Between the ankle and the soul

Christine Carlson

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Between the Ankle & the Soul

by Christine Lisa Carlson

Graduate Thesis

Master of Fine Arts, Fine Art Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

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Forward

When I originally sat down to draft this paper, I was completely stumped. I honestly did not know where to begin. I knew what I had to write about—my artwork and its supporting documentation in order to meet the school's requirements, but that was as far as I could get. I felt apathetic at the prospect of writing a weighty and intellectual paper that seemed impersonal and dry, both for my readers and me. All I was sure of was my desire to write a thesis I would be satisfied with in the end, particularly since it would be forever housed in the annals of The Wallace Library. I yearned for a strategy in writing with a fresh new angle.

After substantial procrastination, accompanied by pages of deleted computer text and wads of crumpled paper, it seemed I needed a skeleton in which to build the body of the text around. I formulated a crude outline. Methodically, I rounded out the framework with a chronicle of my experiences and the succession of steps that led to the execution of the artwork. I was hoping by retracing my steps and recalling all that I did to create my artwork, the written aspect would be effortless. It was in sketching this initial outline that I found my strategy. As a result, this composition is written in chronological order and recapitulates the unfolding of my creative methodology, the process of exhibition, discussion of the artwork, and includes samples and examples of the components that comprised this thesis.

My strategy, it turns out, was to write a paper that not only illustrated my ideas in a manner that fits my writing style and personality, but in the process I formulated a guide on how to bring a thesis to fruition. It is my hope that someone else might find this beneficial.
Between the Ankle & the Soul

She wears veils to cover her body, not in shame,
but in order to contain and contemplate her inner mysteries.

Marion Woodman, Leaving My Father's House

Preface

I am the seamstress for my soul. I am dedicated to the inquiry of the skirt as a narrative vehicle. As I am shaped by my experiences, my experiences shaped these skirts. Divorcing the skirt from the body permits more universality, removing the distraction of flesh, eye contact, smell, and hair so that the intended message and visual intimations are more distinguishable. The lack of human physical form also makes clear that the subjects being explored are not about the female body, but rather about the female soul and psyche. I am addressing the impact of issues that are invisible, playing upon the pun of "wearing the heart upon one's sleeve". In essence, I am making the invisible, visible. Without the female body present, the skirt becomes transformed into a body itself, or perhaps, better stated, the skirts act as a stage or arena. They are communicative garments, operating as vessels of a narrative.

I am intrigued with the notion of clothing as a "vessel", particularly in regards to the skirt. It is also suggested that the female body is a vessel, a form that holds vital bodily organs, that opens itself to food, water, and air that nourish the vessel to function and thrive. The female vessel is also a receptacle for semen and the gestational apparatus for unborn children. The brain, berthed in this vessel is also a receptacle for learning, cultural messages, verbal, and visual messages, and is also the station where these messages are classified. This same brain processes emotions: joy, sadness, rage, surprise, and horror. At the same time, the mind processes physical sensation of sound, touch, sight, and pain.

It is also my belief that the woman is also a vessel containing centuries of oppression, sexual violation, repression, and messages that continue to undermine her free functioning within society. Specifically, fertility, religion, boundaries (physical, emotional, and spiritual), sex, and incest are the topics I am exploring through this body of work, both visually and textually for this thesis.
Skirt Specific: The Her-story of Clothing

You’re born naked, the rest is drag.
RuPaul

Clothing is more than sewn fabrics that cover nakedness or serve as protection from the elements. It functions as a second skin, a housing for the body, a wrapper. Clothes have a history, an evolution, they are culturally and class codified, and replete with mythological signification.

Clothing dates back approximately four hundred thousand years ago to a simple draping of animal fleece that shielded the skin from cold, snow, rain, and sun. Ten thousand years ago woven textile fabrics were worn, fitting the body closely and providing the wearer better mobility (Kaiser 28-29). Researchers surmise that clothing was strictly utilitarian in the beginning. A fur-bearing animal was hunted, skinned, and fashioned into a garment and worn by the very same person or their related family group. Clothing was singular in purpose and directly connected to survival.

Religion rears its head at this juncture with the theory that clothing originates with issues of modesty. With Adam and Even in mind, it is theorized in Ruth Rubenstein’s book, Dress Code: Meanings and Messages in American Culture that men were the first to cover their bodies since their sexual arousal is more obvious than a woman’s. As a result, women followed suit to cover their nakedness so as not to "seduce" the men away from spiritual matters (17).

Researcher Mary Ellen Roach proposes that human beings have had a complex relationship with clothing since its origins. People wear clothing for three main reasons: protection, communication, and decoration. Items that provide protection include a bulletproof vest, hardhat, warm boots, and camouflage "fatigues". Communication via clothing begins a deeper investigation of this complex relationship. Clothing can signify an occupation with a uniform, status with a designer label or a religious affiliation with a yarmulke or a veil. Clothing can also reveal clues about the person who dons a particular style, color, shape, cut or fabric. Decoration or personal adornment addresses the projection of self into the public domain and how that self is assimilated or accepted into that domain. Colors, tattoos, piercings, current fashion trends, jewelry, and cosmetics all are signals about to how the wearer interacts with his/her surroundings and culture (538-539).
The most dynamic aspect of clothing, and the one that is most relevant to this thesis, is its relationship and associations to culture, specifically American culture. To be clear, I am not addressing fashion in this work, which is defined as "a period's desired appearance" (Rubenstein Dress Code 3), but rather, I am dealing only with the female skirt form. The skirt is a female signifier, a motif of femininity, and a fetishized object in the Western world. I embrace and utilize this fetish through the absence of the human female form and transform the skirt into a body.

I address culture here for a host of reasons. Not all countries and cultures view clothing and color in the same way. In regards to the skirt, its history and present day clothing traditions are not primarily female. Egyptian men in 2000 BC wore skirts, and often wore several at a time (Roach 546), the Scottish men wear kilts for formal occasions, and the Greeks have a pleated short skirt worn over pants, while in many African cultures men wear a draping of fabric that resembles a skirt-like garment. Culture also affects the colors of dress. A color for weddings in one culture may be worn for funerals in another. White in the Western world is traditionally associated with weddings and black is associated with funerals. The people of India wear white for mourning (539). The color, fabric and styles of clothing also vary with gender, social status, religion, geographic location, raw materials, and technology. This being said, I again underscore that this work is directed to a Western audience where the skirt is relegated to the feminine realm.

Technology, wealth, and the rise of a middle class were the major factors in the evolution, democratization, and gender specificity of clothing. "As towns grew, specialized shops gradually appeared, run by weavers, tailors, cobblers, and other craft workers who made clothes...The quality of cloth improved as the craft workers developed greater skills. They began to cut, fit, and decorate clothes in more elaborate ways" (Roach 549). The Renaissance gave rise to the petticoat worn under elaborate skirts. In the 1500's Spain used a variety of materials to create a stiff armature or farthingale to make women's skirts broad and rounded to increase the circumference of the skirt from the waist to the hem (550). The 1600's brought an increased prominence to petticoats, and bustles were introduced to push the skirt out further from her behind (551).

Women of society wore tight-waisted corpulent skirts in the 1830's and 1840's with whalebone or wire crinolines. The 1890's "hourglass" figure was the style as women's skirts
were tightly laced, accompanied by a corset to present a dainty waistline (Roach 552). The late Nineteenth century was a time when women appeared physically larger than life. As a way to be fashionable and to show off her family’s wealth, she was dressed in layers of clothing, high-heeled shoes, grand hats, and upswept hairdos. Padding, puffed sleeves, feathered boas, crinolines, and petticoats increased the girth of women. Regardless of the heat, women were dressed in a stratum of fabric. This fashion statement not only delineated social status, but was also the beginning of women and girls wearing differing ensembles to distinguish age differences-- mostly because women were living longer and didn’t want to look like their younger counterparts (Lurie The Language of Clothes 70).

I must digress to clarify a few points raised in the previous paragraph. When referring to fashions being embraced by society, I do not mean to suggest that women were delighted with the clothing they dressed in. Clothing was not a choice by our modern standards; instead it was often decreed by the society and time period by means of what was considered proper and modest. In some cases, women were beaten and placed in stockades for being "improperly" dressed while in public. Conformity to the societal dress code was associated with survival.

The corset and crinoline were beastly contraptions that most women detested, but society mandated. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Amelia Jencks Bloomer and Elizabeth Cady Stanton spearheaded The Women’s Dress Reform Movement. The corset and crinoline practically disabled women from moving and breathing freely, which in turn endangered their health. In reaction, Stanton wrote in 1857:

Women’s dress, too...how perfectly it describes her condition. Her tight waist and long, trailing skirt deprive her of all freedom of breath and motion. No wonder man prescribes her sphere. She needs his aid at every turn. He must help her up stairs and down, in the carriages and out, on the horse, up the hill, over the ditch and fence, and thus teach her the poetry of dependence (Kaiser 9).

As a result of this outcry, Bloomer introduced a new style of dress for women with a large oversized shirt and puffy pants that tapered at the ankle. This offered unrestricted mobility and a minor victory towards independence for women. Considered "an obscene and unladylike rejection of the social order", the "bloomers" were the beginning of women finding their power and voice in society by making choices and statements regarding their dress. The controversy
was, according to Susan B. Kaiser, the beginning of the realization "that clothing had some social significance" (9). In my opinion, American women were not fully at liberty to express themselves by way of clothing until the 1960’s.

Returning to history, the manufacturing of cloth was modernized dramatically in the 1700’s. The spinning jenny was invented which spun a number of threads simultaneously, the spinning mule did the work of 200 people, and the steam powered loom invented in the mid 1780’s spurred an immense yield of fabric for mass consumption (Roach 551). With the Industrial Revolution, mass production of clothing began and clothing was geared to all socioeconomic classes. This increase in consumption and democratization of obtaining fabrics by various class groups began a rapid change in women’s fashions (553).

By the 1900’s dramatic revisions and short-lived fashions became the norm. Women’s clothing became lighter in dimension, weight, and fabric. The crinoline was almost completely abandoned. Skirts became the focal point of a clothing revolution. The hobble skirts were so constricted at the ankles it hampered the ability to stride down the streets in 1910. The 1920’s saw a more masculine look to women’s dress with straight skirts (no more hourglass figure) with a hemline either above or at knee length. (Twenty years earlier it was shocking to see a woman’s shoe or ankle, so imagine the changes afoot.) Slacks were slowly infiltrating the wardrobes of women in the 1930’s. Hemlines rose and fell in the 30’s and 40’s. When women were mustered to aid in the war effort, dress became far more practical; women joined "Rosie the Riveter" wearing slacks in greater numbers along with more "masculine" tailored and practical styles.

"Masculine" fashions were introduced and marketed by Gabrielle Chanel in the early twentieth century. Marlene Dietrich embraced this fashion statement and shocked the world (making international headlines) in 1933 by wearing a boyish suit during her travels to France. Her attire was so scandalous that she was threatened to either change into a skirt or be arrested by the Paris chief of police. I am sad to report she did acquiesce, but did wear the rest of her suit (man’s hat, collar, and tie) with the skirt (Rubensteine 109-110). It is amazing to think that her clothing was viewed as a threat, and that such an outfit would shock Paris and the world. It would take many more years until the "masculine" wear for women would be fully embraced.

After the men returned from World War II, it’s worthy to note that there was a resurrection of the crinoline and long full skirts. Contemporaneously, an ample selection of stockings and lingerie were now readily obtainable in most shops and were purchased en mass.
Perhaps this "ultra feminine ideal" was a reaction to the return of the men from war? Were women seeking repentance for entering the male realm? Was it through this regression to the feminine style of dress that women were returned to "their rightful place"? Indeed it was. Author Ruth Rubenstein agrees and also credits the baby boom to these factors. She notes that fashion designers like Yves Saint Laurent fueled these ideals with his introduction of the "Trapeze Line" and designed clothing that emphasized hips and the abdomen. Harkening back to the late Middle Ages, this type of fashion resurrected the "pregnant look" to glamorize maternity and womanhood. In addition, breasts became a fashion focal point and the bodies of Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield were considered ideal (Rubenstein 93). Round, ultra feminine, curvaceous women with childbearing figures were highly exalted.

Post World War II fashions were deposed by the 1950’s short sheath dress (sleek and form fitting) which then were traded for the 60’s A-line ankle length maxi skirt and shifts that were less constricting. England rocked the fashion world with the extreme miniskirt, showing the foot, ankle, knee, and upper thigh in the mid-sixties! At this point Western societies finally relaxed a standard dress for women (553). Women were permitted a wide variety of choice and personal preference.

It is no wonder then, at this very same time, clothing entered the art arena as a viable and enduring form of expression.
The Her-Story and His-Story of Clothing as Art

Clothing seizes a special role [in art]: layering, molding, interpreting and emending the body. As much as clothing can be said to have traditionally played a part in fixing women into social roles, so it is the medium which can fix and correct social oppression.

