesus in his Renaissance representations, if only such a person existed. For the shoot, the model was selected according to her resemblance to Jesus as portrayed according to the canonical set of rules used in the Renaissance as discussed above: fair skin, long and light hair, beautiful face, non-muscular and slender structure.

The chosen model's body expressed femininity without overemphasizing it. This endowed the image with purity that corresponds to the religious idealism of the Renaissance depictions.

The model and the background were photographed separately but at the same time of day in similar lighting conditions. The two shots took place at dusk when light was soft and wrapped around shapes rather than striking them harshly. Soft lighting was chosen in order to create an overall calmness in the image so that the viewer would concentrate on the figurative interpretation of the image rather than on the girl's suffering. Violent images like Grünewald's *Crucifixion* (Fig. 12), petrify us and remind us of our fear of death. Death by Crucifixion is an especially violent one and even more terrifying for the viewer since the latter is put in the role of the victimizer as well as the observer. The crucified becomes the victim while the viewer becomes responsible for the victim's death. George Bataille describes the horrific experience of the victim in sacrifices as follows:

The swelling to the bursting point, the malice that breaks out with clenched teeth and weeps; the sinking feeling that doesn't know where it comes from or what

it's about; the fear that sings its head off in the dark; the white-eyed pallor, the sweet sadness, the rage and the vomiting . . .⁵⁴

The emotional response to this suffering is unnecessary in the case of *The Jesus*. Instead of the violence of Crucifixion, the image seeks to present a set of visual clues for feminine qualities added to the ideogram for Jesus that the centuries of religious painting have created. In appearance *The Jesus* resembles closer Cimabue's Christ (Fig. 14) than Grünewald's *Crucifixion*. In fact, *The Jesus* is realizing to its fullest the idea of the femininity at which Cimabue's Christ hints. In its allusion to the viewer, however, *The Jesus* resembles much more Holbein's *Dead Christ* (Fig. 13) than Cimabue's rendition. Like Holbein's painting it demands the viewer's engagement in an active resolution of the identity of Jesus, women's identity and the viewer's personal identity.

Besides lighting, the posture and the expression of the model were used to minimize the violence in the image was. She is standing on a horizontal block and her feet are not nailed to the cross. As in Renaissance paintings (Figs. 2, 7-11) she is sad but calm, eyes turned away from us to encourage our interaction with the image. For the shoot the model wore a gossamer fabric, which created deep and beautiful folds. It was light blue instead of white to emphasize without outshining the delicate highlights in the model's skin.

Instead of a hill suggestive of the barren Golgotha, a flooded forest was chosen for the background. As long as the figure could be identified with Jesus, the landscape did not have to conform to the Renaissance canon. The posture of the figure and its attributes—the loincloth, crown of thorns, nails and wound in the chest—made the

figure easily identifiable. The landscape was used to contribute to the idea of Jesus' femininity.

Image Compositing

The image was composited of two separate photographs in Photoshop™: a photograph of swampy woods (Fig. 21) and a photograph of the model (Fig. 22). These were taken using black and white film. The cross was constructed in Photoshop™ from trees from the background of the chosen landscape (Fig. 23). Special attention was paid to making the cross exhibit the same quality of light as the rest of the image. The crown of thorns, the wound in the chest, and the nails (Fig. 24) were taken from a Renaissance master painting found on the Internet.



21. Original photograph of flooded woods.



22. Original photograph of model.



23. Cross constructed from trees in the background of the landscape.



24. Crown of thorns, wound and nails.



25. Final initial composite with retouching completed.

After assembling the various elements of the composition in one Photoshop™ file, each element was retouched and color-corrected so as to fit the overall lighting scheme and make the scene as realistic as possible. The final initial composite is shown in Fig. 25.

Analysis and Improvement of the Initial Composite

Once the montage of the crucified female figure in the midst of swampy woods was completed, the artwork gained an additional narrative parallel to the one about Jesus' femininity. It spoke of the Goddess of the matriarchal age, which some scholars like Marija Gimbutas and Merlin Stone claim preceded patriarchy. According to Stone "[i]n the beginning, people prayed to the Creatress of Life, the Mistress of Heaven. At the very dawn of religion, God was a woman."⁵⁵

The flooded woods were chosen as a poetic and mythic environment that emphasizes the femininity of the Crucifixion and the association of the figure with the Goddess through her close connection to nature. The swamp reveals woman's link to

nature and the ease with which she fits into nature's births and decays. Susan Griffin describes the link between woman and swamp in her book *Woman and Nature* as follows:

...like the body of the plant in her mouth becoming her own dark blood and her blood washing from her like tides (and the sea drawing into itself leaving the bodies of fish, coral spines, the reef)... Like a seed in the earth, in the soil which becomes rich with every death, animal bodies coming apart cell by cell, the plant body dispersing... in the bodies of bacteria, planaria, and back to the seed, this that grows inside her... Like the sunlight trapped in the leaf which becomes part of the ground, of the sea, the body of the fish, body of animal, soil, seed...⁵⁶

This additional meaning of the image seemed to overshadow the idea of Jesus' femininity. At the same time, the idea of the Goddess enriched the art piece and it was decided to keep the Goddess as part of the work but to reduce her presence.



26. Focusing on the figure.

To minimize the association of the Crucifixion with the Goddess, the landscape was cropped and the figure was brought to the foreground (Fig. 26). The similarities of the figure to Jesus were now again at the forefront. However, this resulted in a weakening of the definition of the cross and the background, which were now abstract and unclear. This was corrected by bringing a larger portion of the landscape into the background and by connecting the cross to the water with roots, which were taken from a found photograph. Additional retouching, cleaning and lighting corrections were performed to finalize the work on the image. Its final version is shown in Fig. 27.



27. Finalized image.

Photomontages on religious themes have been done since the beginning of photography. Julia Margaret Cameron's *Adoration* (c. 1865) is an example of such early religious photomontage. In this photograph Cameron has achieved "both artistic beauty

and pious exaltation.”⁵⁷ These qualities are also present in her photomontage *My Grandchild* (Fig. 28) and are essential for *The Jesus* as well. Another photomontage is Johann Carl Enslin’s work of 1839 (Fig. 29), in which a photogenic drawing of Christ’s face is superimposed on the skeleton of an oak leaf. Printing God’s image directly onto leaves gives a literal treatment to the idea of his omnipresence and of nature as the incarnation of the divine order. Perez points out that at least since the Renaissance, the natural world has been depicted closely to its biblical description (or to its equivalent in the artist’s imagination) and that nature is a significant part of Christian religious art as it provides additional symbolism.⁵⁸ The symbolism of the landscape in *The Jesus* was equally important. It was given additional attention outside of the frame of the photomontage.

