

National College of Art & Design

Department of Design

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Paintings that Speak:

Why do Marginalised Artists Frequently Combine Image and Text to Create  
Semi-autobiographical Works of Art?

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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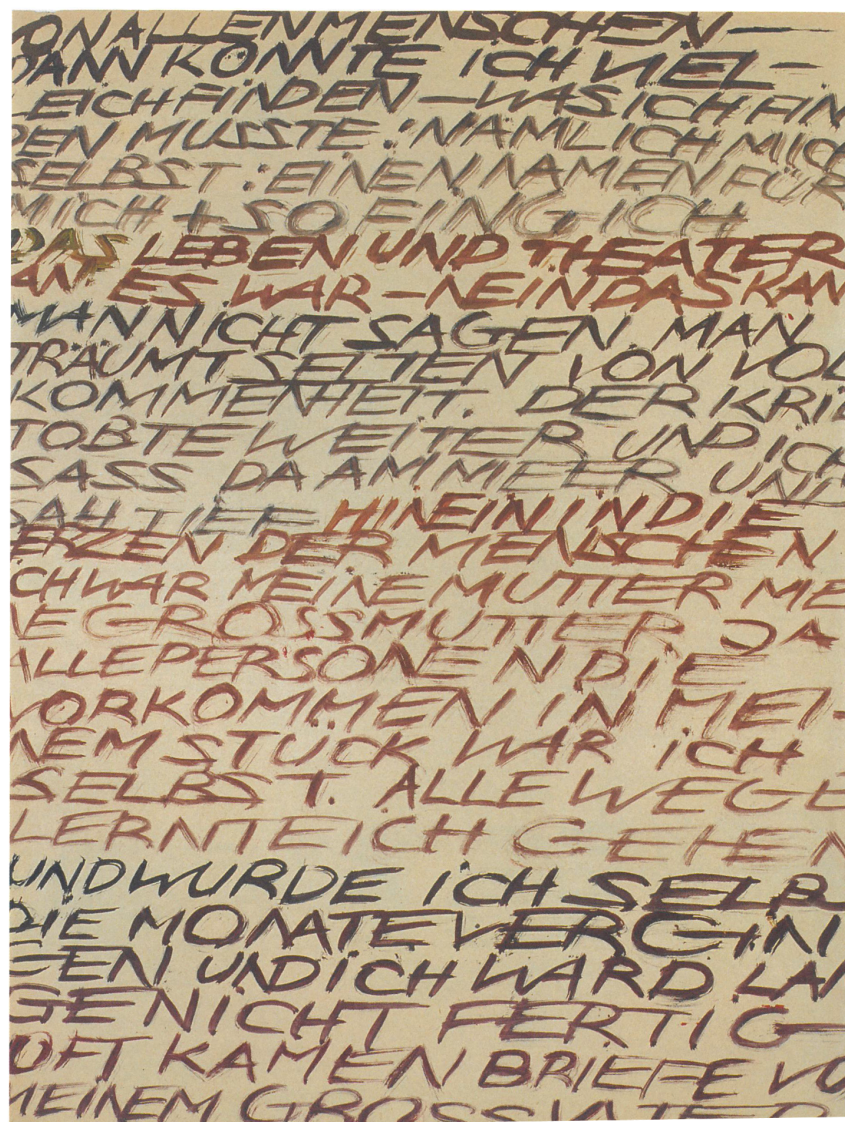




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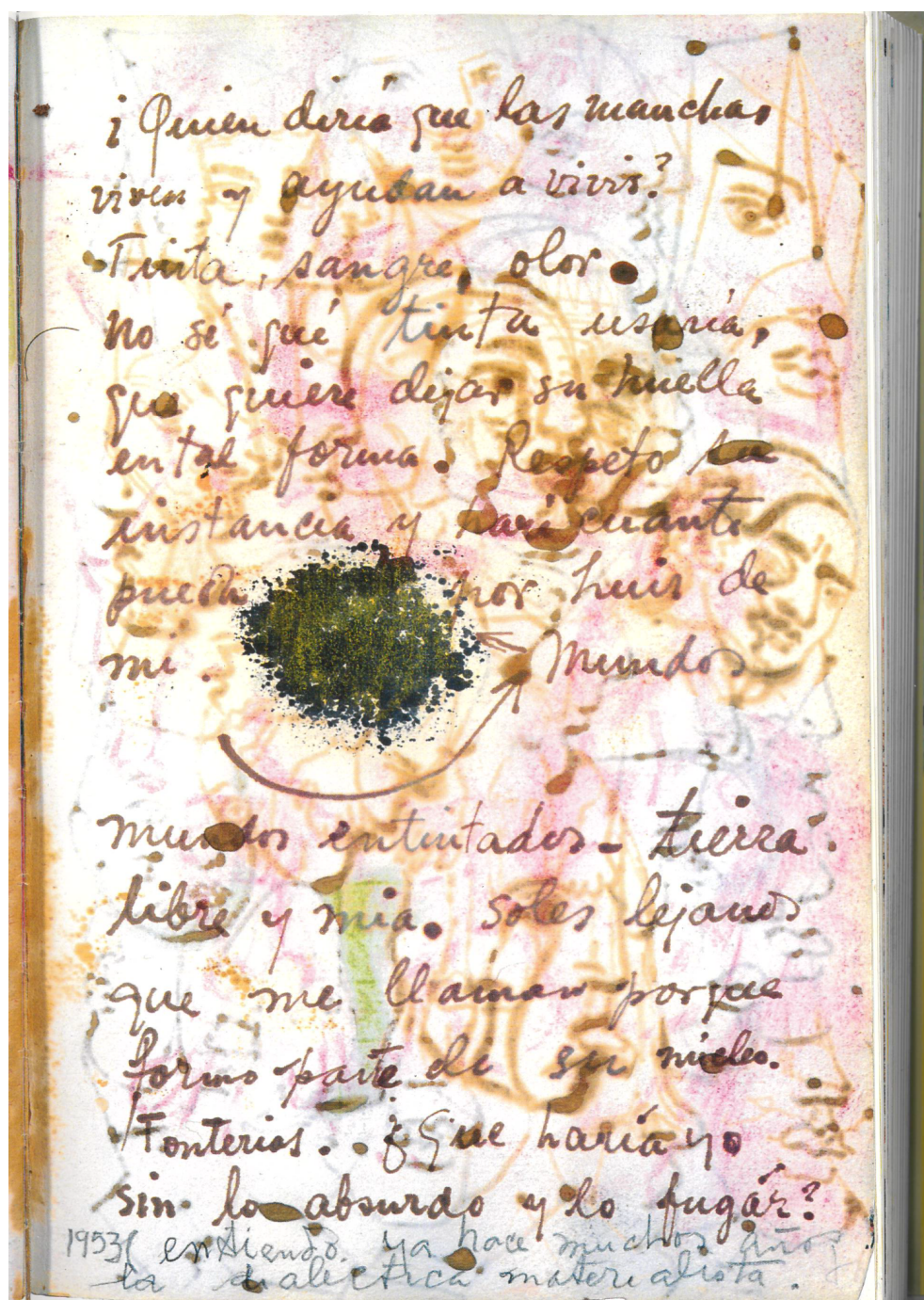