Richard Martin, Fall From Fashion

Using clothing as a means of artistic expression is a relatively new concept--five decades in use. Since many "everyday" objects have appeared in art (i.e.: flowers in paintings, horses in sculpture and cars in photographs) or that have served as appropriated art (a bedpan, musical instruments, or furniture) it was not surprising that clothing was conscripted and destined to be explored artistically. Clothing in its most rudimentary appearance and utility is universal, it is easy to identify and identify with, and it is acutely intimate from person to person and culture to culture. Rich or poor, we invariably own at least one article of clothing. We know what clothing is called and we know what it does. Clothing is also specific to age, gender, size, class, and social status. It can often personify our identity. As Americans, clothing is so central to our life and culture, we seldom contemplate it in a larger context. It is in this "taken for grantedness" that clothing makes such a prime subject for art, because "clothing are independent objects, freighted with meanings," commented Carly Berwick in the November 2001 issue of ARTnews (164).

Many artists have turned to clothing, as it is easier for most people to relate to. During the turbulent and highly political 1960's, many artists felt a need to create work for a more universal audience. Artists wanted their work to be more democratic and be seen by more than the art elite, so employing materials like clothing while incorporating pertinent themes of war, feminism, and politics were predominant. In her artist statement for her Steel Wool Peignoir, 1966, Mimi Smith wrote, "The clothing pieces were based on the theory that people had more experience looking at clothes than at sculpture, so if I made sculpture that looked like clothes my ideas would instantly translate" (Felshin Art Journal 72). Clothing as an object was neither obtuse nor foreign.

The 1990's ushered in a great number of artists working with clothing, namely the use and exhibition of unoccupied clothing. Nina Felshin comments that empty clothing sculpture is a metaphor for the body, a symbol of the body, or to signify the loss of a body. She hypothesizes
that the use of empty clothing is a way of "resisting self images" and objectification (24). "Artists have played with the distinction that is traditionally made between fashion and art: one that is functional—worn for warmth, covering and social status—and one that is not" (Berwick 164).

The largest producers of clothing art are women; obviously due to the repression women have endured by being subjected to a prescribed "uniform" from their culture. In addition, clothing is historically associated to the domestic realm in its creation, purchase, laundering, and mending. Finally, clothing as art also is an expression of demystifying the feminine ideal, stereotypes, identity, gender, and sexuality issues (Felshin 20). Artists such as Mimi Smith, Elise Siegel, Leslie Dill, Mary Kelly, and Annette Messager have explored themes on the corset, bra, dresses, and lingerie.

Reflecting upon the history of clothing, it is no wonder that it remains a dominant theme in contemporary art, particularly employed by women. Having been literally bound by clothing at one time, women artists are now free to express themselves through the use of clothing in their art. Even today, women are still bound by clothing with the wearing of bras, nylon hose, lingerie and the gender differences still embraced by society. Clothing will continue to be an enduring vehicle for expression. I myself chose the skirt as I am still bound by the confines of the skirt. When dressing for a party or formal occasion, I continue to conform by wearing long gowns, fussy skirts, high heels, stockings, bras, and slips. I do not feel "well dressed" without my skirt that signifies me as a woman.

Perhaps women are freer to wear less bulk and have more choices than did our foremothers of the 1800’s, but are we truly liberated to wear what we want to without fear of reprisal? Richard Martin in Fall From Fashion, answers this question his way:

...Our society is saturated with messages and images of what is fashionable, to the point that a part of our self-image is inevitably formed by the knowledge that we are either in-fashion or out-of-fashion. For better or worse, our lives will assume the consequences of our choice of attire: like it or not, we are the victims of our appearance. We may intentionally inform (or misinform) others as to who we are and what we do.
These issues of information or misinformation, interpretations, what is seen and what is hidden, intrigues me. With this in mind, the skirt seemed the perfect platform for my artwork.
Skirt by Definition

I love words. I like big words, and especially those that are spoken infrequently. I detest redundancy. To me, knowing precisely what a word means and to use it properly is important -- as is investigating word origins. Retaining a host of words to assist with wholly articulating my ideas, emotions, and individuality equates to power. I am a talker and I am a writer, so being specific is of great consequence. As a result, I use a dictionary often. As I continued my work on this thesis, I looked up the word "skirt" as I knew it had multiple definitions. I wanted to know how many different meanings there were. The correlations and juxtapositions this single word embodied astonished me, and how they related to the issues and ideas raised in the context of this thesis are profound.

*Skirt*, both a noun and a verb is defined as:

*A garment hanging from the waist down worn by women and girls; fabric that extends over or beyond something to afford protection; an outer edge; a border or margin; the edge of a town; a border; to pass around rather than across or through; to pass close by; miss narrowly; to evade by circumlocution; as well as the old standard slang term for "a woman"* (American Heritage Dictionary).

The definitions seemed to embody so much of what this thesis is discussing. Not only am I addressing the actual article of a skirt, but the ideas of protection (both physical and emotional), evasion (of long suppressed memories and accountability in regards to the treatment of woman), and the objectification of women and the feminine ideal (a woman = a skirt).
The Fetish: Chasing the Skirt

Laura Mulvey composed an engaging book entitled, Fetishism and Curiosity, from which I was able to gather more ideas about the subject of the fetish, particularly as it relates to the skirt. She writes that a fetish is most often associated with the gaze, and the subject enhances the phantasmic (6). "Fetishism triumphs as spectacle", she notes (4). It is my belief that fetishism begins with visual cues, and then goes a stride farther with a desire to touch or occupy.

In the context of this thesis, the fetish is not only the skirt, but also the fabric. The silky, soft, glistening threads glimmer in the light--begging the observer to caress it, to feel it, to wrap oneself in it. Memories of touching soft fabrics make us want to stroke them once more, just like reaching to pet the soft coat of an animal. We know what the fabric feels like, it affords us pleasure to touch it, and we are rewarded when our hands rest on its fibers. The skirt is a fetish, but so too is the fabric because they work harmoniously, simultaneously, fortifying validity each to one another.

The skirt as a fetish is both historically and culturally embedded, and "fetishes are supremely culturally specific" (Mulvey 8). To some men, skirts arouse more sexuality than by the presence of an actual woman (Wolf 175). It is the mere object itself divorced from body and self that arouses the sexuality. The fetish replaces the original desire. The skirt covers the legs, the upper thighs, and the place where the legs join. It covers nudity, female genitalia—where a glimpse of this is domain is the ultimate prize next to intercourse. The mystery of "what Scot's wear under their kilts" is akin to the mystery and obsession with what is hiding beneath women's skirts. As I began a conscious investigation into the skirt in history and in current American culture, the issue of fetish became a recurring theme.

I turn to The American Heritage Dictionary for an exact definition of this noun.

Fetish

1. An object that is believed to have magical or spiritual powers.
2. An object of unreasonably excessive attention or reverence.
3. Something, such as a material object or non-sexual part of the body, that arouses sexual desire and may become necessary for sexual gratification.
4. An abnormally obsessive preoccupation or attachment, a fixation.
The definition helped me better put the skirt into a fetishized context. As I contemplated the issue, I began to keep mental notes of how I have noticed this manifested in my experiences and culture. It was important to prove this theory, and not just accept it. I wanted to observe countless examples in countless forms. What I found was astounding, and will expand on only a few examples of the sexualizing of the skirt.

One of my earliest memories of grade school is boys chasing girls on the playground hoping to pull up their skirts. No humiliation could match a group of boys seeing our white cotton underpants. The harassment seemed unrelenting. No matter how many skirts they chased and were able to raise, their appetite for our underwear never seemed to be satiated. In reaction, starting at the age of ten, we girls opted to wear shorts under our skirts or abandoned wearing skirts altogether.

Current popular culture also emphasizes the fetish in one episode of the television show Friends. A grade school girl named Susie Moss (Julia Roberts) now grown-up seeks revenge on Chandler Bing (Matthew Perry) who had pulled up her skirt in front of the entire school auditorium. The result was absolute humiliation for her and the enduring childhood nickname of "Susie Underpants". Even though it was a television character, it made me wonder if the writer of the comedy had experienced this in her life, until I found out the writers were two men.

Films depict a wealth of examples of the skirt-as-fetish. In the epic film The Piano, set in the mid to late 1800's, the first key of the instrument is “earned back” by letting a man lay on the floor so that he can peer up her skirt. In the 1992 film, Basic Instinct Sharon Stone exhilarated theatergoers with her celebrated panty-less leg-crossing scene, in which she deliberately exposes herself while being interrogated by male investigators. One of the most enduring examples of skirts and the male gaze is from the 20th Century Fox film The Seven Year Itch starring Marilyn Monroe. Standing on a heating grate in a low cut white pleated skirt, the return blast from the furnace blows up her skirt as she coyly tries to keep her privates hidden from view. In this case, her smile is deliberate, and she is clearly not ashamed, and delights in the crowd’s response to her exhibitionism. In addition to the movie, there are a series of black and white stills taken by photographer Bert Stern, which are sold today in galleries and auction houses for thousands of dollars. (I myself sold two to a single client!) It is rumored that Monroe’s husband, Joe DiMaggio was present for the shooting of this scene and stormed off the
set horrified his wife would be so vulgar. It is believed that this scene was the catalyst which brought their marriage to an end.

In the press, The British Royal Family was unsettled with its first "Diana Scandal" prior to her marriage to Prince Charles. Lady Diana was unwittingly photographed in a sheer skirt with her back to the late day setting sun, which revealed the full outline of her legs. Tabloids ran this photograph worldwide, much to her repugnance and disgrace. Pornographic magazines always include a photo or two of a female model standing or reclining in a skirt before the camera to reveal her panties, garter belt, slip, or even vulva. Books on manners and a "proper lady’s" deportment have chapters on the correct way to sit, with either ankles or legs crossed or with legs together, depending upon the garment and the setting in which the sitting occurs. As a young girl (unaware of the taboo I had between my legs), I remember being scolded many times by my grandmothers to be more "lady-like" while wearing a skirt. I was not permitted to play in skirts or sit "Indian-style"; instead I was to sit up straight, smooth my skirt over my crossed legs and act like a lady.

The forces of nature have also wreaked havoc upon the skirt wearer. Wearing a skirt on a windy day required a woman’s free hand to constantly either hold the skirt down or to reposition it after every gust. A soaking rain could turn that white skirt into the equivalent of a white tee shirt within seconds. One of the reasons skirts were once so heavily layered was to protect women and "proper society" from an unavoidable weather related flash of a woman’s shoe, ankle or knee. In fact, many women did not go out on windy days to avoid such happenings. Women were held responsible for this type of indecent exposure and were duly punished even though it was an act of nature. This makes one contemplate the ratio of men to women on the streets of Chicago in those days!

I know I have overstated the skirt-as-fetish with copious examples, but it is in the numerous examples that the fetish and enthrallment is best emphasized and perpetuated. These examples also add evidence to the definitions’ use of the words "fixation", "excessive attention", and "obsessive preoccupation" because this "material object" (a skirt) does in fact "arouse sexual desire". In exploring the skirt-as-fetish, I am not renouncing it or judging this tendency, but merely highlighting its prominence in our society.
Garments of Memory/Memory of Garments

Memories are a selection of images--some elusive.
Some printed indelibly on the brain. Each image like a thread.
Each thread is woven together like a tapestry.
This tapestry creates our memories and these memories create our past.

Unknown

While attending the Gianni Versace Retrospective show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in the late 90’s, I was struck by a quote used by the curator of the show from Marcel Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past:

When from a long distant past nothing subsists...the smell and taste of things remained poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us...[of] the vast structures of recollection.

Indeed, the constructs of recollection are vast, and memories are prompted by sensory cues like sight, sound, smell, and touch. We are sensitive creatures and prone to reverie. These sensory prompts are like booby traps, which seem to spring out of nowhere when we least expect it, and transport us away to an earlier place and time. The skirts I have created address memory—both of the mind and the body. They are intended to prompt memory, as many were created out of my own life experiences and address issues close to my heart. We have all at one point in our life been confounded by a déjà vu sensation brought on by an odor or physical sensation. It is my hope that my skirts would do the same, perhaps allowing the viewer the opportunity to retrace their steps in life, or to face long denied realities.

Physical, sensory, visual, and tactile memories, those we cannot verbalize but instead feel never leave us; they become part of the "tapestry" of our psyche and personality. Alice Miller, the author of The Drama of the Gifted Child researched child abuse issues in her book and writes, "our true, repressed life history is stored up in our body" (7). Our bodies remember everything, and we cannot obliterate the pain, but can expel it from our consciousness and store it somewhere hidden deeply inside (8). These remembrances resonate somewhere in our minds and in our body, and perhaps, simultaneously. We can recall the weave and our desire to touch those fabrics we have a connection with. We also have recollections of how we have been physically touched by others, be it a caress, a slap, lovemaking, or rape. Many times a scent in a
fabric can transport to a place or time that incites mighty peace or towering pain. Our emotional memory bank is sometimes the greatest chasm to face, and why many choose to disregard their past. All these sensory imprints comprise who were are and how we interact with our world. They mold and define us. They determine how we view the world and interact with the people in our lives. "What is remembered by the body is well remembered", says Elaine Scarry (The Body in Pain 109).

Like our indelible psyches, fabric and clothing are receptors for memory. Clothing and fabrics mark seasons, occasions, activities, youth, and maturity. There are types of clothes that are worn for specific activities and venues: school clothes, church clothes, gym clothes, dress up clothes, play clothes, and work clothes. Clothing signifies times and phases in life.