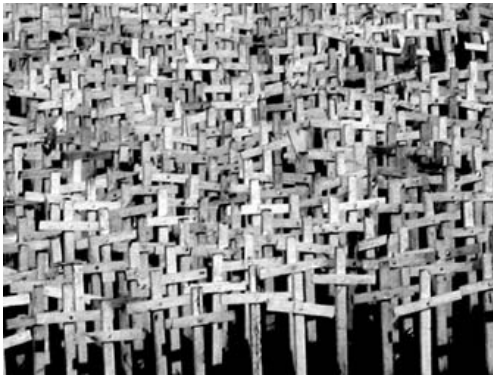


28. Julia Margaret Cameron, *My Grandchild Aged 2 Years and 3 Months*. 1865, silver print.⁵⁹

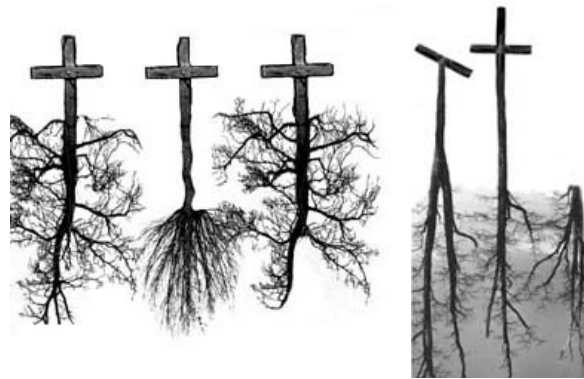


29. Johann Carl Enslen, *Christuskopf*. 1839, photogenic drawing.⁶⁰

The idea of the connection of the Crucifixion to Earth via roots was developed further and a few images that attempted to express the analogy of a cross to a living organism were constructed (Fig. 30). In the centralized, classically balanced composition of the final image there was no space for insertions of plants, crosses and other elements that might have reinforced the connection of the cross to the ground. As the attempts to integrate this idea with the female Crucifixion show (Fig. 31), such additions either discombobulated the composition (Fig. 31A), or burdened the image with surrealist symbolism (Fig. 31B). This is why the crosses with roots were created as separate images that would accompany the main piece and inform it without overloading it with meaning.



A. Source image for the crosses.



B. Constructed images.

30. Development of the idea of the connection of the cross to earth.



A.



B.

31. Unsuccessful attempts to unite the idea of Jesus' femininity with the connection of the cross to earth.

Additional Images for Testing

Before the image was finalized, additional shots were taken and composites made. These included the following composites:

- A. The original model in a variation of the photograph of the flooded landscape;
- B. A new model in a variation of the photograph of the flooded landscape;
- C. The models with an abstraction of tree branches;
- D. Images of fruit in the original version;
- E. The original model in a completely different and new landscape.

These variations are shown in Fig. 32A-E.



A.



B.



C.



D.



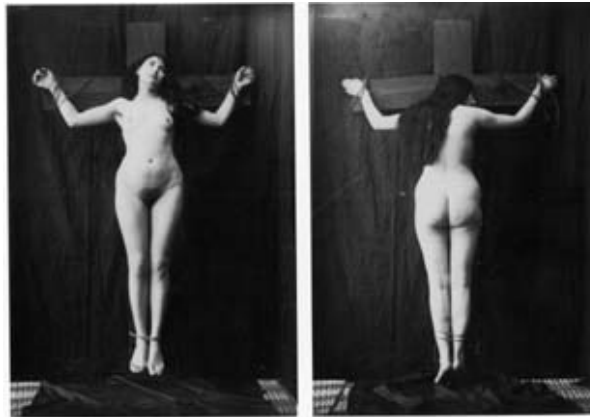
E.

32. Additional versions of the image.

Versions A and D (Figs. 32A, 32D) were disregarded because, in comparison with the first model, the tension in this model's well-defined figure drew attention to the suffering created by this posture resulting in an image that was less successful than the original. The convoluted motion of the branches in the background of version D (Fig. 32D) increased the suspense and was dropped as a possible background for the compositing of the first model. Versions B and E (Figs. 32B, 32E), in which the first model was composited in a new landscape, look too realistic. Their realism undermines the relation of the image to the highly idealized Renaissance representations. In version C the figure looks overly sexualized and its connection to God's Incarnation has become insubstantial. This image was created to show how women and nature are connected through motherhood and it is the explicit treatment of this idea that made it so unsuccessful.

Out of all versions described above, the image in version C is the one that—with its sexuality—resembles the early photographs of female Crucifixions. Such photographs (Fig. 33) have been made since the beginning of photography. In the early days of the art, these images enjoyed an extensive market and essentially were legal pornography. Perez notes that such depictions were “of questionable artistic merit”⁶¹ and that they portrayed “lightly veiled models and similar equivocal subject matter: depicting a naked Mary Magdalene was the perfect means of both avoiding censorship and defying the Church” (15). In *The Jesus*, beauty, purity and passivity were the only sexual elements that were emphasized since they are the source of Jesus' sensuality in

Renaissance paintings. All other sources of sexuality such as dynamic posture and larger, more feminine curves, were kept to a minimum.