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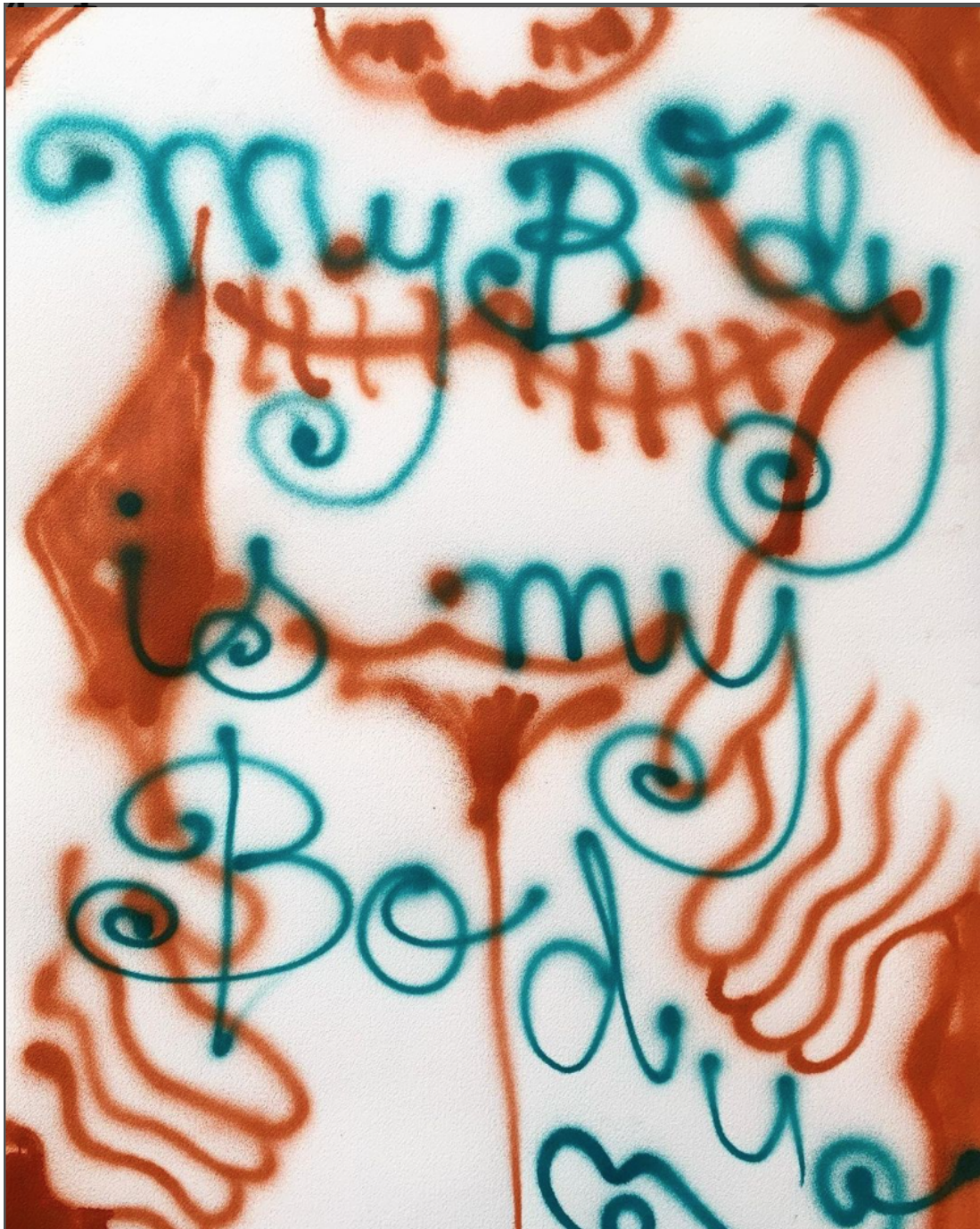
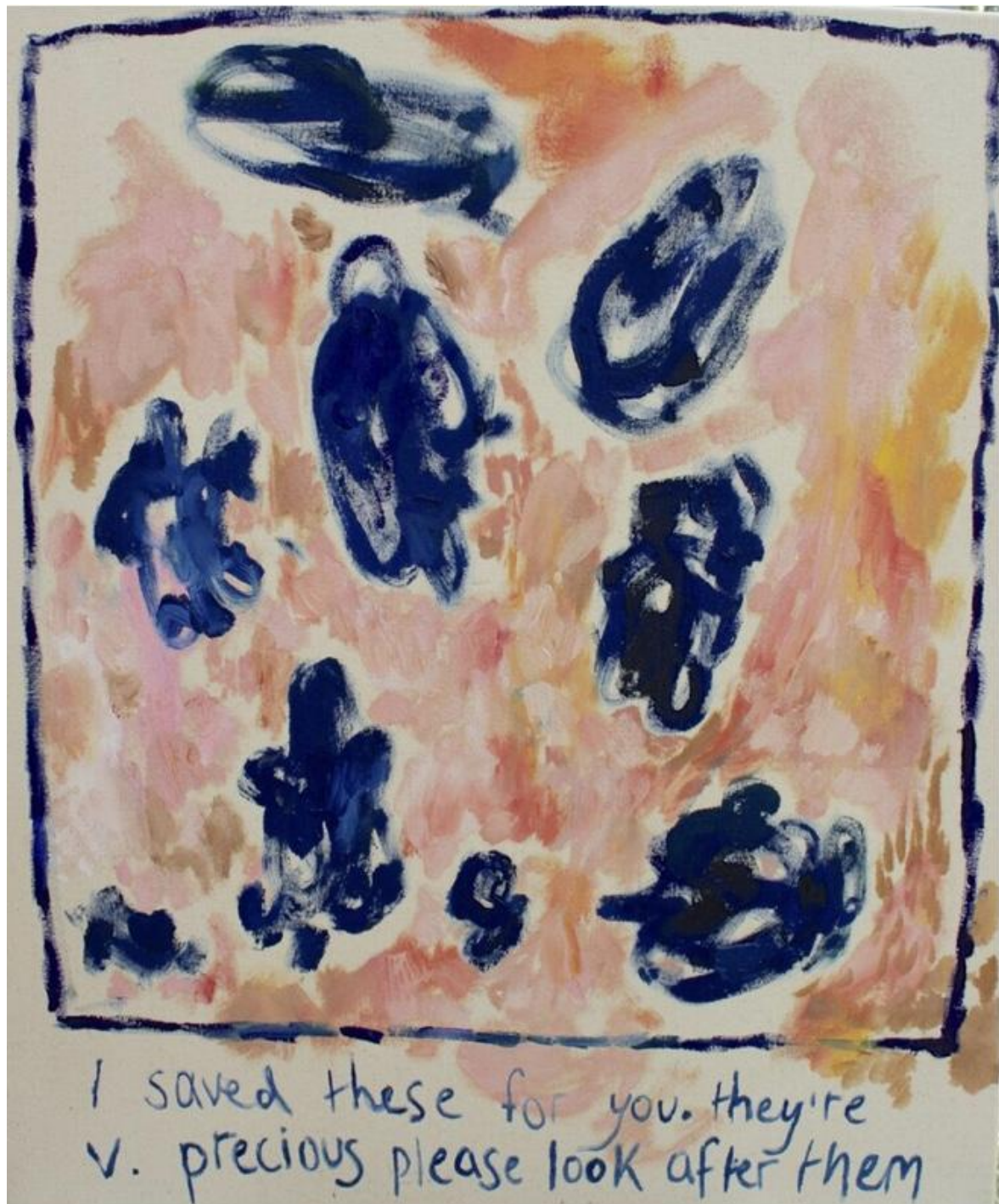