When a loved one dies, they leave behind their most intimate items for family members to sort, some of which is their clothing. Clothing outlives us, and often out wears us. It is a legacy. It reminds us of how fleeting life is. Although the physical body has failed, the deceased person’s scent and body shape lives on in their clothing. It is not uncommon for the mourning process to spiral into chaos when the deceased’s wardrobe is confronted. Peter Stallybrass weighs the complexities of his experiences with mourning and clothing in “Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning, and the Life of Things”, in the 1993 edition of the Yale Review. After his friend Allon died, Stallybrass was bequeathed a prized jacket of his, and interprets how the jacket seemed to "invoke" his friend (36). He writes, "The magic of cloth...is that it receives us: receives our smells, our sweat, our shape even (36). Clothes receive the human imprint (37). Cloth is a kind of memory. When a person is absent or dies, cloth can absorb his or her absent presence" (38).

"I could smell him. Dead, he still hangs there in the closet, in the shape of his body impressed upon the cloth, in a frayed cuff, in a smell", reflects Stallybrass (39). These words hit a very personal nerve for me. After the death of my paternal grandmother, my two sisters, my dad and I were left with the final duty of cleaning out her apartment. Many objects brought tears to our eyes, but it was her clothing that was most poignant for me. There is something remarkably incongruous about a closet full of clothes that will never again be worn. I distinctly remember burying my face into her sweaters, blouses, and scarves hoping to encounter even the slightest lingering of her perfume. Smelling her essence did seem to "invoke" her, somehow she
didn’t seem dead, but rather suspended somewhere between the physical and mystical. Her spirit tarried in the sweet smell of her clothing. Solace and anguish simultaneously overwhelmed me.

As we flip through the pages of our photo albums, we many times can vividly recall the feel of fabric we were wearing in a particular picture, where the outfit was purchased, for what occasion it was worn for, or how we felt when we wore it. The photographs also conjure remembrances of fashion fads. We laugh, cringe, and reminisce about colors, hemlines, styles and patterns of the clothes we once wore. We can immediately identify outfits we adored or disdained. Aversion to certain fabrics can also be rooted directly to distressing events in our lives. Itchy woolen plaid uniforms worn in grade school; corduroy pants that "chirped" as our seemingly too-large-thighs rubbed together; slippery polyester of my deceased grandmother’s dresses; acrylic face masks worn in the process of a robbery or rape; fabric can remind us.

A few years ago I was helping a friend pack her belongings prior to her move across country. In the process, I unearthed a box of photographs in her closet, and we sat on the carpet to look through them. As luck would have it, I found a photograph of the two of us taken several years earlier. While I giggled about how silly I thought we looked, she gasped. In what seemed like one motion, she snatched the photograph from my hand, vaulted to her feet and tore it to shreds. Puzzled, I asked her what was wrong. "That’s the dress I was wearing when I was raped", she said softly. "After the court case was closed, that stupid dress was returned to me. I took it to the back yard and burned it." She muttered under her breath, "Won’t wear silk again, it rips too easily." Stunned, I got up and held her as she wept. Indeed, fabric can remind us.

As a girl of maybe thirteen, I was rummaging through our family cedar chest with my mother. I clearly remember her cooing when she opened a tattered box that contained several diminutive dresses and shoes. It turns out, my mom kept a few articles of clothing that each of my sisters and I wore as children. When our family homestead was sold in 1997 and all of the contents were sorted through, my mother handed me a small white dress with dainty embroidery at the neckline. She told me it was a dress I wore when I was about a year old. I packed the dress in a box and took it home with me. I safeguard that little dress in a drawer of my bureau and look at it often.

In the course of drafting this thesis, I telephoned my mom and asked her why she had preserved our childhood clothing. She told me she kept it for many reasons. She recalled that my paternal grandmother made some of the outfits; some outfits matched my sister’s outfits, still
other’s were worn for an occasion like the first day of school or a birthday, while some Mom said were favorites. Without further prompting, she continued. Mom mentioned that she held onto the clothes as a way of "scrap-booking", they were not saved to be used again or to be handed on, kept strictly for the purpose of reverie. "Clothes keep well, papers disintegrate, and photographs fade and turn colors. Clothes are easy to store", she remarked. They were a tangible part of her life and ours. She liked having three little girls; the small articles of clothing reminded her of when we were little, sweet, cuddly and smelled like baby powder. "The clothes couldn’t keep you small, but these dresses and outfits remind me of a time when you were small", Mom disclosed. She told me she wished she had kept swatches of each of our garments to make a quilt with (this coming from my mother who rarely sewed anything).

For me, looking at this dress my mother gave back to me commands a commingling of heartache and wonderment deep within me. I am forever amazed at how small and vulnerable I once was, and never will be again. I taste a deep grief in my throat about the end and loss of my childhood. I will only continue to mature and grow older. The wonderment is attached to hardly remembering being "that small". I can’t remember when my legs were too underdeveloped to walk, I moved from place to place carried in my parents’ arms. It seems strange to think that I can’t remember the feel of my own petite body, what it felt like to be fragile, dependent, and unable to dress and feed myself. I also get excited when I dream of my unborn children who will someday wear tiny outfits, and to one day explain why I have kept their clothing, as well.

Clothing is significant in our life and to those we will leave behind after we have died. It has housed our fragile bodies and made statements to those we know and interact with. It has kept us warm, dry, and stylish. Our lifetime of clothing is a growth chart and is a gauge of history. Absorbing stains like finger paints, food, blood, body odor, and ink...fabric is a mapping of our life. If we could assemble all of the clothing we owned throughout our lives, it would tell the story of what we did, how we lived, and what we ate. We could recount what we did in certain outfits, which were our favorites, and how and why the clothing articles were ultimately discarded. We could narrate how it was used as a napkin and tissue, a part of an ensemble, a fashion statement, and how it finally ended up being used as a rag for dusting the house. Clothing would resurrect our adventures, events, emotions, and where every stain and tear originated. Using clothing as an art form seems so natural, as clothing and fabrics trigger memories and stories.
Threading Lightly...The Evolution of the Artwork

A secret thing may be hidden away, in a concealed place, but a secret meaning must be transformed into a code. One can be simply discovered by the eye, the other has to be deciphered.

Laura Mulvey, Fetishism and Curiosity.

The evolution of these "storied vessels" was born out of a single skirt I prepared for an early R.I.T. Walk-Through. It was large and green and shiny, created from a ghastly bridesmaid dress I wore for my cousin’s wedding. The skirt installation incorporated mirrors and text with themes of Pandora’s Box. I used a dimmed room and controlled lighting to throw shadows of the skirt, which added an ancillary element to the work. Though this initial work was criticized, and riddled with technical problems, many saw potential in the ideas and subject matter.

Over the next quarter, I explored work by other fabric and clothing artists, delved into historical documents on clothing, thumbéd through contemporary and vintage fashion magazines. I read feminists writings about women’s garments and its context in society and examined my own wardrobe and those of people passing me on the street. I had discussions with friends, watched TV, sketched, stitched up ideas...and then completely abandoned the skirt as a potential art form.

After investigating other mediums and subject matter and finding myself uninspired, I once again returned to the skirt. I seemed drawn to it, rapt and intrigued by its shape, form, sexual and cultural implications, complexities and potential. Another Walk-Through was upon me, and I feverishly produced more skirts. Since one skirt could not incorporate and convey the multitude of messages I felt were workable, I took to the sewing machine to yield four garments of varying sizes, fabrics, textures, and meanings.

Again, with controlled lighting and a new collection of skirts, I presented my work. After mulling over the preliminary group’s critique, what first seemed like a catastrophe turned to glimmers of success. The contradictory dialogues of faculty and students troubled me, as well as the interpretations the audience members were discussing. Men and women had very conflicting analysis, while some people had no insight or reactions at all. As I spoke to more people that day, I discovered many were having a personal experience and an emotional response to the skirts, not just an intellectual one. Others were so confused by the lack of literalness they
simply marched out of the studio. I got excited and encouraged. I was fascinated that others were having deeper and differing interpretations than those I had originally intended.

Since that show, I knew my final body of work for my MFA thesis would focus on these skirts. Some of the work for this thesis was taken from that show, and many have been modified and new ones have been incorporated. As the artwork took shape, I realized the stories I was telling through these skirts were deeply personal for me, sometimes beyond words. I found that each skirt had a voice and a gesture. Some pieces whisper, another may shout, some are direct, while others are hesitant. They are entities to me.

I struggled for a time about revealing such personal issues about myself. As I read Lucy Lippard’s book Overlay, I felt a sense of relief reading that women many times "explicitly link their art and their bodies (46)" and return "directly to our bodies and personal experiences (47)" for inspiration. The creation of this artwork was cathartic because what I could not verbalize I could physically create. The greatest freedom was separating what I wanted the work to address and that which the audience interpreted did not have to be the identical and congruent. As photographer Eileen Cowan said, "not all narratives have resolution (George Eastman House lectures, April 4-6, 1998)."
Exhibition Place and Space

My experiences of showing this work previously mandated a careful command of lighting and environment. Technique, attention to detail, flawless presentation, and technical execution were key. Without the darkness, the shadows were not as prominent and the fabric lost its luminosity. Noise was a distraction. High ceilings were required to suspend the skirts from. Installation of light fixtures in the ceiling and concealing the cords were paramount. I needed a space in which to create and install without restriction. These needs led my colleague Rachel Smith and I to search for exhibition space outside of the Rochester Institute of Technology’s School of Photographic Arts and Sciences gallery.

Early in the winter of 1998, we began our pursuit of space in which to work and exhibit. We met with landlords, walked through many buildings, drove all over the city, braved two massive blizzards, scouted parking, electricity and sanitary facilities, and finally found the suitable locale. We decided upon a three-room studio in the Artist’s Loop at Village Gate Square, signed a six-month lease and moved in.

Dividing the space was done prior to signing the lease; it was the reason we selected this space to begin with. Since the space met both of our requirements, neither of us needed to sacrifice. The front door opened into a reception area that was flanked by two rooms. The one to the left was generous with steel girders in the ceiling. The room to the right was what I was hoping to find, a space with a high ceiling and an intimate feel. (NOTE: See Appendix for Floor Plan of Studio B-324.)

With the approval of our respective thesis committee members, Rachel and I set Friday, May 7th for the opening of our exhibitions.
**Seam-ingly Endless: Art Making & Studio Preparation**

The very day we had secured the studio, I went diligently to work. Aware that time would pass briskly, I wanted to leave nothing to the last minute. Early mornings, late nights, a lot of caffeine, constant music, daily conferences, and library books galvanized and inspired me. I scheduled meetings with my thesis committee members to keep me on track. Relentlessly I read, created, deconstructed, drew, stitched, while learning about the finer points of sewing.

**Sewing 101:** At this point, I must digress and confess. I failed sewing class in 7th grade—I honestly earned myself an "F". My school was still bound to the notion that boys studied metal and woodworking while the girls learned to cook and sew. "Home Economics" they called it—a pedagogy left over from the 50's. I resented and detested it. I had no interest in anything domestic. I was furious about the gender specificity of the class, knowing in my gut I would never be a housewife like Carol Brady or June Cleaver. I rebelled by not producing a final project for the class. While my fellow classmates were proudly showing off their handmade skirts and pillows, I sat apathetic, contemplated my failing grade, and hoped my teacher wouldn’t notice me. Well, the sewing teacher did and called my mother to discuss the situation. I think my mother had to bite her tongue and not burst into a fit of laughter through most of that conversation.

Martha Stewart and my mother don’t stand a chance of being friends. My mother defied the conventions of domestic. She wholeheartedly embraced the Women’s Movement, so cooking, sewing, and cleaning were not espied by her as a "feminine" undertaking. Everyone in my family took part in running the house. My mother believed that being a housewife with all its chores, trappings, and archetype was a fate paralleled to prison life, so she went to work in business. Incredibly we did own a sewing machine, but it only collected dust in the basement and was finally thrown out. We daughters were indoctrinated to believe we could do anything we set our minds to, were taught to view ourselves as equals to men, and to reject sexual division in labor and status. Through my mother’s example, I too came to renounce and be critical of the domestic.

On the polar opposite side of my mother, sat my paternal grandmother who could knit, sew, crochet and kept an immaculate house. Although Nana was head nurse at a New York hospital and well respected in her profession, she was in every way a homemaker. She was the antithesis of my mom and we silently mocked her domestic tendencies. I rejected all of her offers
to teach me to sew and cook, dismissing them as old fashioned and irrelevant. Sure I could replace a button, but that was the extent of my sewing prowess. How it was I came to sewing from, photography as a form of artistic expression perplexed and amused both my mother and myself. It was ironic then that I was to inherit my Nana’s beloved vintage sewing machine after she passed away, two weeks before I began school at R.I.T. Perhaps it was an omen.

Entrenched in my thesis, I began to regret rebuffing my grandmother’s offers of assistance. I also began to realize that although sewing has been long viewed as a female task, it was merely a means to an end. It was a productive and meaningful skill to master. I also discovered that sewing was rather meditative, and lacked the associations of bondage my mother equated with it. In the end, Rachel taught me how to best work the sewing machine, as I retained very little from my 7th grade class. I studied clothing patterns, experimented with fabrics, conferenced with the staff at almost every fabric and sewing store within a 25 mile radius of downtown Rochester, New York, looked at how my own clothes were constructed, learned intricate sewing techniques, and kept on sewing. Much to my surprise, my sewing improved and the skirts took shape.