33. Unidentified, *Deux Femmes en Croix*. c. 1900, albumen prints.⁶²

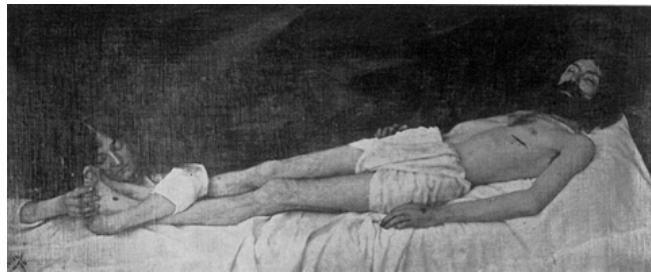
Methodology for the Presentation of the Image

Perez notes that in the beginning of photography, Christ was depicted according to the description set by Renaissance painters:

Since during the early years of the medium there was no established photographic tradition and there were no examples to follow, it was only natural for photographers to rely on the canons and traditions of classic religious painting . . .⁶³

Early photographs of Christ include Léon Bovier's *Le Christ au tombeau* of 1896 (Fig. 34) and Fred Holland Day's staging of the Crucifixion (Fig. 35) and study of Jesus' expressions on the cross (Fig. 36). In the early days the New Testament was a quite popular source for subject matter⁶⁴. It enjoyed plenty of photographic attention even in the second half of the twentieth century (Fig. 37-38) when photographers used it as both

a direct and an indirect reference for their work. These photographs challenged the painterly Renaissance depiction of Christ and transformed his image from an inanimate ideograph to the portrayal of a real person: “On the photographic surface, as opposed to the canvas, the persona of Jesus takes on a somewhat different identity, as the silver image documents and transcribes a certain reality, carrying as it does the trace of a real person with specific features and personality.”⁶⁵



34. Léon Bovier, *Le Christ au tombeau*. 1896, silver print.⁶⁶



35. Fred Holland Day, *Untitled (Crucifix with Roman Soldiers)*. 1896, platinum print.⁶⁷



36. Fred Holland Day, *I Thirst*. 1898, platinum print.⁶⁸



37. Jean Gaumy, *Hospital*. 1975.⁶⁹



38. Bettina Rheims, *Crown of Thorns*. 1997, chromogenic print.⁷⁰

Because photographs have a different look than paintings—evidence that something existed—they deviate from the established rules for religious representation. In comparison to Raphael's *Crucifixion* (Fig. 2), Holland Day's images and especially Gaumy and Bovier's, astound with factual presence that appears in opposition to the idealized, symbolic Jesus in Raphael's painting. Photographic detail imbues the subject matter of the image with factuality and realism. The more detailed the image, the more factual and realistic it is. These qualities in turn set photography against the canon of religious representation.

In his critique of photography on religious themes, Jonathan Jones claims that the medium represents “the Passion as fact” and makes it “banal and ridiculous.”⁷¹ He explains that our visual knowledge of the Crucifixion is informed by Renaissance paintings and sculpture that are highly stylized and “exist on their own terms, representing but not replicating Christ.”⁷² According to Jones, photographs are effectively materialistic, and that makes them inappropriate for religious subject matter. This lack of spirituality is mostly limited to photographs of staged religious scenes where the intention of the artist is to re-create a scene from the New Testament. Images like Mapplethorpe's *Christ* of 1988 (Fig. 39) and Serrano's works *Piss Christ* of 1987 (Fig. 40) and *Black Supper* of 1990 radiate “wonder and mystery.”⁷³ These photographs do not document staged events and real people. Instead, they are images of beautifully lit, highly stylized statuettes.

Mapplethorpe's Christ resembles a white bird in flight. The shafts of light in *Piss Christ* hide the detail of the statuette and replace the physical presence with mystery. Like Renaissance paintings, these photographs belong to the realm of figurative art. *The Jesus*, on the other hand, by documenting a staged event, carries factual information that deprives it of the mystery of figurative religious art much like Léon Bovier's and Bettina Rheims' images. Since it references depictions of the Crucifixion rather than the *real* Crucifixion, *The Jesus* would benefit from showing a degree of spiritual energy similar to that in Renaissance paintings, Serrano and Mapplethorpe's work.



39. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Christ*. 1988, gelatin silver print.⁷⁴



40. Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*. 1987, cibachrome print.⁷⁵

The following two sections describe experiments conducted in order to determine the method for generalizing the forms and stylizing the image and for bringing more “wonder and mystery” into the work.

Implementation for the Presentation of the Image

The two options for altering the final look of the image were changing its contents and/or printing the photograph through an alternative process that would distress the surface and stylize the image. The additional method of projecting the image instead of printing it was also tested as described below.

The first option was tested by taking color photographs of swampy areas and blending the black and white figure and cross into these landscapes. This added color to the figure. Compared to the original landscape, however, the new tests looked even more factual and detailed (Fig. 41). Color encumbered the image with unnecessary

information that did not clarify the concept. Rather, it weakened the connection of the image to the Crucifixion.



41. Unsuccessful attempts to alter the factual quality of the image through color.

Once these tests were completed, the idea of altering the contents of the image was abandoned and efforts were concentrated on finding alternative presentation for the image as described below.

Normally photographs are printed on paper. However, alternative media such as projections in water or on concrete, printing on wood, on handmade paper, or on stone, render the detail of the image differently and alter its final look. Many photographers print on media other than paper to emphasize the conceptual content of their work. In the series *Black Pulse* (Fig. 42) Mike and Doug Starn printed images of old dry leaves—“the discarded cardiovascular and respiratory system of trees”⁷⁶—on rice paper coated with albumen. Interviewer Stephan Götz describes their working process as a break away from “the pristine and mechanical nature of the photographic print”⁷⁷. He describes the

surface of their images as “rough, with a richness that goes far beyond the clinical reproduction of the source negative” (155).



42. Doug and Mike Starn, *Black Pulse No. 17 and No. 3*. 2000-01, MIS inkjet prints on Gampi paper with albumen and encaustic.⁷⁸

For the project *Millennial Forest* (Fig. 43) Meridel Rubenstein photographed ancient American and Southeast Asian trees and people to show how the two cultures persevere through the consequences of war, history and religion. For the medium of her prints the artist coats handmade bark tree paper with ground mica and gum arabic to achieve a luminous surface that adds a “timeless, spiritual quality.”⁷⁹



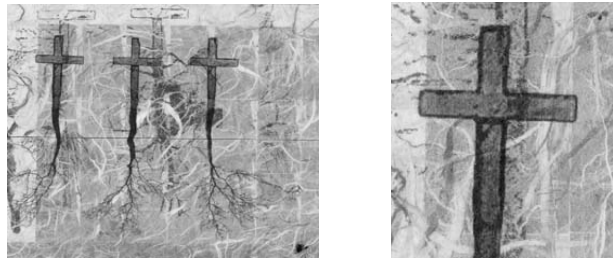
43. Meridel Rubenstein, *Bald Cypress, E. Arkansas, 800-1000 Years*. 2000, Iris print on bark paper, mixed medium.⁸⁰

In the case of *The Jesus*, a luminous surface was desired since the medium had to add “spiritual quality” to the image. The role of the surface was threefold: 1) to add spiritual energy, 2) to generalize the figure, and 3) to clarify the background.