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## **Introduction**

Charlotte Salomon's *Leben? Oder Theatre?*, Frida Kahlo's diary, and Hollis Sigler's *Breast Cancer Journal*. These are semi-autobiographical works of art by marginalised female artists which incorporate both text and image. They are sophisticated artistic interpretations of the internal lives of the artists who made them. These artworks all employ a faux-naïf, expressive artistic style. This essay will examine the works of Salomon, Kahlo and Sigler to investigate why marginalised artists are drawn to appropriating literary forms to create artworks which speak to the inner lives and feelings of the artists. It will outline how these artists pioneered an undiscovered avenue of artistic and literary expression, opposing the traditional conventions of the academic art world, to create a new mode of expression which would accommodate their marginalised experiences. Finally this essay will investigate why this mode of expression has persevered and developed into a popular art practice among online, contemporary artists of marginalised identities who also combine fragmented semi-autobiographical text with expressive imagery, using the case study of Phoebe Kelly-McDonnell.

## **Chapter One (i) : Unveiling The Interior Life**

Salomon, Kahlo and Sigler's artworks all emerge from the artists' desire to give voice to their internal lives and, in the case of Salomon and Sigler, through this self-expression to empower other women. Specifically women whose womanhood intersects with the marginalised identities of the artists; Jewish women and terminally ill women. Toni Morrison discusses the impulse she felt to express her interior life as

a black woman, which was prompted by her examination of the slave narratives of the 19th century,

But most importantly - at least for me - there was no mention of their interior life. For me...a writer who is black and a woman...My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate." The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. (1995, p.91)

Crucial to any self-representational artist from a marginalized group is the imperative to speak about the realities of their inner lives, realities which are often dismissed by the oppressing power. As Linda Anderson outlines,

autobiography can become 'the text of the oppressed' articulating through one person's experience, experiences that may be representative of a particular marginalised group ...empowering the subject through their cultural inscription (2010, p.104)

This clarifies why female artists from oppressed backgrounds often incorporate aspects of autobiographical text into their self-portraits. Including text allows these artists to express their interior life and thereby, empower the groups to which they belong.

The accessibility of text also plays a role. Literature is more broadly legible than visual art. Understanding visual language requires viewers to be "familiar with a specific vocabulary of iconography and motifs" whereas literature is more generally accessible (Nochlin, 1989, p.15). As will be discussed, Salomon and Sigler chose to include text in their artwork to make it more comprehensible. Furthermore, literature was historically a more accessible art form for women. Linda Nochlin argues that the visual arts excluded women; women were forbidden from formative aspects of artistic education (1989, p.11). Female artists' freedom of expression was limited by visual and social conventions established by men, (Borzello, 2016, p.35). Francis



Borzello underlines the problems inherent to creating self-portraiture as a woman when she describes how pre-20th century female artists almost exclusively portrayed themselves as “subdued” (2016, p.20) By contrast, women historically “compete on far more equal terms with men—and even become innovators—in literature.” (Nochlin, 1989, p.14). Consequently, there was a more extensive canon of self-exploratory literature by women than visual art for Salomon, Sigler and Kahlo, to draw inspiration from. This essay will outline how these artists, intentionally or not, drew from the literary legacy of Virginia Woolf. Therefore, appropriating literary text not only allowed these artists to communicate more clearly to their audience but also meant that these artists could engage with an artistic tradition wherein women had more creative freedom, namely literature.