**Addressing the Walls and Floor:** One cold morning it was time to deflect my concentration from skirt making and address the issues of lighting and environment. The room had a window and an auxiliary door I didn’t want to use. The door and window needed to be transfigured into one contiguous wall, which required some minor construction. Thanks to my father, I was competent with the finer points of drywall, tape, compound, and sanding. After a few days of intensive construction work, I was pleased by the seamlessness of the section, and was humored by the fact that I could indeed sew and do drywall! (If only my sewing teacher could see me now!) After the final sanding was complete, I primed and painted the walls. I selected a deep gray for the walls and the floor a matte black to best promote shadows and prevent light bouncing in the room.

In addition to painting my studio, Rachel and I painted the reception room walls with fresh coat of white paint. Since this would be the first impression of our shows and bear our title lettering, we wanted the walls to look crisp. Fans ran day and night for a week to ventilate the paint fumes. We thought the studio space should be inviting so people could spend time with the work, without the distractions and unpleasantness of the construction and installation process. My goal was to create a home for the skirts that gave the appearance that they had been here all
along. I didn’t want the studio to appear temporary or newly finished to merely house the exhibition.

**Lighting and Shadows:** As the skirts were completed, I spent countless hours at hardware stores scouting lighting fixtures, learning about electrical installation, and considered light sources and techniques. I needed to light not only the front of the skirts, but some necessitated a backlight or illumination from the inner recesses of the work. At the same time I needed to cast precise shadows. After testing a variety of fixtures, I decided upon a type of track lighting with incandescent bulbs for the majority of the skirts. I ruled out halogen lights as they burn too visually and physically hot.

By late March, the calendar and the mirror became my worst enemies. One told how little I was sleeping as it reflected dark circles under my sunken eyes, while the other informed me there wasn’t much time to sleep. I was at a crossroads. I needed to put the last seams into the skirts and install the lighting. This meant I was nearing the end; the show was only weeks away. Upon the completion of the skirts, I again met with my thesis committee for the final approval.

Even with a towering ladder, I had to stand on the tips of my toes to mount the skirts into the ceiling. Some skirts were to stay firmly in place, while others I wanted to swing and move with the air current. The installation was tricky because I wanted an ethereal floating presence without detecting the fishing line. As a result, I experimented with different strengths of filament.

With the skirts finally situated, I could now map out the lighting. The 20 foot exposed beam ceiling had no electrical wiring whatsoever; therefore I had to run wires from the outlets on the floor up the walls and into the fixtures, making sure they were painted to blend with the walls and well hidden from view. Thanks to my six-foot-two assistant, the tracks of lighting went up in a few days after many repositionings.

The skirts were lit and relit. I had to rearrange some of the skirts to better suit the placement of the shadows. It was also necessary to fashion snoots and diffusers to distribute the light. The lighting became the most daunting and exacting component of the show. It was crucial to ensure each skirt had equal illumination, as I did not want any skirt to seem like the focal point. It was also important that the shadows fell either on a wall or floor without overlapping. To make matters even more challenging, the viewer could not obscure the lights. Casting light
upon the skirts required the fixtures to be placed high on the wall or ceiling so that audience members would not cast their own shadows upon the work, the floors, or walls.

There were three skirts that required additional lighting equipment. One of the smaller skirts required a small low wattage light. It took a bit of trial and error until I decided upon a small battery pack and book light so that no wires would be visible from the front of the work. The red skirt needed to be lit from within—and again, a small light was fashioned so as not to be visible when the hole in the skirt was peered into. Again, I struggled with the brightness of the fixture so as not to over light the inside of the skirt and wipe out the red reflective glow. The Communion skirt, the largest of them all, was a formidable task. It required a small shaft of light to fall about 13 feet through the body of the skirt to its hem. I spent the better part of a day perfecting it.

The last lighting issue was the entry door into the studio. Since the reception room needed to be well lit, I had to devise a means for the viewer to enter the space discreetly and with the least amount of light coming in with them. I used a sexy black satin that was lined with a black cotton fabric to make a dense curtain. It not only blocked and absorbed light, but it was also an experience to transition into the space. Having to touch the fabric to enter gave the viewer a tactile and active role in beginning to experience the work. In some ways, I wanted it to feel like being in a skirt. I also liked the encounter, if only for a second, of being enveloped in the fabric. I tried to capitalize on the anticipation that a person would have prior to walking into the room. The black curtain added to the mystery of the space, the only clues the person had before pulling back the curtain was the title. I wanted a feeling of apprehension and anxiety to be present. Without clues as to what was behind the curtain allowed the viewer to not have any preconceived notions before entering the studio. (NOTE: See Appendix for Studio Diagram for the placement of the skirts.)

**Sight and Sound:** What I envisioned and strived to fulfill was a quiet and contemplative space in which to interact and encounter the work. I had once considered adding a sound element, but I found the visual stimulation sufficient. I did not want to give the audience a full sensory experience. My intention was to allow them to form their own connections and to not bombard them with a plethora of information.

The other occurrence I desired was the motion the audience’s presence had on the skirts. Air currents produced by the opening of the curtain, walking past and touching the skirts
added yet another dimension to the overall installation. Empty floating skirts gyrating slightly, trembling, breathing, approaching and retreating; the movement added an additional "life" to the seemingly uninhabited skirts. I installed the skirts so that they would move and interact with the audience. A few skirts spun freely 360 degrees, while some were tethered tighter than others.
Detailing the Details: Exhibition Minutiae

In March and April of 1999, as Rachel and I continued readying our artwork, we charted our advertising and signage strategies for opening night and the weeks of exhibition. It was imperative to keep a calendar at the ready to ensure we had adequate time to meet all deadlines and to plan sufficient time to get our press releases out in the papers and our announcement cards printed and mailed. We were cognizant of our necessity to advertise our shows since it was off campus. We also needed to plan a menu for our reception, as neither one of us wanted to cook or prepare anything beyond our artwork.

Announcement Cards: Using the company Modern Postcard based in Carlsbad, CA, Rachel and I decided upon two sided, 4.25 x 6 inch announcement card and went to work on the design. We fused visual themes from our work and scanned in a tape measure, fabric patterns, blueprints and a minor amount of text. Using Photoshop®, together we created a mutually agreeable layout with an end result both alluring and enigmatic. On the verso we added our pertinent information, saved it on disk and send it off to the company for printing.

The cards were completed and the order of 500 was received in plenty of time. Together we assembled a mailing list of artists, faculty, friends, and members of the art, photo, and video world. Rachel and I knew the many benefits of sharing a show: not only could we split our expenses but we could also share our audience to increase attendance. Sitting on the floor of my apartment we printed the labels, attached them to the cards, affixed the postage and sent them in late March. The remaining cards were placed in student and teacher’s R.I.T. mail folders, affixed to faculty doors and bulletin boards, and piles were left in local stores, libraries, and galleries. (NOTE: See Appendix for the Announcement Card.)

Press Releases: In addition to the announcement cards, we wrote two versions of press releases and sent them out to the local Rochester papers, to papers in Buffalo and Syracuse, and to our local home newspapers. Our promptness was rewarded by having each press release printed in each of the papers (without any typographical errors) for four weeks. (NOTE: See Appendix for Press Releases and printed versions from the newspapers.)

Catering: With all the hard work we were putting into our show, it felt important to plan a fantastic opening celebration. Our intention was to create an atmosphere where people wanted to linger and not rush off to have dinner. We wanted our audience to stay and enjoy not only our work, but the food and libations as well. Deciding upon an eclectic menu, Rachel and I
met with several caterers. We ordered a variety of delicacies to feed the crowd. In addition, we bought cases of wine, soda and juices, and asked a few friends to tend bar. Going the extra mile we purchased color coordinated cups, plates, glasses, candles and napkins. Thanks to our landlord, we were able to host the reception outside the studio in the large space just beyond our door. This way the reception room would be relatively empty and the exhibitions would not be overwhelmed with noise.

**Signage/Vinyl Lettering:** Because the location of our studio within the Village Gate Square was a little difficult to find, we wanted our studio address posted outside the studio door. In addition, we wanted lettering with the titles of our shows and our names for the walls. Our fellow M.F.A. colleague, Sangdal Lee offered to do it for us free of charge as a way to congratulate us on our show. Again, Rachel and I sat together at the computer and finalized our lettering. With all the expertise and machinery at his disposal, he generously sent us the final self-adhesive vinyl lettering within days.

Installing the lettering was a tedious and painstaking task. With exact measurements and attention to square and level, we taped up the first phase of the lettering. I suddenly regretted having such a long title! After checking the first phase of the process again, we burnished them onto the wall. In the end, the titles made the space look complete.

**Gallery Hours:** Since our show was off the R.I.T. campus, we wanted our colleagues, faculty, and the general public to visit the gallery. We also anticipated a handful of curiosity seekers who would stop in while shopping, eating, or visiting other artists at the Village Gate Square. Rachel and I established mutually agreeable times and dates to be at the gallery. We divided the time, and kept our hours as scheduled...even when sleeping or socializing seemed more desirable.

**Artist’s Statement and Acknowledgements:** It took little effort to compose my artist statement, as I derived much of the wording from my thesis proposal, press releases, and research I had done while creating the artwork. It seemed to flow out as a result of being so enmeshed with the work for such an extended period of time.

A list of acknowledgements seemed appropriate to exhibit adjacent to my artist’s statement. It was necessary for me to list the names of those who had helped me along the way. Friends, family, colleagues, and fabric store clerks played an indispensable role in this show. Feedback, technical guidance, inspiration, and assorted philosophies encouraged me to refine,
alter, and enhance my work. Displaying the names was a modest gesture to declare my gratitude and esteem to those who supported me.

These two statements were situated on the left wall as one entered the exhibition space. An elegant presentation of my artist’s statement and list of acknowledgements was important, because if it looked haphazard, it would have a visual impact on the rest of the space and on the work. Printed and placed behind glass, they were illuminated with a handsome brass fixture. It was important to me to have the statement in the same room as the work for two reasons: I didn’t want to reveal anything to the viewer before entering the space and I felt the statement within the studio added a point of reference that was easy to access. (NOTE: See Appendix for Artists Statement and List of Acknowledgements.)
The Final Frontier: Thesis Committee Approval

After numerous meetings, both at the gallery and at school, along with a last viewing of the final work, each of my faculty thesis members finally and affably approved my show. I met with each member individually for the last showing, as I was able to absorb their feedback and reactions to the work without a cacophony of voices and input simultaneously.

Following the receipt of the decisive "thumbs-up" from each of them, along with my colleagues and friends, I was truly overjoyed and relieved. All the feedback from Walk-Through and our meetings aided me in producing a show that felt complete and cohesive. I had always concurred that this work would only succeed with exact lighting and a controlled environment, and showing them the final product was a terrific thrill. I was happy to know that my committee was satisfied and enthusiastic with my work and its execution. After receiving all of my thesis committee member's signatures on the "Intent to Exhibit" form, I felt I was holding a precious document. I promptly left the studio and submitted it to the head of the M.F.A. department to avoid any complications.

In the end, even without their approval and accolades, I found that it was me that needed to be truly satisfied with my artwork. I can honestly admit that I had far exceeded my own original plans and expectations, and I had actuated a show that I was completely at peace with. (NOTE: See Appendix for the "Intent to Exhibit" form.)
The Exhibition

**Opening Night Reception:** The day of the opening was fraught with trivial irritating tasks. There were details that could only be attended to that day. Two separate trips to the airport to pick up my mom and boyfriend made the day more grueling. Thankfully, they both came back to the studio and helped Rachel and I wrap up the final details. Rachel and I left the studio with our respective families and lists of responsibilities, with the goal of meeting back at the studio at 4:30 p.m.

Arriving back at the gallery at roughly 4:30, we were greeted by friends who came early to help with the preparations. We set up the tables for the food and the bar. Then I turned the lights on for my skirts while Rachel cued the looped video for her installation. Amidst the insanity, Rachel and I stole a moment to view one another’s work (again!) and to contemplate the preceding frenetic months. We congratulated each other, hugged, and took a deep cleansing breath. It was a joyful and bittersweet moment. We had finally arrived at the day we had been slaving so hard for, and we were going to savor it!

At 5:30 p.m. the caterers turned up, long after the early birds began to trickle in. An unremitting stream of people arrived, and few left. It was affecting to see friends, colleagues, students from a few of the classes I taught, and our professors come to view our work. By 7:00 p.m. the food and the bar was depleted. The attendance far surpassed our wildest imaginings. We approximated over 100 people had been present. By 10:00 p.m. we had to ask people to leave because Village Gate was closing. Rachel and I were both wearied and exhilarated. After cleaning up, we went home and slept with an awesome sense of accomplishment.

**Post Reception:** Being faithful to our advertising, Rachel and I shared time at the gallery meeting people who wanted to see our shows. My phone rang frequently with requests to make appointments to open the gallery for a special viewing. Some R.I.T. faculty and students came who were unable to come to the opening, as well as members from the Rochester arts community. We also did have some curiosity seekers who were at Village Gate shopping. We were thrilled to learn that most people came because friends or colleagues had told them about the shows.