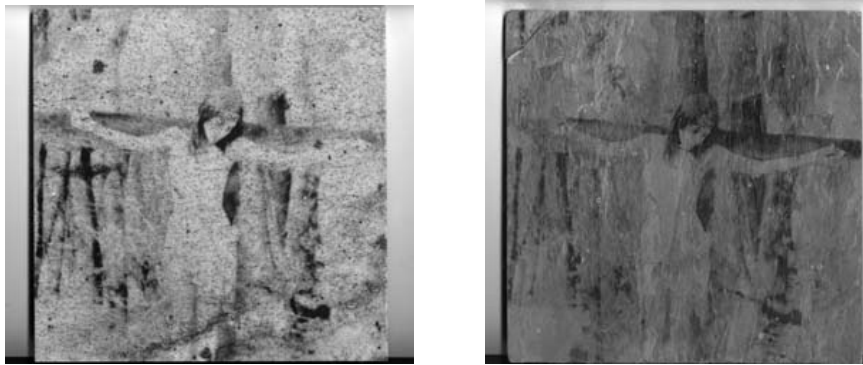
The luminosity of the surface would satisfy the first condition. Its roughness would generalize the figure since prints on rough surfaces result in softer focus and less detail. Reducing the detail of the image, however, would result in a more vague background. This in turn would contradict the third goal: clear background. However, clear focus is not the only way of solidifying the background. This could also be achieved through the quality of the material of which the surface is made. A surface that reminded one of swampy woods and earthy matter such as mud, sand, wood and leaves would accentuate the presence of the swamp and would communicate a stronger relationship between the crucifix and nature.

In order to determine the most effective presentation , images were projected in water and on concrete and prints were made on the following surfaces (Fig. 44):

- A. Thai mulberry paper;
- B. Marble and slate;
- C. White ceramic and sandstone;
- D. Sand;
- E. Wood.



A. Print on Thai mulberry paper and detail.



B. Prints on marble and on slate.

44. Surfaces for experimentation.



C. Prints on white ceramic and sandstone tiles.



D. Print on sand and glue mixture.



E. Print on wood.

44. Continued.

Projecting the image was limited by the fact that projections are effective only in the dark. For this test a multiple of images were printed on slide film and projected in water and on concrete walls. Since water is transparent, an opaque light surface that reflected the image was chosen. Projecting on dark and earthy materials such as mud and leaves did not work. Dark surfaces absorb light instead of reflecting it and render the image invisible. Sand, however, worked very well. It reflected the image and also blurred it slightly, since it is a relatively rough surface.

A negative of the image was projected. It was determined that the negative version (Fig. 45) stylized the image more than the positive version. When projected on a concrete wall, however, the negative was too unclear and ambiguous. For the rest of the experiments only positives were used.



45. Negative image.

The results of printing the image on different surfaces are discussed below and are numbered in the order according to the lettering used above.

A. Prints on Thai Mulberry Paper

This experiment was inspired by the Starn brothers' series *Black Pulse* (Fig. 42). These photographs consist of prints on fine and almost transparent papers. Images were printed digitally on Thai mulberry paper (Fig. 44A). Similar to Make and Doug Starn's *Black Pulse* series, the fragility of the print influenced the reading of the work. While in the case of the Starn brothers' work fragility strengthens the concept, in the case of *The*

Jesus the delicate surface weakened it. Like the delicate paper the idea of a feminine *Jesus* would appear spineless and temporary.

B. Prints on Marble and on Slate

These prints (Fig. 44B) were made by coating marble and slate tiles with light sensitive emulsion. The tiles were then exposed to light through a projected negative and the emulsion was developed in the usual black and white darkroom procedure. The tiles were pre-coated with a glossy sealer to increase luminosity and ensure that the emulsion adhered to the surface without being absorbed by it. The glossy sealer was particularly effective in the case of the slate, which was raw and unpolished.

A large amount of detail was lost due to the small size of the tiles—12 x 12 inches. The resulting images were very subtle and the background was unidentifiable. Despite this, the stone surface became part of the content. This was more prominent in the case of the slate tile, whose irregularly patterned rough surface mimicked the pattern of the trees and branches in the image and gave the impression that the image was part of the pattern of the stone. Both images were less about *Jesus* and more about the Goddess of the matriarchal age introduced in the discussion “Analysis and Improvement of the Initial Composite” above. In these prints she was portrayed as a petrified relic preserved in the stone like a fossil. The loss of detail contributed to this reading of the images. Despite the interesting results, this reading deviated from the original idea of *Jesus*’ femininity. *Christ*’s presence in the piece had to be restored by enlarging the surface and preserving the detail.

This test determined that the size of the image should be as large as possible. It also showed that natural materials were suitable media for the image.

C. Prints on White Ceramic and Sandstone

These prints (Fig. 44C) were made on tiles in the same photographic process as the prints on slate and marble. The sandstone preserved detail much better than the slate and the marble tiles. Its smooth ochre surface reminded one of the earthy materials of the swamp without overshadowing the main concept. The print on the white ceramic tile was done to determine how well the sandstone had received the image and whether the level of detail and the contrast varied with the type of the surface: natural or glazed. The images on the natural surface of sandstone and on the glazed ceramic tile appeared equally crisp with the light sensitive emulsion adhering better to the stone than to the ceramic tile.

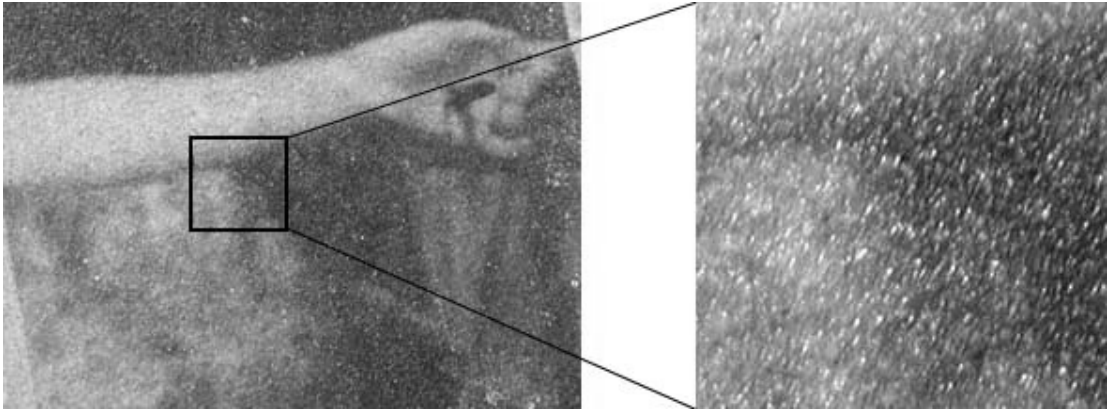
Sandstone appeared to be a perfect medium for the image since it contributed to the concept and also resulted in a high quality print that could vary in size. It was decided that a larger print of approximately 40 inches in width would be more effective than a smaller print. However, it would be extremely difficult to print on a stone of that size. A lighter and more flexible surface that resembled sandstone had to be developed. It consisted of sand and glue.