Literature provides more scope than visual art for female artists to create self-interpretative artwork. Literature has a number of genres of self-exploratory work; the bildungsroman, the autobiography, the memoir, but corresponding vocabulary does not exist for analysing self-reflective art. Examining Virginia Woolf’s modernist, feminist approach to autobiography helps clarify why autobiographical aspects were appropriated by Salomon, Sigler, and Kahlo in their artworks. Autobiography accommodates nuanced expressions of marginalised identity which traditional artistic convention does not. Woolf’s experimental autobiographies “became a way of constructing a different subject, a ‘subject in process’...a subject which is not fixed but ‘constantly called into question’”. (Anderson, 2010, p.94), Woolf believed that by “thinking outside the dominance of the letter ‘I’ ... one can begin to open the question of the woman,” (Anderson, 2010, p.95). Woolf pioneered a new form of autobiography wherein the primary subject “I” was displaced in favour of a fragmented autobiography which accurately reflects the complex understandings

women and marginalised people have of their identities. This essay will argue that Salomon, Kahlo and Kelly-McDonnell appropriate this modernist approach to audiobiography in their own work to more accurately reflect their own fractured sense of identity.

## **Chapter One (ii) Salomon's Interior Life**

Charlotte Salomon's monumental work *Leben? Oder Theatre?* was a series of "784 paintings created in an intensive period between 1941 and 1942...to form a vast narrative cycle" (Pollock, 2018, p.1). The paintings detail a semi-fictionalised version of her life as a Jewish girl/woman in Berlin. It narrates her mother's suicide, her coming of age, the Holocaust, and her exile in Nice, France. The paintings were compiled in Nice before Salomon was murdered in Auschwitz in 1943.

Salomon resisted the gendered dynamics of traditional art by appropriating aspects of literature in her artwork. In her narrative her mentor, the writer Amadeus Daberlohn, enforces the idea of the male artistic genius "Salomon's role model...is a man who 'initiates her into notions of art in which creativity is an exclusively male asset'. (Schultz, 2008 p.262) However, Salomon resists these gendered conceptualisations of art by appropriating literary conventions in order to innovate her own form of artwork (Schultz, 2008, p.262,). In the Postscript of *Leben? Oder Theatre?*, Fig. 1, Salomon describes how she,

had to go further into solitude, completely away from all humanity. Then maybe I could find what I had to find- namely myself: a name for me + this is how I began Life and Theatre."(Salomon, Pollock, 2018, p.28).

This moment solidifies the work as a form of visual *Künstlerroman*, a narrative about the artist's growth which concludes with a rejection of everyday life. The protagonist

of a Künstlerroman is generally a male artist and so Salomon inserting herself into a Künstlerroman narrative as the protagonist who removes herself from the concerns of everyday life, "from all humanity", in order to create art, was an inherently feminist decision (Pollock, 2018, p.28). In literature, if a female artist ever was the protagonist of a Künstlerroman narrative she was fatefully confronted with "the impossible choice" between domestic life and art, and so had to die to resolve the plot. (Martin, 2011, p.128). Salomon breaks this convention, by not dying but instead resolving to "undertake something wildly eccentric" and create *Leben?Oder theatre?* (Salomon, White, 2004, p.110) and so she resists the male conceptualisations of art presented to her by Daeberholn To create a truly self-representative work, Salomon had to resist traditional masculine conventions of artistic expression and construct her own visual language. Through her appropriation and repurposing of traditionally male-only genres of literature, she constructs this new visual language.

In Fig.1, Salomon expresses the desire to construct a "a name for me" through her artwork *Leben?Oder Theatre* and in doing so affirm her existence and the experiences of Jewish people in a time when Jewish people were being exterminated.(Pollock, 2018, p.28) Salomon takes advantage of autobiography's function as the text of the oppressed. She equates the idea of finding "a name for me" with finding her identity (Pollock, 2018, p.28)'.Griselda Pollock wonders,

What kind of name did she need, or hope, to find? Was this a search as an artist, as a Jewish subject in a world planning to exclude Jews from the human community...as a subject in the feminine?... How would making one of the largest narrative cycles of modernist painting act as an antidote to any of these? (2018,p.28).

Salomon's creation of *Leben?Oder Theatre* serves as an antidote to the existential crisis of being, "the Other", as Simone deBeauvoir would describe it, of living through

the Holocaust under the “condition of namelessness” which all Jewish people, particularly women, did. (1956, p.166, Pollock, 2018, p.10). Perhaps because Salomon’s experience as a Jewish woman was being annihilated through Nazi genocide she felt compelled, like Morrison, to express her interior life, affirm her own identity and empower other Jewish women. Salomon outlines that her inclusion of text was to ensure that her artwork was easily accessible, “The basic reason given by Salomon for the use of words (in a sheet she later discarded) was for communication: 'In order to facilitate the reader's understanding, explanatory texts have been attached to many sheets’” (Schultz, 2008, p.270) Salomon uses autobiographical text not only because it provided her with a way to reaffirm her marginalised identity as a Jewish woman during the Holocaust but also because it made her art more legible and therefore more effectively empowering to Jewish women.