Our only minor regret was not having the same foot traffic that we would have had at the S.P.A.S. gallery at school. We were not privy to the students, administrators and teachers who had time between classes to stop in. We did long for some of that additional feedback and
exposure. However, in the end we were satisfied with the final outcome of our works, and realized that we would not have been able to execute the installations to our exact specifications if we had used the S.P.A.S. gallery due to their regulations. We believe that roughly 200 people had come to see our shows.

The Robbery: Eight days before the show was to come down, Rachel and I were stunned to discover that our gallery had been burglarized. The outside door in Rachel’s studio had been forced. The three rooms had been ransacked, with overturned chairs, tables, and papers strewn on the floor. In shock and disbelief we surveyed the damage and called the police.

The police arrived a few hours later and took our report. They informed us that there had been other robberies in Village Gate Square that night. In the end, we were given little consolation that the equipment would ever be recovered, nor the crime solved. We could chalk this up to an expensive learning experience, and thankful to have had renter’s insurance!

Two of my skirts had been torn down. I was heartbroken to find the plaster Wishbone Skirt fractured on the floor. In addition, my CD player (just given to me at Christmastime) was taken, along with an antique table linen of my grandmother’s that the perpetrators probably used to wrap the stolen items in.

Rachel’s two VCRs were stolen, along with her videotapes that were inside them. The rest of her video installation equipment—too burdensome to transport—was left behind. Luckily she still had her master copies. The door in her studio would require repair, along with the lock.

After the police left, we wondered how the robbers knew there was valuable equipment in our studio, since we were not a store or company like the other victims. Out of all of the artist’s studios in the building, ours was the only one robbed. All of our windows had been covered, and there was no way to see in—unless they had been in our space either during the opening reception or while we had open gallery hours. That concept both angered and troubled us. Had we been unknowingly “cased”? Did the people who did this come and see our work first, and then break in? Could the robbers be people we knew or went to school with? Our questions were, of course, rhetorical ones.

Furious and determined, we made the appropriate repairs and reopened for the final week of our show. Since we had been so pleased with our work and we had promised our families and friends to have the show open after graduation, we were undeterred. There were no further incidents.
The De-installment: This too was a process. Prior to plucking the work from the ceiling, I took rolls and rolls of slides to document the show. Wanting to portray the work on film as accurately as it hung in the studio was a chore. I experimented with slow shutter speeds, tripods, auxiliary lighting, and different films. Rachel utilized a video camera to document the installations. I was thrilled to have this medium as the work has more presence in "real time" than in still photographs. Needless to say I didn’t remove the work until I had a comprehensive set of slides I was satisfied with.

I had very mixed emotions taking down my show. This space and the work inside it became such an overriding part of my life that it felt like a mini-death to remove the skirts and place them in boxes. Mixed with sadness, I was elated to finally have the show done. I also felt tremendous pressure to vacate the premises by the date of our lease as I had painting and light removal to do, as well as the de-construction of the door and window.

Once the studio was restored to its original condition (with again more painting, sanding, and construction), Rachel and I took one last sentimental walk through our studio space, locked the door, and turned in our keys to the landlord. Between the Ankle & the Soul and Landing were officially history – chronicled on film and in our memories.
The Work Itself: A Discussion

*Woman must not accept; she must challenge.*
*She must not be awed by that which has been built up around her; she must reverence that woman in her which struggles for expression.*

*Margaret Sanger*

I have had a long-standing and very personal interest within the arena of the female domain and body politic in both photographic and fabric realizations. While attending the Rochester Institute of Technology M.F.A. Photography program I have grappled with finding a personal narrative, whether through deconstructing my family photographic albums; probing and mocking issues of conservative politics; and matters of violence to personal emotional, physical and spiritual boundaries. My ideas and work have matured into subjective, intimate, and feminine dialogues utilizing fabric skirt forms. It was a natural progression to have continued with these skirt forms for my thesis as a means to complete this particular discourse for myself.

Our first impression of a person is formed by their exterior: stature, body size, cleanliness, neatness, physical traits, eye color, and of course, what attire and embellishments the person is wearing. We make assumptions based on our observations of people. Our challenge, though, is to go beyond the external cues and find deeper qualities about the person’s character and personality. My work in *Between the Ankle & The Soul* invites the same challenge of the skirt and it’s complexities. My challenge to the audience is to look and look again. Think. Ask. Engage. Experience. Touch. Feel. Interact. Draw your own conclusions. Unsubstantiated assumptions and quick dismissals on first glance is a lost opportunity.

Each skirt, though physically different, had a few construction details in common. All of the skirts were, at the waist and hemline, threaded with a stiff wire to look as if it were being worn on an imaginary body. This skeleton gave the skirts form, support, shape, balance, additional weight, and a structure from which to hang it. I selected identical ready-made silver hangers for each skirt to be suspended from. The sterile and clean lines of the hangars pleased me, as well as the enduring associations with hangers and crude abortions.

The skirts were attached to the hangers with a fine fishing line that was nearly undetectable to the eye. (I must acknowledge that during my first R.I.T. Walk-Through, the fishing line was a huge issue. A particular faculty member made an arduous point to discuss this detail. After much trial and error, I found a line that was strong enough to hold the work, while
being almost invisible to the eye.) I liked the slick appearance of the hangers that glistened in the light, as well as the tension between the hanger and the skirt and their shadows. The floating appearance of the skirts defied the laws of gravity, and added an additional element of suspense.

The selection of fabric was premeditated and deliberate. I sought out fabric that begged to be touched. I chose fabrics like silk, organza, and satin to bewitch and call forth the visual and tactile sensibilities. Skirts are fetishized, so too are fabrics, because they are laden with corporeal sexual nuances. When walking through a clothing store, don’t many of us "pet" the fur coats, massage the soft Italian leather garments with our hands, and tenderly caress the satin and silk? Valerie Steele, in her book *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power* writes that "certain materials have a powerful erotic appeal by virtue of their tactile, olfactory and visual characteristics, as well as their symbolic associations" (143). For the most part, I selected fabrics that look and feel delicate and "sexy", fabrics used in making lingerie and women’s evening gowns, in other words, I used fabrics that seduce. These same materials also have a shimmer and reflective property, while fabrics like organza transmit a multi-colored hue when moving in the light. Choice of fabric was indeed crucial.

As I mentioned earlier, these skirts are not about fashion. They are the most rudimentary and identifiable shape of a skirt—stripped down to its most basic framework. I fabricated the skirts to be simplistic in shape and form, without diverting the audience with trivialities that would detract from the message the skirts were portraying. Essentially, the skirts act independently of one another and are symbols of the feminine body and realm.

Clothes in fairy tales, like clothes in dreams and life, create an image.  
They cover and reveal our naked truth.  
Color, cut, texture, and period are all significant.  
They may create a persona we assume to impress the world;  
they may be an authentic expression of who we are.

*Marion Woodman, Leaving My Father’s House.*

What follows are descriptions of the installation. In the following pages, I do not attempt to explain the artwork, nor do I wish to discuss in detail what the work means to me specifically. Instead, I describe the materials and process and general constructs of the skirts, and leave the "meaning" to exist in interpretation. I will explore the implications of some of the
materials, both culturally and metaphorically, however, these associations are not, necessarily answers to what the work actually "means". There is no single interpretation. There are as many meanings as there are people to posit meaning. In fact, my written exploration is purposely ambiguous, and sometimes asks more questions than provides answers. There is no right or correct way to interpret this work. Like Martha Rossler commented at an April 1998 lecture at The George Eastman House, art should be about "blurring specificity and we don't need an actual image or precise identity. Essentially, work can function iconically. Specificity fades".

The Hair Skirt

There is something between my legs. I do not know what it is.
I do not know where it is. I do not touch.
Not now. Not anymore. Not since.

Eve Ensler. The Vagina Monologues.

This skirt was fashioned to look like a tiny child might be dressed in it. It was the smallest skirt I could make that would successfully allow people to walk under and look under. The fabric is a thin, soft satin with a lace detail at the hem, using an ornate christening gown as inspiration. I lined the skirt with a slip so when lit, the outside fabric did not reveal the secret of what was inside. Within the slip I sewed in small strands of curly black hair. From a distance, it looked like an article for a baptism. When it was approached, and then looked beneath, there is a definite contrast of the hair versus the silky exterior. The lighting was tricky for this piece so that the viewer could look up into the work to experience it without being blinded, while its shadow was cast on the floor and west wall.

A small delicate skirt with hair underneath leaves much to think about. Short black hairs connote pubic hair, hair not age appropriate for such a young child. Hair is a topic that has very conflicting associations. I am reminded of a comedy routine by Jerry Seinfeld who compared and contrasted thoughts about hair and its context. (I will try to do his comedic work justice with a summation of what I can draw from my memory.) A tall woman with long blonde hair: beautiful. Nose and ear hair: gross. Running our fingers through our lover's hair: sensual. A lock of hair in a locket or scrapbook: sentimental. Finding a hair in our food: disgusting. Hair in our mouth: unspeakable. His ideas certainly sum up hair and all it's implications in a funny but succinct manner.
Eve Ensler wrote in her book, *The Vagina Monologues* that "many people do not love (pubic) hair" especially for men in regards to a woman's vagina (9). Our culture is fascinated with either removing hair from women's bikini areas, underarms, and legs; while men cannot seem to have enough hair, enter the product Rogaine®. Hair essentially is classified in two ways: unsexy, dirty, messy, and unsightly or virile, masculine, and empowering. Body hair (other than on the head) is a sign of sexual maturity. In teen years, hair sprouts from the underarms, pubic areas, and men begin to grow facial and chest hair. Therefore, body hair is a rite of passage and fraught with sexual nuances.

As children, we are literally dressed by our parents. Either we are too young to physically manage the task, or as toddlers are prone to wearing outfits that don’t match or that are not appropriate for the weather. The issue of a child’s dress comes down to choice and power for the child. The same is true in regards to incest or abuse, a child is powerless to defend its tiny body and define mental boundaries. A child loses her power over her own body, power which is minimal to begin with. They are stripped of choices and are eventually dressed by shame, helplessness, and frustration. What springs forth and germinates within the confines of the child’s psyche can be grotesque.

In regards to this skirt, what is the hair about? Is this a type of "hair shirt" hair skirt? Is wearing it a way of paying penance for a sin someone else committed? Or a manifestation of her belief that she was the cause of the abuse? Is it about girls “who were taken sexually, before they were even conscious of sex, by their stepfathers, brothers, cousins, uncles, mothers and fathers (Ensler, xxxi)” Is the hair a legacy of abuse that was cast upon it by an adult? Or maybe a symptom of suffering (Miller 13)? Or is the hair about the impending and inevitable sexual maturity and its ramifications that most parents dread with their young girls? Is it a little girl unprepared for puberty and is hiding it? Does the hair belong to a young girl who might wear this skirt or was it left behind by an intruder? Is the hair appealing or is it alarming?

**The Wishbone Skirt**

This skirt is made from a soft very thin polyester fabric with a slight lace detail on the hem. It has the appearance of an undergarment. The size would be worn by a young girl of eight years of age. When lit from behind with a small battery back, a large handmade wishbone undulates through the fabric. The wishbone is smooth and oversized.
The skirt is positioned in a corner; the center hung a little higher than eye level, and is stationary. It is to be seen only from the front; therefore the battery pack had to be unobtrusive. I did not want the technical lighting components of this skirt to become an aesthetic issue, distraction, or curiosity. This is the only skirt that has no shadow, for it would have detracted from the internal glow. I wanted the light to appear unearthly and mysterious.

From a distance, the figure looks like a wishbone, and then looks like legs. Open legs. Small fragile legs. There is a stark contrast from the lightweight fabric to the stiffness of the "bone". Because the fabric shrouds the wishbone, it looks ghostly—and then the skirt itself looks like an apparition. The presentation allows the audience to literally see beyond the exterior of the surface of the fabric to the riddling imagery beneath.

The ritual and superstition surrounding the wishbone is very old. Two people take up the wishbone, an end is held and then both pull it apart while making a wish. It is postulated that the person with the longer piece of bone gets their wish fulfilled.

Essentially, the skirt is about wishing—an unspoken desire of the soul. The question is: "What is the wish?" I think there are many wishes.

The Scissors Skirt

This skirt was inspired by my childhood love of ornate sugar "diorama" eggs. About the size of an ostrich egg, they are fashioned of molded sugar, hollow, and decorated with piped frosting on the outside. When looked into, each egg had an Easter scene inside. Some had rabbits, others chicks and flowers. I loved the mystery these eggs held. The experience of touching the hard grainy exterior with all the bright colored frosting flowers and gazing into the interior was an enchanting experience for me.

Made of a heavy blood red silky satin fabric this skirt is proportioned for a grown woman. Slim and cylindrical at the waist, it billows into a full skirt that ripples upon its wire support. The waistline is hung a foot higher than eye level. It is not until one nears the skirt from five feet or less that a slit in the crotch area is discernible. It is an opening that glows—entreat ing the viewer to approach the skirt and peer inside. Due to the lighting and electrical cords, this skirt is relatively static, yet shudders when the viewer’s body nudge s it in the act of peering.
This skirt is lined internally with a thin scarlet slip that transmutes the white light to red. The effect is that of standing in a photographic dark room. Gazing into the hole, through the red lining, one can behold a suspended pair of polished, silver scissors, slightly opened, and glistening with reddish light.