D. Prints on Sand

The surface was prepared by laying a mixture of light-colored sand and transparent adhesive onto Plexiglas. When the sand dried the surface was sealed with a glossy sealer. It was then coated with light sensitive emulsion and exposed and

developed in the same manner as the previous prints. The surface with the resulting print (Fig. 44D) was peeled off the supporting Plexiglas and was now a “sand skin” since it resembled a sheet of sand paper without the paper backing.

Sand is composed of tiny particles. When light hits its surface, some of it is reflected but a lot of it scatters into the spaces between the grains. This softens the look of the surface and of the image printed on it. Similar to sand, black and white film is made of tiny particles of a silver compound such as silver nitrate. In a negative such as the one from which the print was created, the light sensitive silver compound particles had grouped together where light was the brightest. The granularity of both film and sand allowed for experimentation with different amounts of detail in the image. The larger the surface to be exposed, the more it would look like the film grains are of the same size as the sand grains. The image would appear as if it were created from sand of different shades of gray and ochre (Fig. 46), rather than from a film negative. This effect would reduce the photographic quality of the image, which would benefit the work for the reasons discussed in the section “Methodology for the Presentation of the Image”. For this reason and because of the interesting interaction of sand and film grains, it was decided to print the image on a large sand skin. This process is described after the discussion of printing on wood below.



46. 8 x 10 inch print on sand with detail.

E. Print on Wood

Simultaneously to the test on sand, a print on a wooden surface of 8.5 x 11.5 inches was made. The surface was coated with orange acrylic paint, a glossy sealer and light sensitive emulsion. It was exposed and developed as the prints in the previous tests. The wood around the photograph was covered with gold leaf and an additional wooden surface was prepared for a tempera painting of the Man of Sorrows (Fig. 47). The two wooden pieces were placed next to one another (Fig. 48) in an attempt to create a diptych, a form resembling medieval icons of the East Orthodox church.



47. Unidentified, *Man of Sorrows*. 12th century, tempera on wood.⁸¹



48. Tempera painting and photograph diptych.

The photographic print on wood was very crisp and detailed. However, even though it was printed on gold-leafed wood like the icons it was to mimic, the print was in sharp contrast with the tempera painting. This dissonance made the existence of the two images side by side, in a diptych, impossible.

For the final print thirty-six surfaces were prepared from sand and glue. Each surface measured 8 x 10 inches. Instead of using Plexiglas for backing, a fabric that

could be peeled off was used. The surfaces were sealed with a glossy sealer and were coated with light sensitive emulsion.

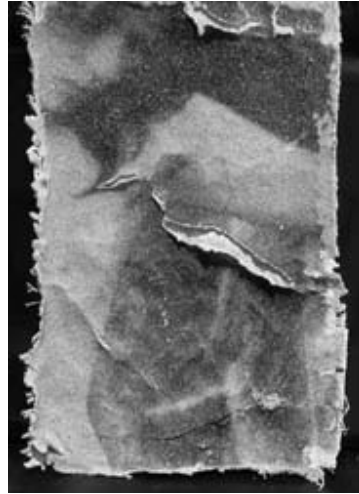
A negative of the image was divided into thirty-six parts (Fig 49) in Photoshop™: one negative for a print on each surface. The negatives were printed on positive film with the intention of assembling all surfaces into one image after exposing and developing them. This was possible since the wet sand and glue mixture is malleable and can be cut, bent, separated from the fabric backing, or glued to another surface. However, this had to be done with extreme caution, as the wet prints were extremely delicate and often broke (Fig. 50).



49. Negative image divided into 36 parts.

Once the thirty-six prints were made, they were wetted, trimmed and glued to a fabric into one cohesive final image (Fig. 51). After experimenting with the assemblage

of the prints, it was decided to glue them loosely to a fabric, allowing them to overlap and bend as they dry.



50. Cracked print.



51. Final print.

SUMMARY AND RESULTS

This section contains a thorough evaluation of the final print and a brief comparison of the project to other artworks. The purpose of analyzing the project in terms of the work of other artists clarifies the results and places the piece in the context of past and contemporary art.

Analysis of the Final Print

The figure is quite tall and impressive although smaller than life-size. The paleness of the skin is accentuated by the variety of black tones in the cross and in the background. The form of the female figure is easily discernible in the curves of the thighs, the graceful arms, the breasts and the features of the face. Jesus' attributes on the cross—crown of thorns, bleeding chest and nails—are also recognizable. The division of the surface into thirty-six parts contributes to the delicate beauty of the girl and of the print as a whole. The divided surface is a counterpoint to the balanced composition and contributes to the uneasiness created by the female Jesus figure. The effort of perceiving the individual surfaces as one cohesive image stimulates the viewer's thought and initiates questioning of the artwork.

The background consists of a maze of trees and branches. It neither obstructs nor facilitates the loneliness and solemnity of the figure. It seems neutral and yet it relates to the sand, which, like the trees in the landscape, is an earthy material. As one moves closer to the print, the image dissolves in patterns of lights and darks, while the quality of the surface comes into focus. The range of grays in the background makes interesting patterns, which become numerous as one gets closer to the surface. The print is luminous

and glitters under yellow light with a mystical quality. The alternative surface of the print and the softness of the image hide the fact that the photograph was staged. It contains a spiritual quality due to the glossy sealer, with which it is covered. The shiny surface generalizes the forms and reduces the photographic detail without making the forms undistinguishable.