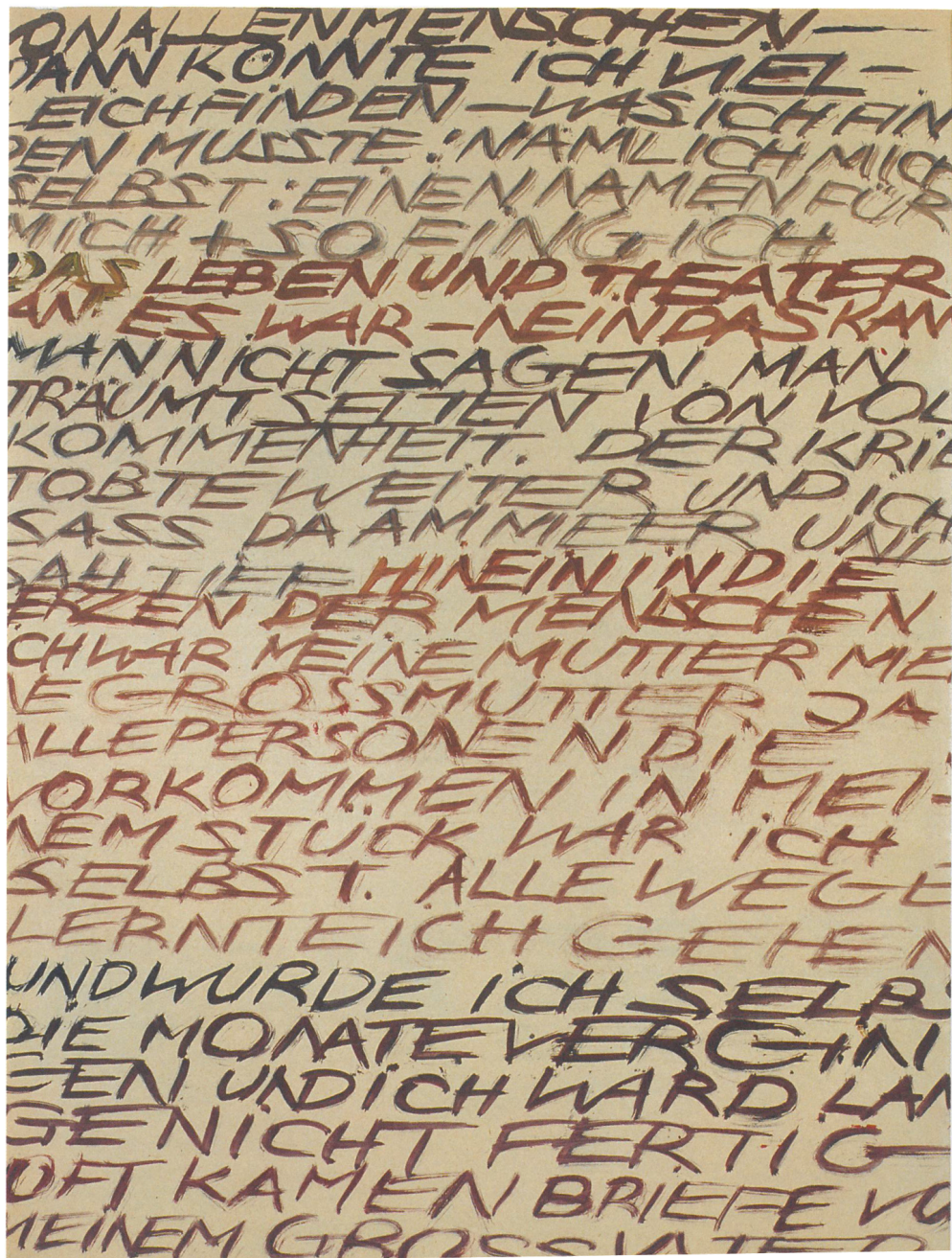


Fig.1 Salomon, C. (1941-42,) Sheet from the Postscript of *Leben?oder Theatre?*

Jewish Historical Museum.

TRANSLATION: "Then maybe I could find what I had to find - namely, myself: a name for me..."

However, Salomon's utilisation of autobiographical aspects does not make this work a traditional autobiography. Similar to Woolf's desire to distance herself from the subject "I", Salomon distances her own life from her art. For example, she names the primary character in the work Charlotte Kahn, not Salomon, in order to "distantiate the often traumatic and historical and personal material of the work and turn it instead into a highly rhetorical interrogation of life" (Pollock, 2018, p.19). This encourages an understanding of *Leben?Oder Theatre?* as a sophisticated, complex artwork which reflects Salomon's fractured identity. As Pollock outlines Salomon invents,

a hybrid, multimedia form to translate her interpretation of the experiences initially encoded in words into paintings with words. These are far more than mere illustrations for a memoir of a war survivor" (2018, p.366)

That Salomon did not intend to create a simple autobiography through her use of text is most evident in the Epigraph paintings. Here, the text is painted directly onto the page rather than onto overlays like in earlier sections of the artwork. In the Epigraph the words, "become more prominent within the compositions" (White, 2004, p.272). They are central to the paintings, not mere captions. A poignant example of this is the final painting of *Leben?Oder Theatre?*, Fig.2. Here, Charlotte Salomon/Kahn's internal thoughts and the key concept of *Leben?Oder Theatre?* emerges from within Salomon/Kahn herself,

In the painting of the young woman in her modernist bathing costume,...brush poised...the words 'Leben oder Theater' are painted affirmatively in bold letters on her bronzed back. (Pollock, 2007, p.385).

Salomon depicts herself beginning *Leben? Oder Theatre?* in Nice, with the title painted on her back being drawn out of her through her brush. This painting portrays Salomon expelling her interior life from within herself onto the page before her. The painted words, which represent the main character's inner voice, dominate the

composition. The intensity with which these words have been painted, in dark blue capital letters with a furious red beneath them, underlines their significance. The phrase “Life or Theatre,” and the omission of the interrogative present in the title is significant, (Pollock, 2007, p.385). Most interpretations conclude that “theatre” references “a kind of false self, created on the one hand by German-Jewish assimilation to German Bildung,” as well as, an artistic training “that is opposed to authentic creativity,” whereas “life” refers to the authentic self (Pollock, 2007, p.386). The title of the overall project *Life? Or theatre?* acknowledges the tension between those concepts and the question marks imply that Salomon is interrogating whether living is simply a performance. This is a question with gendered dynamics. Judith Butler outlines that gender is a social performance; you must perform your gender suitably or be societally punished, (1988, p.528). This helps illuminate why Salomon in this final image, omits the question marks and concludes that, because she is a Jewish woman, ensnared both by the dynamics of performing gender and German assimilation, her interior life is always both “life” and “theatre”. It is both authenticity and performance. Salomon’s casting of a false self as the protagonist of the work underlines her desire to create work which speaks to this dual identity and the fragmented experiences of Jewish women. This final image speaks to the complexity of having an authentic self as a marginalised woman. As Margaret Atwood outlines, there is always an internal voyeur, it is always life or theatre, life and theatre (1994, p.193). Salomon’s appropriation of aspects of autobiography allows her to express this concept straightforwardly by placing the conflicting concepts of performance and authenticity inside her body, Fig.1. Reducing our understanding of Salomon's artwork to illustrated memoir undermines what it actually is; a sophisticated artwork



which combines imagery and aspects of modernist autobiography to create paintings which reflect Salomon's fragmented identities.



Fig.2, Salomon, C. (1941-42,) *Epilogue Painting 558 Final Image, Leben?oder Theatre?* Jewish Historical Museum.