The lighting for this skirt was a challenge, as I did not want the light fixture to be seen so the lighting was brought through the back and suspended deep within the skirt. The viewer is to see only the scissors, and at the same time, experience the vagina-like opening. The contrast of the luscious fabric, the beckoning orifice, and the hygienic medical feature of the scissors all produce a seductive and dynamic statement.

Associations with this piece are boundless. Red is analogous with stop signs, traffic lights, blood, menstruation, anger, love, lips, heat, and danger. Is, this small stitched opening truly a peephole? Perchance a vagina? Maybe it is a porthole that is to look outward? Can one only look into this opening? Is the act of looking inside the hole intimidating or invigorating?

Scissors are a simple machine designed to cut. They slice through material, string, paper, hair, and flesh. They are implements of construction and destruction. They are utilized in kitchens, classrooms, beauty salons, operating rooms, and fabric stores. There are scissors made especially for those who are left-handed. We are told not to run with them. Are the scissors within this skirt for medical purposes? And if so do they conjure ideas of hysterectomy? Rape? Abortion? Genital mutilation? Castration? Are the scissors a means of protection? Do they belong to the soul of this skirt who would use these scissors as a weapon against intruders or predators? Are they metallic appendages of the body...like opened legs?

Like looking into the egg, it is an intimate experience to gaze into this hole. There is a certain amount of anxiety, anticipation, and conjecture that flutters in the mind before actually taking that look. Will the result be horrifying, enlightening, pleasing or confusing? One eye is met with simple imagery that can translate into a host of conclusions.

The Communion Skirt

Approximately 10 feet tall, this skirt comprises a variety of fabrics. Stiff black and white cotton fabric constitutes the clergy collar, while black transparent organza comprises the preponderance of the skirt. This is the largest of all of the skirts, so huge that it looms in the
room like a giant. On the floor, encircled by the hem, is a goblet with a swatch of red organza to symbolize wine.

Technically, this skirt presented throngs of complications in every aspect of construction and execution. I studied the size and contour of a priest’s collar in order to replicate it exactly in a larger scale. Working with such a large section of delicate and slippery fabric like organza was cumbersome. My measurements had to be precise so that the skirt would be flawlessly cylindrical. Running the stabilizing wire through the top seam and hem so the skirt would hang perfectly level and not droop in either direction, was a critical maneuver. When suspended, the skirt hung with the hem barely skimming the floor.

Lighting required snooting one of the fixtures so a single beam of light would fall undeviatingly upon the goblet, illuminating it from above to lend it a celestial countenance. The organza fabric presented an additional dilemma due the sheen of the fabric. When lit too harshly, the fabric’s transparency is blocked by its reflective qualities. Moving the lights and positioning them painstakingly allowed the skirt to be seen, and seen through.

The mental connections individually to a priest’s collar, black feminine fabric, and the chalice filled with a red substance are quite obvious, but in this setting and in combination they encompass a larger context with more intricate ramifications.

Growing up Christian, I witnessed a very definitive division of labor within the church and a total inequality of power between men and women. Men were the priests, the mediator between God and us earthly mortals. Men were on the board of trustees, in the vestry, they were deacons, and their younger counterparts were altar boys. The women were the Sunday school teachers, brewed the coffee for the fellowship hour, and played the organ. As I sat in church, with my skirt smoothed over my thighs, I listened to Biblical anecdotes about Adam and his poor misguided and sinful companion, Eve. I heard about "the Father, Son and Holy Ghost" (I presumed the Holy Ghost was a male), I learned about how women were wives and mothers that did their husbands bidding. Never did it cross my mind as a young girl that God may not be male or to question why women’s roles in the church didn’t extend much beyond their duties at home.

Luckily my parents allowed me to do my own reasoning and choice making regarding religion so I do not possess an inordinate amount of "religious baggage". As a grown woman, I
have made my own determinations about spirituality and no longer conclude that God is a single sex. I approach religion as a buffet, I take what I like and leave the rest.

Unfortunately, I continue to view religion as a major hurdle for women. Author Kim Chernin in her book Reinventing Eve challenges why the Gnostic Gospels, Venus of Willendorf, Mother Nature, and a host of Goddesses have been almost completely erased from religious and conventional spiritual consciousness? Chernin asks the rhetorical question: Why has God been given the male gender assignment? She delves deep into her own experiences and realizes that first she must "dis-invent herself as a patriarchal female "to better confront this issue (15). By "dis-inventing" herself can she clear her vision to see the male system she has for so long accepted as truth, and begin to contest and disrupt it.

Another author, Marion Woodman, contemplates her encounters with Christianity and surveys how patriarchal and narrow her understanding of Christianity once was. She asks, what if "Christ might have had women and men in mind", challenging the male gender assignment of God and male domination in the current religious practices (42)? Personally I can’t help but agree. If Christ was a benevolent and righteous man wouldn’t all people be beheld equally in His eyes? Could not a woman who possesses the qualities of Eve, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the Virgin all be allowed into heaven, if men were permitted the same indulgences and were granted absolution for the asking?

I adore the bumper sticker that reads: "Eve was framed!" It is probably for the same reasons I was amused by Reinventing Eve. Chernin also explores the myth of Eve and unravels the conundrum of how religion (in general) became so male based. Since the Bible is essentially a collection of stories, she refutes many of the translations and is intensely critical of the recounting of Adam and Eve. She is of the opinion that Eve was a heroic figure, a woman who seized the apple to obtain knowledge and to nourish her body. Chernin proclaims Eve as a "rebel, [and] the first woman to challenge the subjugation of woman in the patriarchal garden" (xxiv). She also humorously recounts a Jewish folk tale that Adam’s last will and testament read: Don’t believe Eve’s version! (149). Why should a woman who acts upon her own thoughts and feeds herself be so despised and scapegoated?

The inequalities of sex roles within the church and the Bible have been under scrutiny by feminists for years. Betty Friedan wrote in The Feminine Mystique that religions indenture women to stereotypical roles by "the church’s dogmatic definition of marriage and motherhood"
because it is "enshrined in the canons of the religion" (351). In other words, a woman must follow the church’s rules because they are God’s rules. What a convenient way to subdue women. Julia Kristeva theorized that "patriarchal religions kept women bound to a patriarchal society" (Moi The Kristeva Reader 139) due in part to the Christian view of female sexuality as a sin. While virginity and marriage were holy and divine matters purely executed and upheld by the Virgin Mary (146). Friedan and Kristeva illustrate the belief that to be a "good" woman in The Church means suppressing her desires in order to conform to a patriarchal society. It is a sin (or darn close) for women to have a career; to enjoy her body sexually; to disobey or question her husband or The Church; and to embrace and pray to a female or unisex god.

A woman administering religious rites in the modern church is a new concept. "Women have a very brief tradition of participating in religious authority, and a very long one of submission to it" (Wolf The Beauty Myth 92). In many religions, women are physically separated from the men during worship. Feminizing the traditional male religious robes into a towering organza phallic skirt was an emancipating act for me, but alone it did not fully express my thoughts. The skirt without an additional element seemed more of a complaint than a statement.

Utilizing the chalice was a very natural decision. Working with the notion that skirts are vessels, I wanted to explore a vessel in its more literal form. The chalice, from the Latin meaning "blossomed shaped cup", has multidimensional and multifaceted meanings in this work. It is a vessel. Artist Susan King notes the goblet is akin to the womb, it is a fertile region for transformation and...wine turning to blood, her blood miracles (Fragments for a Body of Knowledge 1). Protected under her skirt, it is she who administers the contents of the cup and decides who to share it with.

Some of my earliest thoughts in regards to this skirt pertained to a nagging question I could not dismiss: Who can and cannot mediate, distribute, teach, and conduct religion...and why? This thought was directly correlated with the Christian act of Communion. I learned in church that Communion was eating of Jesus’ body and drinking His blood symbolically with bread and wine. It represented His ultimate sacrifice. Since that was about all I could remember about Communion, I turned to the book The Communion Rite at Sunday Mass written by Gabe Huck.
In relation to Jesus, the word "sacrifice" rang in my head. As I kept probing this issue, I began to make associations to the sacrifices women have made for their families and in the name of their culture. Gabe Huck defines "sacrifice" in relation to the Christian religion this way:

We must begin by acknowledging that, for those who follow Jesus, authentic sacrifice is not a matter of "someone else must die so that I can live". Sacrifice is rather the gift of my life for the life of the world. Sacrifice in the model Jesus proposes means "I spend myself so that others may live" (4).

It wasn’t a difficult jump to associate how women have sacrificed and "spent" themselves so that "others may live". "Christ’s body and blood are bound up in creation, in fruitfulness, in human work, in communal rejoicing, in redemption", promulgates Huck (37). Giving birth from our womb (the most sacred of all vessels), pouring out our blood during childbirth, nursing a child at our breast, are sacrifices a woman makes with her body to propagate the human species. Sacrificing time, energy, sleep, nourishment, and individual aspirations in order to provide succor to her family and society has been her devotional. Unable to vote, pursue a career, choose her own clothing, confined to the vocation of "gathering" and baby making, make choices about her own body, speak a discordant conviction are only a few crosses women have had to bear over the millenniums, yet there is no religious feast for her in her honor. Mother and Woman have drained out her blood to lubricate the gears of the patriarchal system, and are repaid with a “Hallmark Holiday” once a year on some Sunday in May?

The Pins and Needles Skirt

This medium sized skirt is for a teen or petite woman and suspended in the back left corner of the room. This is a yellow-cream rich satin and cotton blend fabric with a slight ribbed texture. From parts of the hem, a white slip modestly peeks out. From the deep recesses of the skirt emulates a phantasmal set of legs created by a pair of cream silk stockings. The feet of the stockings are laden with pins and needles that glisten in the light as they quiver with shifting air currents. The sharp metal pins weigh the stockings down. The pins and needles are the same silver of the hanger, which add an additional element of drama and sparkle. Anchored in a corner, with the hem at eye level, this skirt has relatively restricted movement.
The meticulous lighting makes the pins appear at times to look like metallic hair, and associations are made to the semblance of testicles, a sock full of nickels, and a medieval mace. The literal impression of "walking on pins and needles" is easy to read in this piece. For me, it is, in many ways the materialization of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*: "the discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform" (11).

For thousands of years women have had to walk through a world fabricated by men (Chernin xxv). Are women secondary animals due to being created from man, and from a "disposable part of his body", the rib (xxvii)? Women have worn restrictive hosiery and painful high heels to make our legs more appealing. Women of China have had their feet bound. Under the Taliban autocracy, women in Afghanistan have been forced to wear full body veils and not permitted (among other things) to wear shoes because they make too much noise when they walk. Women have limped on earth unable to vote, participate in religious duties, dictate their clothing, become educated and work at a profession that fulfills them, speak out against injustice, and to make choices about their own bodies. "Born into a patriarchal garden" women have lived under the regime of men and have had to conform accordingly or die (xxix).

Eve Ensler writes, "When you rape, beat, maim, mutilate, burn, bury and terrorize women, you destroy the essential life energy on the planet. You force what is meant to be open, trusting, nurturing, creative, and alive to be bent, infertile, and broken (*Vagina Monologues* xxxii)".

The *Vagina Monologues*, written and performed by Eve Ensler is a testament to women so monstrously traumatized by rape, sexual abuse, and cultural taboos (with respect to feminine sexuality) that most women are completely out of touch with their bodies, particularly their vaginas. We know all too well about the penis and the constructs of the male arousal and gaze. Phallic symbols litter our nation's capitol and cemeteries. Bob Dole and other male celebrities proclaim the wonders of Viagra® so man will never again be flaccid. However, there is no such medication for women's sexual fulfillment. Freud's theory of penis envy is widely known and often referred to. Men sew their "wild oats" and masturbate while women stay home and believe either that they "can't" or "mustn't"?

The saga of John Wayne Bobbitt's penis sliced off and hurled into a cornfield by his estranged wife made national news for weeks. Was it not somewhat jocular and infuriating to
think of law enforcement and rescue workers sweeping that field looking for his dismembered member? Tax dollars hard at work, it seemed. And, did not the patriarchal world sigh a collective breath when we learned that it was located, reattached, and is once again fully functional? Thank God he did not loose his penis forever!

"To live in a culture in which women are routinely naked where men aren’t is to learn inequality in little ways all day long", writes Naomi Wolf in The Beauty Myth. (11). Female nudity in films is considered commonplace, but remember the stir Harvey Keitel’s two seconds of full frontal nudity caused with his role in The Piano? As a woman photographer and artist, I am tired of seeing print after print of nude women that are called "art". I remember emotionally applauding the work of Robert Mapplethorpe because of his portrayal of nude men in his photographs. Being a liberal thinker, I can pry my mind slightly open to understand why SOME of his work was subject to controversy, but I think much of the brouhaha had to do with male nudity and homosexuality, subjects the mainstream male gaze finds unpleasant. Frankly, I have had enough of nude women = art.

Anne Wilson Schaef wrote an interesting book entitled Women’s Reality: An Emerging Female System in a White Male Society. She analyzes the roots and underpinnings of our patriarchal American culture and the ramifications it has had upon women (and non-white men also). She states,

It is very difficult to stand back from the White Male System because it is everywhere in our culture...It is our culture. We all live in it. We have been educationally, politically, economically, philosophically, and theologically trained in it, and our emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual survival have depended on our knowing and supporting the system (11).