Comparisons

In Rafael's *Crucifixion* (Fig. 2) the intense spirituality of the moment is conveyed through physical beauty. Instead of twisting under the gruesome suffering of the cross, Jesus' beautifully sculpted body emits liveliness and erotic energy. As critic Eleanor Heartney might argue, when the "willingness of the martyrs to endure painful tortures and death"⁸² is conveyed, physical beauty can be read as a metaphor for "spiritual perfection" (59). While the comeliness of Raphael's Christ on the cross can be seen as a symbol for his sacred flawlessness, the physical beauty of the girl in *The Jesus* could be perceived quite literally. The soft light that envelops her half nude body attracts the "way of seeing that takes women as its object. . . . whenever it directs itself at, and takes pleasure in, women, where women function as erotic objects."⁸³

A feminist take on the Crucifixion is Edwina Sandys' bronze statue *Christa* (Fig. 52). Like *The Jesus*, *Christa* is a female crucifix. It was created in 1975 when feminists were beginning to explore the idea of God as female. Unlike *Christa*, however, *The Jesus* is not simply a figure on a cross. It exists within the context of the beauty and eroticism of religious imagery. This differentiates it from *Christa*, in which the objective is to instantiate a case of "[g]ender-reversal applied to the traditional image of the

crucified Christ”⁸⁴ in order to address the lack of pluralism in religious discourse. While *Christa*’s creator uses religious imagery to criticize the patriarchal representation of God, *The Jesus* attempts to show that this traditional image is in fact very feminine.



52. Edwina Sandys, *Christa*. 1975, bronze.⁸⁵

Renaissance masterpieces are explicitly quoted in the photographs of Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura, as well as in the work of photographer Cindy Sherman. In his series *Playing with Gods* (Fig. 53) Morimura has appropriated Lucas Cranach’s painting *Crucifixion* of 1503 and has replaced the figures of Jesus, the two thieves and the saints with satirical self-portraits. His work raises “knotty questions about originality and the quest of identity in contemporary Japanese art”⁸⁶ as Japan’s culture is soaked in Western influences. Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled #216* (Fig. 54) is part of a photographic series derived from reproductions of Italian and French paintings of the fifteenth through

the nineteenth centuries⁸⁷. *Untitled #216* is staged to resemble a Renaissance painting—Jean Fouquet’s *Virgin with Child and Angels* of c.1450 (75). Like *The Jesus*, in which a classic biblical scene is set out of balance by the figure’s gender, Sherman’s photograph portrays an unsettling version of the Virgin and child, in which the Mother’s open gown reveals a prosthetic breast for a plastic doll. The photograph raises doubts regarding “the artifice of painting itself to question the divine truths that it traditionally has been deployed to represent” (75). Unlike *Untitled #216*, *The Jesus* does not criticize religious painting but merely calls attention to its sensual content.



53. Yasumasa Morimura, *Playing with Gods: No.1, Night*. 1991, color photograph.⁸⁸

Both Sherman’s photograph and Morimura’s *Playing with Gods series* are explicit citations of a particular painting. *The Jesus*, on the other hand, references centuries of artistic work—from Roger van der Weyden’s *Crucifixion* of the 1440s (Fig.

8) to Goya's *Crucifixion* of the 1780s (Fig. 55), all of which depict Christ as rather feminine and attractive.



54. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #216*. 1989, color photograph.⁸⁹



55. Francisco Goya, *Crucifixion*. 1780, oil on canvas.⁹⁰

Although, *The Jesus* was not created as a sacrilegious image, it certainly allows for such an interpretation. The substitution of Jesus for a woman seems problematic if the artwork is interpreted as a statement that Jesus was a woman. Such interpretation would place *The Jesus* along quite a number of artworks of the past five years, which were received with hostility because the intent of the artist was misunderstood. Such are Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* of 1987 (Fig. 40) and Chris Ofili's entry to the notorious show "Sensation" at the Brooklyn Museum (fall of 1999). Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) represents a black Madonna, from whose breast hangs elephant dung. While this imagery is very apprehensive to political conservatives, to Ofili it represents his "African heritage in the context of contemporary Western art."⁹¹

Piss Christ is another example of badly received artwork due to poor interpretation. Serrano's color photograph depicts a statuette of the Crucifixion submerged in his urine. It is part of a series in which the artist immersed Crucifixion statuettes in body fluids such as blood and milk. In an interview entitled *Taboo Artist: Serrano Speaks*, the artist describes the intent of the photographic series as follows: ". . . my use of bodily fluids, especially in connection with Christianity, has been a way of trying to personalize and redefine my relationship with Christ."⁹² The initial stages of the creation of *The Jesus* follow the same personal trajectory (see Artist Statement in Appendix A). Despite the beautiful glowing light in *Piss Christ* and the strong association of the Christian doctrine with body fluids such as the symbolic drinking of Christ's blood at Communion, the photograph could not convince political conservatives.⁹³ Similar to Serrano's image, *The Jesus* is susceptible to controversy. As

was noted in the introduction, contemporary art on religious subject matter is treated as suspicious and unhealthy. *The Jesus* challenges this hostile view and contributes to the body of contemporary interpretations of the New Testament with a new and unique vision.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

The Jesus challenges the viewer with a multitude of meanings on different levels. Some of these meanings will be developed independently of this artwork. One such is the connection of the Crucifixion to the earth, using tree roots as a tangible symbol. This idea can be developed further, exploring the theme of the Goddess, her Incarnation and her connection to Earth.

Another area of future work will explore the sexuality of other religious figures. Since Jesus is the most prominent among several crucified martyrs, the eroticism of martyrdom could be further explored artistically by staging the Crucifixion scenes of other martyrs and especially of Saint Sebastian. Such experiments would allow for a comparison between the canon of representation of Jesus and the depiction of other martyrs. As noted earlier, the gay community has marked Saint Sebastian as a symbol of male homosexuality.⁹⁴ This is similar to Jesus' idealization in the religious community. While our male-driven society supplies the gay community with plenty of material suitable for appropriation, the cultural resources available to the lesbian community are scarce. Portraying Saint Sebastian as a lesbian would draw attention to this inequality and challenge the belief that male and female homosexuals relate to the rest of society in analogous fashion. As in the case of *The Jesus*, this treatment of Saint Sebastian imagery would be an interpretation of Renaissance paintings. And just like *The Jesus*, its power would depend on its sexual charge.