TRANSLATION: "LIFE OR THEATRE"



### Chapter One (iii) Sigler's Interior Life

Hollis Sigler similarly appropriates literary forms in her artwork in order to represent the interior life of the marginalised group to which she belonged. Her *Breast Cancer Journals* humanise the taboo experience of being a woman with a terminal illness. The series of over one hundred text and image drawings documents her experiences dying from breast cancer (Yood, 1999, p.16). Sigler was involved in the 1970s feminist movement and so respected the power of art about women's personal experiences, "'The personal is political' " was one of the mottoes of the women's movement... This ran counter to an intellectually driven, male-dominated art world." (Sigler, 1999, p.19). Sigler knew that her memoir-like artwork documenting her experience with breast cancer would empower her, deconstruct the stigma around women's health and provide a voice for all women with breast cancer (Yood, 1999, p.16). The title of Sigler's first *Breast Cancer Journal* drawing, *The Illusion Was to Think She Had Any Control over Her Life*, Fig.3, acknowledges the lack of agency that breast cancer sufferers have. Through this acknowledgement Sigler reclaims some autonomy (Yood, 1999, p.16). The text in the frame of the drawing details how breast check exams do not reduce "the incidence of breast cancer", a devastating revelation for women led to believe that self-examination is effective in this regard. The clinical language Sigler uses underlines the detached way the medical world treats women. The text clarifies the imagery in the drawing. The caption and text in the frame suggest that the woman enclosed in the cage is trapped by both a genetic predisposition to breast cancer and the medical community's apathy towards women's health. Sigler cites the inclusion of memoir-like text in her drawings as being crucial to her expression of her experience with breast cancer (Sigler, 1999, p.20). By appropriating the form of the memoir in

her art practice Sigler was able to express herself more authentically and communicate more effectively to the women she hoped to empower.



Fig.3. Sigler, H. (1992) *The Illusion was to Think She Had Any Control Over Her Life*  
Collection of Jacques Zimicki.

Caption painted on image reads; *"The illusion was to to Think She had Any Control Over Her Life"*

Text in the frame reads; *"Although breast self-examination has not reduced the incidence of breast cancer, it does markely reduce the rate of mortality, since most early tumors are found by women themselves".*

## Chapter One (iv) Kahlo's Interior Life

Frida Kahlo's diary differs from Salomon and Sigler's work as it was never intended for public consumption, (Lowe, 1995, p.25). Rather, Kahlo's diary was a forum through which she could engage with her interior life, (Lowe, 1995, p.25). Like Salomon, the work is not simple autobiography but sophisticated artwork, which utilizes aspects of Woolf's modernist autobiographical approach to enrich Kahlo's artistic interpretations of her experience. This *journal intime* allowed Kahlo to externalise and cathartically process her feelings,

Kahlo is inattentive to day-to-day goings on, and uses her journal (as did Virginia Woolf) as a repository for feelings (and images) that do not fit anywhere else. (Lowe, 1995, p.26).

Despite the diary being a private artwork, Kahlo interrogates universal experiences of womanhood. For example, Fig.4, "one of Kahlo's most haunting images, a double (or triple) portrait" engages with the multiple selves and complexities housed within all women. The faces resemble Kahlo enough to be read as self-portraiture but are universal enough to represent all women, "The stages of a woman's life, from daughter to mother to grandmother, are made visible here." (Lowe, 1995, p.230)". The fading of certain words and the use of fragmented phrases underlines the meaning of the text. Kahlo is exploring the experience of ageing as a woman, (Lowe, 1995, p.230). One of the unobscured phrases in Fig. 4, "It's no use" references the futility of resisting mortality and change, both as a disabled woman whose body does not conform to the able-bodied standards of her culture and as an ageing woman. Another fragment in Fig.4 "Isn't it superficial- don't you think?" reflects Kahlo's insecurity with her feelings about her changed/changing form. Kahlo surfaces the conflicting feelings of many women; raised to care deeply about their appearance,

punished for vanity, and harboring a deep seated self-awareness of the performative nature of our lives. Like Salomon, Kahlo engages with the tension between performance and authenticity in a woman's, particularly a disabled woman's, life. Kahlo grapples with the knowledge that, "You are your own voyeur," (Atwood, 1993, p.193). Kahlo's use of fragmented autobiographical text helps her clearly and cathartically illustrate her complex feelings about her self-awareness of her internal voyeur and the performative nature of her existence as an ageing and disabled woman.





Fig.4, Kahlo, F. (1944-54), p.52. Frida Kahlo Museum.

TRANSLATION: "two. It's no use. Moon... dreadful and alone banal... isn't it?

*Superficial - don't you think?*

*I desire clearly*

*break it! "*

## Chapter One (v): Language Specifies Audience

While the inclusion of text can clarify the meaning of artworks it also makes artworks more exclusive. Text is always in a particular language, which specifies the audience. Gloria Anzaldua, outlines how utilising the 'spanglish' spoken by the Chicana people allows her to reclaim an empowering sense of identity, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity... Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself." (Anzaldua, 1983, p.59). Anzaldua's text is written in both English and Chicana-Spanish to reflect her dual identity as a Chicana-Mexican American. The use of Chicana dialect in Anzaldua's text means that in order to truly understand her work you must be Chicana. She uses language to narrow the parameters of who can access the text. The same is true of Salomon's use of text.

Salomon's paintings contain text in German. However, there are several references to and in Yiddish meaning that only a Yiddish and German speaker could fully appreciate the representation of Jewish-German culture in *Leben? Oder Theatre?* The Yiddish and references to Yiddish interspersed throughout the work suggest that Salomon intended her work specifically for Jewish-German people; as Yiddish is a Germanic language originated by Ashkenazi Jews (Baumgarten, 2005, p.72). For example, the stage name of Salomon's step-mother character, "Paulinka Bimbam" evokes associations with the bell-like 'bim bam'...chanted by the choir in Mahler's third symphony and in Yiddish folksongs." (JCK, 2022, n.p.) . Gustav Mahler was an Ashkenazi Jewish composer whose work was banned in Nazi Germany and who

Salomon included to emphasise the Jewish nature of her artwork. (Pollock, 2018, p.488). Salomon often accompanied her paintings with text from Yiddish folk songs, e.g. in Fig.5 where the text indicates that Paulinka is singing in Yiddish (JCK, 2022,n.p.). This refers back to Salomon's own rationale that the inclusion of text was "to facilitate the reader's understanding". The specific reader Salomon wanted to communicate to was likely an Ashkenazi Jewish-German. While a German speaker could technically read the work, the inclusion of Yiddish means that only a Jewish-German individual could grasp the full extent of the culture being portrayed in *Leben?Oder Theatre*.