Contemporary thinkers, writers, and activists like Schaef, Friedan, and Steinam have only begun to scratch the surface—but thankfully the surface has been penetrated. Women have been "bucking" the male system for years, some loudly and in the spotlight, while others teach by example gender equality and feminism in their daily lives. The struggle for equality is not over, and in some cases has barely begun. Women continue to earn less than their male counterparts, women still have yet to hold high political offices like Speaker of the House,
Vice President, or President of the United States, and the domain of a woman’s right to make choices about her life and body are still not hers alone. However, it is my belief that today I am responsible for making changes in my life, for embracing and vocalizing my beliefs, to take a stand against injustices, and for choosing how I want to be a woman. I can elect to walk on "pins and needles" or I can opt to walk loudly and carry a big stick.

The pins and needles, what do they say to you?

*When a woman seriously asks herself what it means to be a woman
she is pulling at a thread that can unravel an entire culture.*

*Kim Chernin, Reinventing Eve.*

### The Zipper Skirt

This is a very substantial skirt—one made for the divine, ethereal woman—a spiritual garment. This skirt is suspended high in the right corner of the room. It is to be viewed only from the front and underneath, and is granted very little movement. Sewn from a sensual satin fabric in pink, it solicits touch. The waist gives way to an ample skirt, replete with folds and ripples of luxuriant material. The sweeping hem of this voluptuous garment is trimmed with cotton and silk scroll appliqué. The undermost section reveals an immense skin toned closed zipper that runs the diameter of the opening from where the legs should protrude. It is only upon closer inspection that the zipper can only be accessed from the interior of the skirt.

The interlocking "teeth" of the zipper permit no access from the outside world without the inhabitant’s permission. There is no way to unzip it without being inside the skirt. Only selective entrance is sanctioned. The skirt has folds of fabric, folds of skin, with an impenetrable vagina.

The pink, to me, is the color of skin, the flesh and membrane of the labia and vagina—sacred territories of a woman’s anatomy. The great folds of fabric that attach to the zipper also make this association even more pronounced. Pink also has long been affiliated and relegated to the female being, and with this particular skirt, I wanted to use this to my advantage. I created a skirt for a woman, a powerful woman—aware of all the implications of being female.
I am troubled over women having their wombs removed. I have read how our bodies contain stories. If their wombs are removed, does that mean they can't remember certain things, or does the ghost of memory live like the ghost of an arm or leg which has been amputated?

Shelly Hoyt, *Fragments for a Body of Knowledge.*

I too am troubled about the high number of unnecessary surgeries performed annually on the female reproductive system. The term "hysterectomy" is derived from a time when doctors believed that by performing this surgery it would cure a woman of her "hysteria." Hysteria defined in the Victorian Era meant acting unladylike, acknowledging and acting upon her sexual drive, and/or being unfulfilled as a homemaker and wife. Basically any emotion, thought, action or tendency opposing the patriarchal cosmos could be diagnosed as "hysteria" and her precious ovaries and uterus were in serious peril. I raise the topic of female circumcision here because it is another form of violence guised as a necessary function of medicine and/or culture. The zipper in this skirt in many ways acts dually in regard to both issues. It is a way to mediate who and when and for what purpose the opening is entered. Opening the zipper is about choice, empowerment, and knowledge. The zipper can also function as a scar, a testament and legacy of the body being sliced open, the necessary parts removed and then sewn back up.

This skirt is for women who comprehend the essentiality of personal space, and understands the need to find a place to retreat from the world and its demands. An intimate fabric womb in which to regenerate, cogitate, grow, meditate and repose in. A domain where perhaps she can revel and rejoice in her "femaleness" and her sexuality, without shame or retribution. A cocoon from which she can emerge more powerful, with deeper insight as to who she is and what she needs, and perhaps with a pair of wings. The inside zipper is only for her to use, for only she can open it. Perhaps, like a butterfly, she will shed this garment upon the completion of her metamorphosis.

**The Toothpick Skirt**

 Constructed of a flesh-toned polyester mesh fabric and toothpicks, this skirt is deliberately sized and patterned for no woman. It is approximately 5 feet tall and roughly 7 inches in diameter. Toothpicks comprise the trim of the hemline, and a few toothpicks randomly pierce the skirt. There is no front and no back to this skirt which is suspended so the viewer can walk all the way around it. This is one of the few skirts that spins 360 degrees, and does so from
the air currents in the room. It is lit from several angles, casting the prominent shadow upon the floor which looks harsh and thorny.

This is a modern day corset. Similar to the Wishbone Skirt I used a filmy translucent fabric. The tone of the material emulates skin—through which moisture, air, and light pass. The effect is a luminescent garment that seems to breathe, while pulsating tentatively in the room. It has the appearance of vacuous sausage casing or a contrived penis with woody pubic hair.

The crux of this skirt is a woman’s body image and body size. It is unmistakably exaggerated in height and width, and the diaphanous fabric adds an additional element of “barely there”. Historically, women’s bodies have seldom been appreciated for their natural splendor and shape. Corsets, girdles, crinoline, bras, stockings, high heels, and bustles have been used to revise the woman’s figure. "My sexuality has been organized by Hollywood movies and Madison Avenue advertising campaigns", notes Kim Chernin (15). Women’s and girl’s bodies have become battlegrounds.

Plastic surgery is now becoming a rite of passage with women turning to plastic surgery in droves to transform themselves into a culturally imposed normative body. Western women are mocking the course of aging and opting for facelifts, Botox® and collagen injections, liposuction, while young girls are undergoing breast implants and nose jobs. Body parts are surveyed critically and compared to other women, mostly those airbrushed in fashion magazines. Seemingly “perfect” women are remedied routinely by a nip here and a tuck there. Plastic surgery frequently goes awry, imparting scars rather than precision, and is many times lethal. Dying to be beautiful takes on a new meaning.

Even more troubling is the upsurge of anorexia and bulimia among women of all ages. The body has become a central issue to young girls, a war zone, and an obsession. "American girls now make the body their central project and is not an accident or a curiosity: it is a symptom of historical changes" (Brumberg The Body Project xxvii). Scientific medicine, marketing of diet foods, movies, advertising, and society’s emphasis on physical instead of spiritual matters is making our young girls sicker (xix). Fashion models are getting thinner every season, and clothing sizes are getting smaller too--there new a demand for size zero. Clothing for young girls reveals more skin than ever with tight midriff shirts and low rise jeans, increasing additional pressure to be thin. Defined abs and tight buns are achievable through
compulsive exercise and paltry caloric intake. Girls are being socialized to revile their bodies and our adult American culture enables and fosters it.

Barbie® has betrayed us too. Women have long been viewed as mannequins or dolls to be dressed, changed, and posed. Naomi Wolf, author of Promiscuities says of Barbie: “Her posture showed us that being sexual meant being immobile. It meant: walk on your toes, bust out, limbs rigid...Barbie is designed to appeal to girls’ fascination with what the culture considers to be appropriate female sexuality” (14) and I would add, appropriate body proportions. Normative icons of beauty, like Barbie and Kate Moss are, by example, killing and crippling American girls.

This skirt is a protest.

The Bandage Skirt

This is the only skirt not made of clothing fabric, instead it is constructed of square medical gauze bandages. The bandages are stitched together with waxed thread for medical stitches using a sutchering knot. This garment is sized to be worn by a teen or grown woman. It is situated in the gallery so the exterior of the skirt is accentuated, and is fully accessible to circumnavigate. It is lit from several angles to emphasize the texture of the bandages and the stitching. Looking unfinished, there are patches missing from the front of the skirt, and a needle with a long length of sutchering thread pierces the center of one of the squares.

This is probably the most straightforward of all the skirts. The materials themselves are readily discernible and correspond to absorption of blood and the covering and healing of lacerations. From an initial glance, the viewer can witness the amount of physical labor that had transpired to create every perfectly rendered and equidistant stitch. This process of meditative and deliberate strokes make up a medical patchwork. It is essentially a meditation on pain.

There are a multitude of wounds and a host of vehicles to deliver them. Slashes from a sharp knife, bruising from a punch, genitalia harmed from rape or circumcision, broken bones from a fall or a beating, self-mutilation with a razor blade, amputation due to an irreversible physical trauma are all examples of physical injuries. However, years of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse; addiction; divorce; death of a loved one; and miscarriage are only a handful of emotional wounds. Each wound requires a different panacea.
The initial query concerning this bandage skirt might be whether the wound is physical or emotional. Is this a gaping wound that pulsates with pain down below the skin that effects the soul and spirit? Artist Dolores Zorriegueta beseeches these same questions with her 1996 dress entitled, Wardrobe for a Wounded Woman made from Band-Aids® and fake blood. In a performance she would wear the dress and challenge the audience with the notion that "you wouldn’t know if the wound I’m referring to is emotional, or if I am really talking about abuse and violence and social struggle" (Berwick 167). Clothing covers the body, bandages cover wounds, but what covers pain?

In essence, this work to me is visible soul suturing. Since the soul is invisible, this work makes the process of emotional healing, visible and physical. It is both inflexive and reflexive—internal and external. A weaving of two processes that melds into one simultaneously. One may enter into the body to surgically repair damage that is beneath the epidermis, but the soul has no such boundary. Like a surgeon who knows where to perform an operation, so is the same of those who have soul wounds. We know precisely where the soul wound lies, what it feels like, and its cause. It is not contagious and it is not easily healed. The emotional wound may manifest itself also into physical symptoms like ripping at the wrist with a razor, an ulcer, or fingernails bitten to the quick.

Like bed rest and recuperation post-operatively, the soul undergoes a comparable healing process. The emotional pain is akin to feeling the pain of a physical wound, and is often somatized into the body. There is a choice to be made: either to treat the pain or ignore it. When the decision is made to confront the wound, a conflicting amalgam of relief and dread is present. The recovery process of the soul may take the form of sobbing, fury, bitterness, fits of savage emotion swinging both manic and depressive...but it is healing. It is not as observable as a cut mending or reduced swelling. One can begin to know a mitigation of distress, that where there once was a persistent whirl of frenetic energy is now assuaged and salved by truth. This type of ameliorating requires hope, support, and belief that there will be a catharsis that makes the entire undertaking and its pain worthwhile.

Kiki Smith says that her work The Dowry Cloth was "the transformation of energy into the material, its connection with love of the physical and with giving substance to one’s reality...[it] is a way of creating [a] physical manifestation" (The Dowry Book 1). This skirt is
surely a transformation of my blood, sweat, and tears. My wounds and my healing intermingle in the fibers of this skirt.
Reactions to the Artwork

I provided a book for people to write their reactions to my work. I found this feedback frank, amusing, and interesting—and felt it was important to include with this paper.

"Somewhere between the Ankle and the Soul dwells the mystery of life. I see your colors, fabrics, movement, lights, subtleties and changes as attempts to define and understand the mysteries of life."

"Your hangers and hangings thrill me."

"Huh? Signed, A Guy."

"It is awesome to see your work progress from an idea in your head to an incredible room of mystery and calm and wonder and it's thought provoking...each piece a cultural statement."

"Beautiful images—almost a metaphysical feeling."

"Incredibly moving work that needs to be experienced over and over to let it all sink in."

"Although I do not know you, I feel a close kinship with you. The skirts are life...living and breathing beings."

"A manifesto. A bold statement of painful truths. A courageous show."

"Although I don't get it, I appreciate your work and attention to detail."
"You are setting men up with satín stimulus."

"These are fabric ghosts."

"Confusing...but certainly interesting."

"I wouldn’t want to meet the women who would wear these skirts."

"Both dreamy and nightmarish."

"Luscious and tactile. I like when I can touch the art."

"These speak to me of desire...inaccessible desire."

"These skirts simultaneously charm and repel me."

"I appreciate your sharing your deep self with me. I have so many thoughts about this work, I will need to take some time to digest and understand them."

"They remind me of lamp shades."

"I’m not sure I totally understand what you are trying to tell me with your art, yet I do have a few ideas. That is unimportant. What is important is that you do speak thru your work."
After Much Ado: Finally Writing the Thesis

I really planned to have my thesis written and defended prior to leaving Rochester, New York. I truly did. I did not want to move away and have it hanging over my head. I wanted to close this chapter in my life and leave R.I.T. triumphantly without having to return. Unfortunately, my plans changed when I was diagnosed with an illness in June of 1998. I did make several attempts to drag my sick and weary body to the computer that summer, but I just could not do it. As fever and weakness waxed and waned that summer, I had some tough decisions to make. My lease would soon expire and I had to make a plan.

Without my written thesis completed (or even started for that matter), I moved to a small Virginia town just outside of Washington, DC. After several months of convalescing and regrouping, I took a position in Washington. Commuting everyday, adjusting to my new environment, and enjoying post-graduate school life, my thesis became less and less of a priority. I thought about it occasionally, and hated writing "thesis pending" on my resume, yet still it remained undone.

In October 1999, I got engaged and had a wedding to plan for the following October. My thesis suddenly had no place in my life. I kept thinking I would get around to it, but still the books stayed closed and I spiraled deeper into my wedding planning. Occasionally, the topic of my thesis would arise, usually prompted by my soon-to-be husband, my friends, or my parents, and I would quickly change the subject. I promised myself I would write it right after the wedding.