While in the use of canonical imagery, sexuality is a powerful tool for expression, sexually subtler images may be just as effective. This could be explored by

an interpretation of the Madonna and child in which the Child is portrayed as a girl. While *The Jesus* interprets Renaissance paintings through the photographic medium, an image of the Child as a girl may be more effective if it is based on a specific painting. After choosing the painting from the plenitude of artworks on this theme, the Child's sexuality would be inverted through manipulation of a digital reproduction of the painting. This approach to Renaissance imagery resembles Morimura's methodology of reproducing paintings as close as possible, but substituting the figures with portraits of himself (Fig. 53). The recreation of the Madonna and child in the manner just described could serve as a comparison to *The Jesus* in terms of conceptual approach. Such comparison would demonstrate the effectiveness of the two approaches to interpreting conventional imagery and would challenge the notion of Christ's sexuality in a new context—motherhood.

The Jesus aims at presenting a different view of religious representations without imposing a certain reading of the work. It questions the grounds on which we have based our social structure and moral values. Ultimately, the artwork seeks to transcend these values and hint at the mysterious power of creation, life and death.

NOTES

1. Konrad Oberhuber, *Raphael* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1999): 25.
2. Eleanor Heartney, "Blood, Sex, and Blasphemy: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art," *New Art Examiner* 26 (March 1999): 34-35.
3. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), reprinted in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989): 14.
4. Mary Devereaux, "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator: The 'New' Aesthetics," in *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, ed. Peggy Z. Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992): 121.
5. Mulvey (as in n. 3), 20.
6. Susan Bordo, "Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body," in *Beauty Matters*, ed. Peg Z. Brand (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): 112.
7. Retrieved from *Calvin Klein Ads as Art*, 14 February 2000, <<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Village/2550/>> (24 October 2003).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Retrieved from *The Supermodels Tribute Site*, <<http://www.kmmod.com/cturlington/fashion/original/fa016.jpg>> (24 October 2003).
10. Bordo (as in n. 6), 115.
11. *Ibid.*, 113
12. Pamela M. Jones, "The Reception of Christian Devotional Art," *Art Journal* 57 (1998): 2.
13. An interesting theory on the popularity of "feminine" men among heterosexual women can be found in Susan Bordo's section (as in n. 6) entitled "Thanks, Calvin!" in which the author places the roots of the eroticism of feminine men in the twentieth century development of gay male aesthetics noting that, were it not for the targeting of single male homosexuals in advertising, the notion that "it's feminine to be on display" (117) would still be editing out the show of sexually charged male bodies.
14. Dave Hickey, "Nothing Like the Son: On Robert Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*," in *The invisible dragon: four essays on beauty* (Los Angeles: Art issues.Press, 1993): 29.

15. Nissan N. Perez, "Who Do You Say I Am?" in *Revelation: Representations of Christ in Photography*, Israel Museum (London: Merrell in association with the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2003): 23.
16. Bordo (as in n. 6), 133.
17. Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, October, 1983): 92.
18. Bernice Marie-Daly and Eleanor Rae, *Created in Her Image* (New York: Crossroad, 1990): 3-4.
19. Joseph A. Becherer, *Perugino: Master of the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Rizzoli in association with The Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1997): 261.
20. Steinberg (as in n. 17), Fig. 100.
21. Werner Schade, *Cranach: A Family of Master Painters*, trans. H. Sebba (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1980): Pl. 17.
22. Cecilia Jannella, *Duccio di Buoninsegna*, trans. L. M. Bailache (Italy: Scala; New York: Riverside, 1991): Pl. 83.
23. Giorgio Vigni, *All the Paintings of Antonello da Messina*, trans. A. F. O'Sullivan (New York: Howthorn, 1963): Pl. 45
24. Christian Eckart, "Internalizing the Sacred: the Interogative Artwork as a Site of Transubstantiation," in *Faith: The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium: January 23-May 29, 2000*, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art (Ridgefield, Conn.: The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000): 39.
25. Colmar Museum, *Grünewald* (Oxford: Phaidon; New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1976): Pl. 9.
26. John Rowlands, *Holbein*, (Boston: David R. Godine, 1985): Pl. 16.
27. Eckart (as in n. 24), 35.
28. Alfred Nicholson, *Cimabue*, (New York: Kennikat Press, 1972): Fig. 40.
29. Jane A. Allen, "The Sacred and the Profane: a Continuing Story in Western Art," *New Art Examiner* 17 (summer 1990): 22.

30. Perez (as in n. 15), 24.
31. *Ibid.*, 23.
32. Steinberg (as in n. 17), 108.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Heartney (as in n. 2), “Art between Heaven and Earth,” in *Faith: The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium: January 23-May 29, 2000*, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art (Ridgefield, Conn.: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000): 58.
35. *Ibid.*, 59.
36. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Eroticism in Western Art* (New York: Praeger, 1972): 216.
37. Ettore Camesasca, *Mantegna*, trans. S. M. Lister (Italy: Scala; New York: Riverside, 1992): Pl. 50.
38. Giorgio Vigni, *All the Paintings of Antonello da Messina*, trans. A. F. O’Sullivan (New York: Howthorn, 1963): Pl. 54.
39. Heartney (as in n. 34), 58.
40. George C. Bauer, ed., *Bernini* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976): Fig. 20.
41. Perez (as in n. 15), 24.
42. Theodor Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, trans. M. H. Beigel and G. M. Kurth (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1941): 4.
43. Perez (as in n. 15), 23.
44. Lucie-Smith (as in n. 36), 214. Although analyses of the perversities of religious images with violent subject matter certainly exist, there are also theses that suggest different readings of such images. These attempt to analyze the violence from a point of view of its usefulness in the church. Mitchell B. Merback’s text *Torture and Teaching* (*Art Journal* 57 (1998): 14), for example, shows how the twelve fierce woodcuts of Lucas Cranach the Elder entitled *Martyrdom of the Twelve Apostles* were used in the instruction of children and adults as part of Luther’s plan to transform the German society into “a true Christian polity” (17).