Salomon, C. (1941-2) *"Du sollst nit gehn mit kein ander Mädal ach."* Jewish Historical Museum

TRANSLATION: "You shouldn't go with that girl."



## **Chapter Two (i): Why Do You Look The Way You Do?**

Frances Borzello provides guidance for interpreting self-portraits by women, “I asked them: why have you chosen to look the way you do,”(2016, p.19). Why do the works of Salomon, Sigler, and Kahlo all share a faux-naïf, expressive style? They were all formally trained artists capable of painting to a traditional academic standard.

Perhaps this standard, derived from an able-bodied, male canon of art, could not do the interior lives of these women artistic justice. By abandoning traditional visual norms they could attempt to depict themselves outside of the perspective of self-voyeurism that John Berger describes all women experiencing (1972, p.46).

Salomon, Sigler and Kahlo’s use of an expressive artistic style complements the idea that the artists included text in their work because they wanted to authentically express themselves. Not only would this style feel more organic to these female artists but Sigler and Salomon were aware that it was a more accessible artstyle for their audiences. The pictorial styles of these artists imply that clarity was crucial in their artworks and this underscores that text was incorporated by these artists to avoid misinterpretation of their art

## **Chapter Two (ii) Sigler’s Style**

Sigler turned to, “drawing without restraint,” because it was cathartic and was a truer expression of her interior life, (Sigler, 1999, p.19). She unlearned her original constrained realist style, in order to “cleanse herself from coded stylistic strategies in order to pursue something that might open up possibilities that were more natural,

organic and honest.” (Yood, 1999, p.14). This style was both more intuitive for Sigler and more accessible for her audience, (Yood,1999, p.14). Sigler uses easily decipherable visual metaphors like the recurring motif of a vanity mirror. The vanity mirror straightforwardly depicts Sigler’s complex relationship to womanhood. The complexity of this relationship was compounded by Sigler’s new identity as a woman with a terminal disease, “The body no longer whole. The shattered image of the vanity’s mirror reflected woman’s pain, her fragmented sense of self.” (Sigler, 1999, p.21) The vanity’s clarity of meaning is increased by Sigler’s use of text, for example in *Walking with the Ghosts of My Grandmothers*, Fig.6, Sigler’s text carved into the frame,

My great grandmother Sarah Anna Truit Ruan died from cancer...My mother Marilyn Ryan Sigler has breast cancer...I discovered a lump in my underarm on a summer day in 1985,” (Sigler, 1999, p.47)

suggests that the three broken vanities in the drawing represent Sigler, her mother and her great-grandmother and the hereditary nature of breast cancer causing intergenerational trauma for women. Sigler’s faux-naïf style not only functions as a more honest expression of her feelings than academic art would allow but also works, in tandem with the explanatory text, to make her work more understandable to women with breast cancer



Fig.6 Sigler, H. (1992) *Walking With The Ghosts of my Grandmothers*. Collection of Laura and Larry Gerber.

Caption painted on the image reads: "*Walking With The Ghosts of my Grandmothers.*"

Text in the frame reads : "*Cancer, the crab from the `Greek Karkinos, is a term for a group of diseases. The word cancer, the crab, comes from advanced breast cancer which is a stellated form tumor in the breast. Cancer is not a new disease but one which has been recognized since earliest times. It is mentioned by the Egyptians in the Papyrus Ebers and by the Hindus in their medical writings, which probably date back 2000 B.C. My great grandmother Sarah Anna Truit Ryan died from cancer, This happened sixty years ago. My mother Marilyn Ryan Sigler, has breast cancer. She*

*had a Mastectomy in 1983. The cancer metastasized to her lungs five years later. I discovered a lump in my underarm on a summer day in 1985. I had a mastectomy in the beginning of August of 1985. It was followed by 6 months of chemotherapy. The cancer is now in my bones, my pelvis and my spine. “*

## **Chapter Two (iii) Salomon's Style**

Salomon's *Leben? Oder Theatre?* was created in a modernist art style, with an emphasis on expressiveness rather than technical accuracy. Pollock characterises Salomon's work as conforming, "to no known visual style".(2018, p.44) However, Pollock emphasises that its unconformity, "does not, however, make it outsider art...her artistic decisions were well informed and conscious" (2018, p.47).

Salomon's decision to utilise this modernist style was connected to her identity as a Jewish woman, similar to how Sigler's use of a faux-naif style developed from her experience as a woman with a terminal illness. As Felstiner outlines, "Otherness ...certainly determined the lot of Charlotte Salomon, but more because she was Jewish and exiled than female" ( Bernard, 2000, n.p.). She entered art school as one of the only Jewish students and

begins in the German national and volkisch world...that would be favoured at her art school under its new vision of Germanness...but she then embraces the forbidden international and notably French modernist tradition.(pollock, p.284).

Pollock argues that painting 192, Fig.7, represents Salomon's artistic manifesto and helps us understand why she developed the expressive style she uses in

*Leben?Oder theatre?*

As a manifesto painting this work openly proclaims its artist's gender;..it clearly asserts that artist's double identification with "jewishness": both defying fascism and embracing modernism in a single gesture.( 2018 p.273)



In the centre of Fig.7 we see the artist in self-portrait three times, representing her evolution as an artist. The left side of the painting shows “three delicately drawn illustrations each of whose compositions is properly centred on the page with clarity and detail”.(Pollock, 2018, p.270) These represent Salomon’s education in the academic style approved by the Nazis. However, the right and centre are painted more imaginatively. Here Salomon is surrounded by motifs of modernism (Pollock, 2018, p.271). Van Gogh’s sunflower dominates the painting, symbolising Salomon’s alignment with modernism, and affirming her Jewish identity in the face of Nazi oppression. Salomon embraces the “degenerate art” which the Nazi’s despised, their “roster of ideal German artists” being anti-modernist, anti-jewish and anti-woman (Pollock, 2018, p.274). In order to represent Jewish people, particularly women, and to defy Nazi standards Salomon adopted this modernist style (Pollock, 2018, p.285). The modernist style Salomon utilises works in tandem with her use of Yiddish text to actively exclude a Nazi audience, to re-enforce her Jewish identity, to speak to the experience of being “The Other” and to authentically represent Salomon’s inner life.