The wedding came and went and after many moves all across the country, I could no longer stand the weight of my conscience or my husband’s unrelenting badgering. This thesis became the bane of my existence. I had dragged a box of books, slides, receipts, note cards, and papers that remained unopened for far too long.

After September 11th 2001, my husband and I moved to Florida to heal and regroup from the repercussions of that fateful day. While there, I was not working and had exhausted all excuses to delay my paper any longer. So, mustering all my might and ignoring the beaches and bright sunshine, I set about writing the paper. First, I finally opened and sorted through my "thesis box". I retrieved data and sources I had completely forgotten about. The box turned out to be a treasure trove of ideas and notations I had kept throughout the creation process. Much to my surprise, I had already formulated a working bibliography, a rough outline, and enough
preliminary information to begin the paper. It took a few hours to organize, but reading through the information gave me all I needed to begin a new outline.

Like I mentioned in the beginning of this paper, I was troubled with what strategy I wanted to use to write the thesis. What was the tone I wanted to set? How did I want to address my artwork? How was I going to cover all my ideas? The more questions I asked myself, the longer it took me to get to the computer. Once I started the outline and began the inaugural poundings on the keyboard, the paper seemed to surge out of me. I wrote and revised. I wrote and erased. I wrote and shifted paragraphs, ideas, and topics. I wrote and rested. Yet still, I continued to write. The fewer distractions I had (real or imagined), the more headway I made. After several months and several drafts, I began to detect the conclusion was within reach. One last proofread solidified that notion.

Having finally completed my M.F.A. thesis, I now feel like I can move on with my life. I know it sounds strange, but having procrastinated on this thesis really was a burden to bear. There is much that life presents that I can only manage with acceptance and an attitude of tenacity. As I look back, I realize this thesis was one of the few burdens in life I really could do something about.
Life Imitates Art...My Final Thoughts

The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find out way back to the deepest springs of life.

C. G. Jung

Although I was procrastinating writing my thesis, I found myself living part of my thesis on my wedding day. Beneath my gown of satin and pearls and layers of crinoline, I wore a something beneath my skirt. An hour before the wedding ceremony, my family presented to me a silver charm tied to a blue satin ribbon. Without thinking, I attached the charm between the layers of the crinoline with a safety pin. The charm and the ribbon dangled about five inches.

Pinning it deep within my skirt, I immediately thought about my thesis. While most American brides wear a garter belt (don’t even get me started on that), I felt I had a unique treasure. I felt liberated having it there; to me it was like a secret. As I look back, it reminded me something of a fishing lure—a string attached to a shiny piece of silver metal that I hooked into the fabric.

It’s rather ironic I likened it to a fishing lure, as most of my life I felt "hooked" into my family—be it dysfunction, hurts, memories, my role as a middle child, as well as the lingering nuances of old fashioned, stifling, and stereotyped feminine ideals. What I kept in the forefront of my mind while planning our wedding were deliberate choices about what the ceremony, marriage, and being a wife would mean for me. I made conscious choices and conscious omissions about what would transpire on that day, and in my life as a married woman. I chose to wear a traditional dress and a veil, but not over my face. Both of my parents walked me down the aisle, but they did not "give me away". We favored a relatively traditional service, though I did not use the word "obey" in our wedding vows.

What I did that day that was monumental for me. I was starting a new family that obliterated traditional female and male roles that I had matured in the shadows of. This new union would pave the way for a life that puts an end to violence, unnecessary pain, secrets, addiction, and the cycle of torment that had been so familiar to me as a young girl and a growing woman.
"The hook" in my dress was a metaphor of what I wanted to leave behind as a single woman—along with my maiden name—on my wedding day. As much as I love my family (and yes, I sometimes view them as a unit instead of individuals), I needed to formally "unhook" from so much of what I have been indoctrinated with. Being a wife did not have to mean I had to cook, clean, and keep house like my grandmothers. I could be a wife unlike my mother or the “mothers” I saw on television. It did not mean my voice was to be stifled. A wife did not have to mean lying flat on a bed being submissive. What I wanted on my wedding day was to feel deeply the rite of passage, of leaving my family and all its webs and trappings behind, and beginning anew.

My cream colored wedding dress functioned as a narrative vessel that October day. This dress, with me in it, symbolically carried so much to the altar, and with the words "I do", I dumped its contents of 31 years.

The charm I keep not only as a memento, but also as a reminder to live consciously, be truly alive, make life enhancing choices, challenge old messages, and to never ever subsist as a mindless, choiceless robot.

That charm attached to my gown, functioned on many levels--and I DID wear it somewhere between my ankle and my soul...

Today I keep this charm in the same drawer that I keep that little dress I once wore. They keep one another company.
Bibliography


Appendix

Announcement Card
Press Releases (2 versions)
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Studio B-324 Floor Plan
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Thesis Defense Poster
Slides of the Exhibition
BETWEEN THE ANKLE & THE SOUL
Christine Lisa Carlson

LANDING
Rachel Smith

Two MFA Thesis Exhibitions
May 7 - 28, 1999
Opening Reception: Friday, May 7th  6-8 pm

Studio B324
Village Gate Square
274 N. Goodman Street
Rochester, New York  14607

Gallery Hours: Thursday-Saturday  1:00 to 5:00 pm or by appointment (716) 473-0103
Christine Lisa Carlson
Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition

Christine Lisa Carlson, long time Ridgefield resident and Master of Fine Art Candidate in the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences at Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY will be presenting her thesis show. Entitled *Between the Ankle and the Soul*, this work is an installation of fabric skirt form that function as narrative objects. These feminine “vessels” address a variety of issues relating to the female domain and body politic.

The opening reception is May 7th from 6-8 p.m. at Studio b-324 in the Artist’s Loop at Village Gate Square, 274 North Goodman Street, Rochester, NY 14607. For further information call (716) 555-5555. The exhibition runs until May 28, 1999. Gallery hours are Thursday through Saturday 1-5 p.m. or by appointment.

Along with Ms. Carlson, colleague Rachel Smith will be exhibiting her thesis, *Landing*. 
Christine Carlson and Rachel Smith:
Two Master of Fine Art Thesis Exhibitions
May 7 - 28, 1999

WHAT:

Between the Ankle and the Soul by Christine Carlson; an installation of fabric skirt forms that function as narrative objects. These feminine “vessels” address a variety of issues relating to the female domain and body politic. Landing, by Rachel Smith; a fabricated “landscape” utilizing video, sound, light, and mapping to explore the links between the inner and outer self. The work is a personal journey traversing the boundaries of memory, space, and materiality to reveal the unified and fragmented relationships between place and experience.

Rachel Smith and Christine Carlson are Master of Fine Arts Candidates in the School of Arts and Sciences at Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, NY.

WHEN:

Opening Reception: May 7, 1999 from 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition Dates: May 7 - 28, 1999
Gallery Hours: Thursday – Saturday, 1-5 p.m. or by appointment

WHERE:

Studio B324 in the Artist’s Loop, Village Gate Square
274 North Goodman Street
Rochester, NY 14607

INFORMATION:

For additional information or to make an appointment call 716-555-5555
CALL FOR WORK, GRANTS AVAILABLE

Arts and Cultural Council for Greater Rochester, Arts Council, 277 N Goodman St, Rochester 14607 (473-4000): To commission Art Awards, may be poem, musical composition or visual art; edition of six; expenses and fees must not exceed $3000; proposals must be received by noon, Fri May 7. Special Opportunity Stipends available for artists in the Genesee Valley/Finger Lakes region, $50-$500; send SASE for application, deadline is May 21.

Memorial Art Gallery, 500 University Ave (473-7720 x3021): T-shirt Designer for the Gallery's annual Clothesline Festival, submit portfolios by May 10.

OPENING

Arts Council for Wyoming County, 315 Main St, Perry (237-3517): "Haven," paintings by Jane Notides-Benzing, sculptures by Sandra Cain, fibers by Mary Ann Scarborourgh, May 7-June 25. Opening: 3-5 p.m., Sun May 9. Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Mon-Fri.

Cool Arts @ the Gallery, 12 East Main St, Corning (607-962-1212): "Pangs," hot glass work by Jack Wax, May 6-June 12. Opening: 5:30-8 p.m., Fri May 14.

1570 Gallery, Valley Manor Apartments, 1570 East Ave (642-8470): "Sutherland at the 1570," Pittsford Sutherland Advanced Art Students Show, May 7-28. Opening: 7-9 p.m., Fri May 7. Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Mon-Fri, or by appt.

Genesee Country Village & Museum, John L. Wehle Gallery of Sporting Art, 1440 Flint Hill Rd, Mumford (538-6822): Interpretive wildlife wood carvings by John T. Sharp, May 8-June 20. Hours: 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Tues-Fri, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., weekends and holidays. Adm: $2.50 adults; $2 seniors/students; $1.50 age 4-16.

Irondequoit Art Club Spring Show

Mary Kay Colling Gallery, Village Gate Square, 274 N Goodman St (442-8946): "Eight Anniversary Show: The Somerset Studio Collection," through May 31. Hours: 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Wed-Sat or by appointment.

More Fire Glass Studio, 80 Rockwood Place (242-0450): Open House, demos, noon-4 p.m., Sat May 8.

171 Cedar Arts Center, 171 Cedar St, Corning (607-936-6647): "Treasures from the Ceramics Collection of Lee Baldwin," May 5-July 1. Opening: 5-7:30 p.m., Wed May 5, 10 a.m.-7 p.m., Mon-Thurs, 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Fri-Sat.

Roselawn Gallery, 7 Schoen Pl, Pittsford (586-5441): "Painting in Provence & Touring in Tuscany," watercolors by Barbara Ford and Jeanette Musliner, May 6-June 5. Opening: 6-8 p.m., Thurs May 6. 10:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Mon-Sat.

Studio B324, Artist's Loop, Village Gate Square, 274 N Goodman St (256-3523): "Landing," fabricated multimedia landscape by Rachel Smith, "Between the Ankle and the Soul," installation by Christine Lisa Carlson, May 7-28. Opening: 6-8 p.m., Fri May 7. 1-5 p.m., Thurs-Sat; or by appt.
Fabric skirt forms

Christine Lisa Carlson, a longtime Ridgefielder and a master of fine arts candidate in the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences at Rochester Institute of Technology, will be presenting her thesis show entitled “Between the Ankle and the Soul,” an installation of fabric skirt forms that function as narrative objects.

“These feminine 'vessels' address a variety of issues relating to the female domain and body politic,” Ms. Carlson said.

The opening reception is May 7 from 6 to 8 p.m. at Studio B324 in the Artist’s Loop at Village Gate Square, 274 N. Goodman Street, Rochester, NY 14607. For more information call 716-256-3523. The exhibition runs until May 28 Thursdays through Saturdays 1 to 5 or by appointment.
Between the Ankle & the Soul

She wears veils to cover her body, not in shame, but in order to contain and contemplate her inner mysteries.

Marion Woodman

Clothing is more than sewn fabrics that cover nakedness or serve as protection from the elements. Clothing has a history, an evolution, is culturally and class codified, as well as replete with mythological meaning.

These garments operate as narrative vehicles. Without the physical form present, the skirt becomes transformed into a stage and a body itself, exploring intimate female dialogues.

- Christine Lisa Carlson

May 1999
My heartfelt gratitude to the following people who have helped this show come to fruition:

Susan, Erik, Betsey, and Julie Carlson, my family

Afshild Carlson, my paternal grandmother

Rachel Smith

Sean Beirne

Sangdal Lee

Angela Kelly

Erika Gentry

Sarah Herzog

Sarah Webb

Gary Stern and Staff

The collective wisdom of Fabrics and Findings & Jo Ann Fabrics

...and finally, my special appreciation to my thesis committee

Elliott Rubenstein

Patti Ambrogi

Lynne Bentley-Kemp
Rochester Institute of Technology
School of Photographic Arts & Sciences -- Masters of Fine Art

Intent to Exhibit Form

As a member of her thesis committee, I approve Christine Lisa Carlson ( ) to exhibit her MFA Thesis "Between the Ankle and the Soul".

The show will be held off the Rochester Institute of Technology campus at Studio B-324, Village Gate Square, 274 Goodman Street, Rochester, NY 14607 from May 7th to May 28, 1999. The opening will be May 7th from 6:00 to 8:00 pm (along with Rachel Smith's MFA show "Landing"). The gallery hours will be Thursdays through Saturdays 1:00 to 5:00 pm.

Signed,

Patti Ambrogi

Lynne Bentley-Kemp

Elliott Rubenstei - chair

Christine Lisa Carlson

date

4/13/99

4/16/99

4/15/99

4/13/99

CC: Angela Kelly
Village Gate Studio B-324
Floor Plan

North

Rachel's Studio

"Landing"

unused window

main entrance

unused door

Reception Room

window

My Studio

"Between the Ankle and the Soul"

unused window and door

unused window
MFA THESIS DEFENSE

“Between the Ankle and the Soul”
An Installation of Feminine Narrative Vessels
Presented by Christine Carlson

Tuesday, October 22nd 2002
Room 2070
2:00 to 3:00 p.m.