45. Denis Thomas, *The Face of Christ* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979): 121.
46. James Clifton, *The Body of Christ* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts; Munich: Prestel, 1997): Pl. 34.
47. Lucie-Smith (as in n. 36): Fig. 220.
48. Reik (as in n. 42), 347-48.
49. Matt. 19:12.
50. John D. Crossan, *The Essential Jesus* (Edison, N.J.: Castle Books: 1994), 138.
51. Reik (as in n. 42), 212. In the context of religion, Freud's belief in the relation of femininity to masochism could be tested by examining the practices of Los Hermanos Penitentes (The Penitent Brothers), a religious group of Hispanic men in the United States who—in order to atone for their sins—practice flagellation, carry heavy crosses, bind themselves to crosses, and tie their limbs to hinder blood circulation (Aurelio M. Espinosa, *Catholic Encyclopedia Online*, 15 September 2003, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11635c.htm>> (20 October 2003).
52. *Ibid.*, 348.
53. Perez (as in n. 15), 13.
54. George Bataille, "Sacrifice, the Festival, and the Principles of the Sacred World," in *Theory of Religion*, (New York: Zone Books, 1989): 50.
55. Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993): 1.
56. Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1978): 169-70.
57. Perez (as in n. 15), 19.
58. *Ibid.*, 20.
59. Helmut Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron* (New York: Aperture, 1975):138.
60. The Royal Photographic Society of England, *Photogenic Drawing*, <<http://www.rps.org/book/terms/photodraw.html>> (24 October 2003).
61. Perez (as in n. 15), 15.

62. *Ibid.*, 72.
63. *Ibid.*, 13.
64. *Ibid.*, 12-16.
65. *Ibid.*, 20.
66. Claude Magelhaes and Laurent Roosens, *De fotokunst in België 1839-1940* (Deurne-Antwerpen, 1970): 63.
67. Mary Warner Marien, *Photography* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002): 181.
68. Keith F. Davis, *An American Century of Photography* (Hallmark Cards in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1995): 60.
69. Claude Nori, *French Photography from Its Origins to the Present*, trans. L. Davis (New York: Pantheon, 1979): 145.
70. Shlomo Abrahamov, *Image Archive*
<<http://www.hait.ac.il/staff/ShlomoA/Photography/archive.htm>> (24 October 2003).
71. Jonathan Jones, "Unholy visions," *Guardian Unlimited*, 20 October 2003,
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/critic/feature/0,1169,938727,00.html>> (17 April 2003).
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*
75. Michael Archer, *Art Since 1960* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997): 197.
76. Stephen Wirtz Gallery, review of *Doug and Mike Starn: Absorption of Light*, 2 February 2002,
<http://www.wirtzgalleries.com/exhibitions/2001/exhibitions_2001_12/exhibitions_starn_bp.html> (20 May 2003).
77. Stephan Götz, "Doug and Mike Starn ('Starn Twins')," in *American Artists in Their New York Studios: Conversations About the Creation of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, Harvard University Art Museums and Stuttgart: Daco-Verlag Günter Bläse, 1992): 155.
78. Wirtz Gallery (as in n. 76).

79. Brian Gross Fine Art Gallery, review of *Meridel Rubenstein: Millennial Forest* 20 October 2001, <<http://www.briangrossfineart.com/exhibitions/mrubenstein01.html>> (20 April 2003).

80. *Ibid.*

81. Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 153.

82. Heartney (as in n. 34), 58.

83. Devereaux (as in n. 4).

84. Lucie-Smith (as in n. 36), *Race, Sex, and Gender in Contemporary Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994): 152.

85. *Ibid.*, 153.

86. Carol Lutfy, "Gaining Face," *Art News* 89 (March 1990): 147.

87. John A. Farmer, "Devotion," *Art Journal* 57(1998): 75.

88. Lucie-Smith (as in n. 36), *Movements in Art since 1945* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995): 258.

89. Rosalind Krauss, *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993): 191.

90. Jacques Lassaigne, *Goya*, trans. R. Frost (New York: Hyperion, 1948): 10.

91. Heartney (as in n. 34), 59.

92. Derek Guthrie, "Taboo Artist: Serrano Speaks," *New Art Examiner* 17 (Sept. 1989): 46.

93. Heartney (as in n. 34), 59-60.

94. A discussion of the symbolism in Saint Sebastian imagery was presented in the section "Martyrdom and Sexuality".

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APPENDIX A

ARTIST STATEMENT

A year ago I was looking at a few paintings of the crucifixion. In particular, paintings of the lean stretched out figure of Christ, nailed to the cross and susceptible to any sort of physical violation: quite erotic.

Having lived in Bulgaria for so long I had never experienced anything particular toward religious iconography, let alone sexual impulses. For my generation Jesus pertained to that part of fiction which Marx called the opium of the masses.

Thinking of the very idol of Christianity as erotic does not upset me much since I am not religious. Instead, I find the idea of a sexually appealing Christ paradoxical, rather than horrible. Creating the image was my way of realizing how feminine his sexuality is and—therefore—how intriguing it is.

For some, putting girls on crosses means that men are evil. This is where we take Jesus for a ride on the postmodern train and we let him off at the “Artworks Borrowing Jesus for Feminist Purposes” stop. He definitely doesn’t get off at the stop with crucified women where fathers and medieval witches pour out of the train. This site is too gruesome for him and his squeamishness makes him look like a modern-day homosexual. The Buddha’s waiting for Jesus at another stop. He had passed the stage when he could save humanity and now needed help to save himself. He was among all other people that Jesus was saving. This is the downtown for the postmodernist train as far as this piece is concerned. Trains go in circles: from one side of town to the other. And so does this train.

* * *

Ah, the river has flooded the Pinchon fields
and crumbled leaves are bubbling up into a fruitful mesh.
Soon light and water will fertilize the winter land and I'll be born again.

* * *

Oh, I am where sunlight sings to glowing weeds...
Walk down the maple log into the water and there you will find me.

* * *

Everybody carries their own cross. I simply chose the place for mine; the body: the belly, the breasts, the hair, the arms, the posture, the gender. It is more pleasant to be naked when carrying a cross than it is to be dressed. It's easier to breathe that way. However, once tied to the cross, the clothed state cannot be regained. This loss of control is more problematic for women than it is for men. I prefer the nude state and, I think, most people do too, although some find it hard to admit.

* * *

When Death enters, as in *The Seventh Seal*, beauty becomes very important. Catholics know this, especially the artists. Mapplethorpe liked and indulged in it and so do I. Beauty is important so that you can suspend your cross in it when Death is around. Death becomes the "suspendedness"—neither a second, nor an eternity. Add sunlight, some water, some birdsongs and leaves and the cage is perfected—it becomes as good as it gets. Now you can listen to the voices that others do not hear.

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