Fig.7 Salomon,C. (1941-2) *The manifesto, Leben? Oder Theatre?* Jewish Historical Museum.

## Chapter Two (iv) Kahlo's Style

Kahlo adopts an expressive style in her journal, not for purposes of accessibility like Sigler or to affirm Jewish identity like Salomon, but perhaps to allow herself to momentarily drop the self-control of her painted self-portraits and create spontaneously. By virtue of Kahlo's work being a "a private record written by a woman for herself," Kahlo could adopt a more chaotic, expressive style in order to create an unselfconscious expression of her interior life (Lowe, 1995, p.25). Lowe writes that while Kahlo's painted self-portraits maintain a degree of emotional distance, "in contrast her journal entries - the written passages as well as the drawings- convey the immediacy of firsthand sensations transcribed and recorded" (1995, p.26). This style "relished the element of chance", allowing Kahlo to freely express her complex identity as a disabled woman (Lowe, 1995, p.27). For example, *p.47*, Fig. 8, "one of Kahlo's most illuminating statements with respect to her own creativity." (Lowe, 1995, p.227). This work explains the recurrent ink blotches in Kahlo's diary, "Kahlo makes an explicit connection between ink and blood, an affinity which is specifically relevant to women's 'productivity' " (Lowe, 1995, p.227). The stains from the next page seep through, distorting the writing and thereby underlining its meaning. Kahlo's work is specifically female. It is specifically ephemeral and absurd. The two are linked; the female experience is absurd and ephemeral, often without agency. The stains of life seep through while Kahlo tries to make her point, obfuscating her meaning. Her work responds to the experience of chronic pain and disability. This is the congruent point she is making. It is no coincidence that the next page, *p.48*, Fig.9, which seeps into and distorts the writing, is an assemblage of female portraits, self-portraits and disembodied limbs connected

with a line resembling female genitalia. The female experience, the disabled experience, the intersection of both seeps into other pages and colours Kahlo's writing, her art. She respects her husband Diego Rivera's desire for her to escape into his world, of the able-bodied male artist, and those worlds' "distant suns" do call to her (Lowe, 1995, p.227). However, she can never go. She must live in her "inky worlds." (Lowe, 1995, p.227). She revels in her inky worlds. Despite being drawn to the "free land" of the able-bodied male artist, she ultimately concludes, "what would I do without the absurd and the ephemeral", (Lowe, 1995, p.227). The lack of autonomy women have and the body's transience are Kahlo's arenas. The domestic sphere, the female experience and chronic pain, mundane and harsh realities seeping into art and transforming it like ink, like blood, like an odour, is something which Rivera does not have to contend with, but it is also an experience he cannot represent, and which Kahlo can. It is a uniquely female, disabled experience. It is one which Kahlo represents in her diary using an unpredictable artistic style which complements her use of poetic, diaristic text in order to reflect the chaotic complexity of her interior life.





Fig.8, Kahlo, F. (1944-54), p.47. Frida Kahlo Museum.

TRANSLATION:

"Who would say that stains

Live and help one to live?

Ink, blood, odor.

I don't know what ink he would use so eager to leave his mark in such a way.

I respect his entreaty and I'll do what I can to escape from my world.

*Inky worlds - a free land and mine. Distant suns that call to me because I am part of their nuclei. Rubbish. What would I do without the absurd and the ephemeral? 1953 for many years I have understood dialectical materialism. “*



Fig. 9, Kahlo, F. (1944-54), p.48. Frida Kahlo Museum.

### Chapter Three: Virtual Poetry

The tendency of marginalized artists to create text and image artworks which represent their inner lives has developed into a phenomenon in the world of online art. Explore the profiles of the extremely popular artists @Inkipri and @Frances\_Cannon to see artworks which combine expressive imagery with fractured text to represent their complex marginalised identities, Figs. 10-11. Why is there such an abundance online of artworks by marginalised artists which combine poetic text with expressive imagery? Painter Phoebe Kelly-McDonnell outlines in an interview how they have been influenced by internet culture to create artworks with fragmented text,

I do think that how language is used on the internet has influenced how I write in drawings/paintings and Instagram is definitely part of that. Even just in how fragmented the text in my work is and how there's only ever a small bit of text I can see how I've been influenced by growing up with like v angsty/absurd tumblr text posts and then continuing to consume angsty/absurd IG captions and memes. (2022, p.55)

Similar to Salomon, Sigler and Kahlo, contemporary online artists appropriate literary language to create works which represent their inner feelings. However, rather than appropriating modernist autobiography like Salomon, and Kahlo, they appropriate the language of the online culture they live in, the “angsty/absurd tumblr text posts” and Instagram captions which partially comprise the literary zeitgeist of this generation’s artists. For example, the text in Kelly-McDonnell’s painting *To hold* Fig.12, “I saved these for you. they are v. precious please look after them” uses a very online syntax which is intuitively understood by those in Generation Z/Millennials. The border around the painting is reminiscent of the borders of Instagram underlining



how the text references the way people write online. The reduction of very to “v.” connotes a familiarity with the audience and the lowercase letters suggest a gentle tone which contributes to the overall tenderness of the fragmented phrase. The lack of a full stop is typical of absurdist online text posts. These forms of internet writing spill not just into art but also literature, dominating the literary voice of poet and novelist Patricia Lockwood,

she is one of the few writers whose voice feels either—or even both—distinctly literary or internet-y, depending on how you look at it... it can sound like she’s speaking in poetic fragments, or maybe just really good tweets”. (Iversen, 2021, n.p.).

The syntax and content of these “angsty/absurd” fractured, personal, and hyperbolic statements seems to represent an inner truth which the online generation identifies strongly with, as can be seen from the popularity of the aforementioned Instagram artists. Although these artists are drawing directly from internet text culture, the fragmented, poetic nature of the phrases they use is reminiscent of the “queer amalgamation of dream and reality” in the semi-autobiography of Woolf, Salomon and Kahlo (Woolf, Anderson, 2010, p.97). The dreamlike blend of poetry and autobiography in these artworks underlines that rather than simple visual diaries, these are complex artworks that have been “worked on/edited to portray a specific thing,” paralleling the complex artistic modes developed by Kahlo and Salomon (Kelly-McDonnell, 2022, p.55).



Fig.10, @inkiprii, (2021) *here's to the small joys and baby hopes*. Instagram.



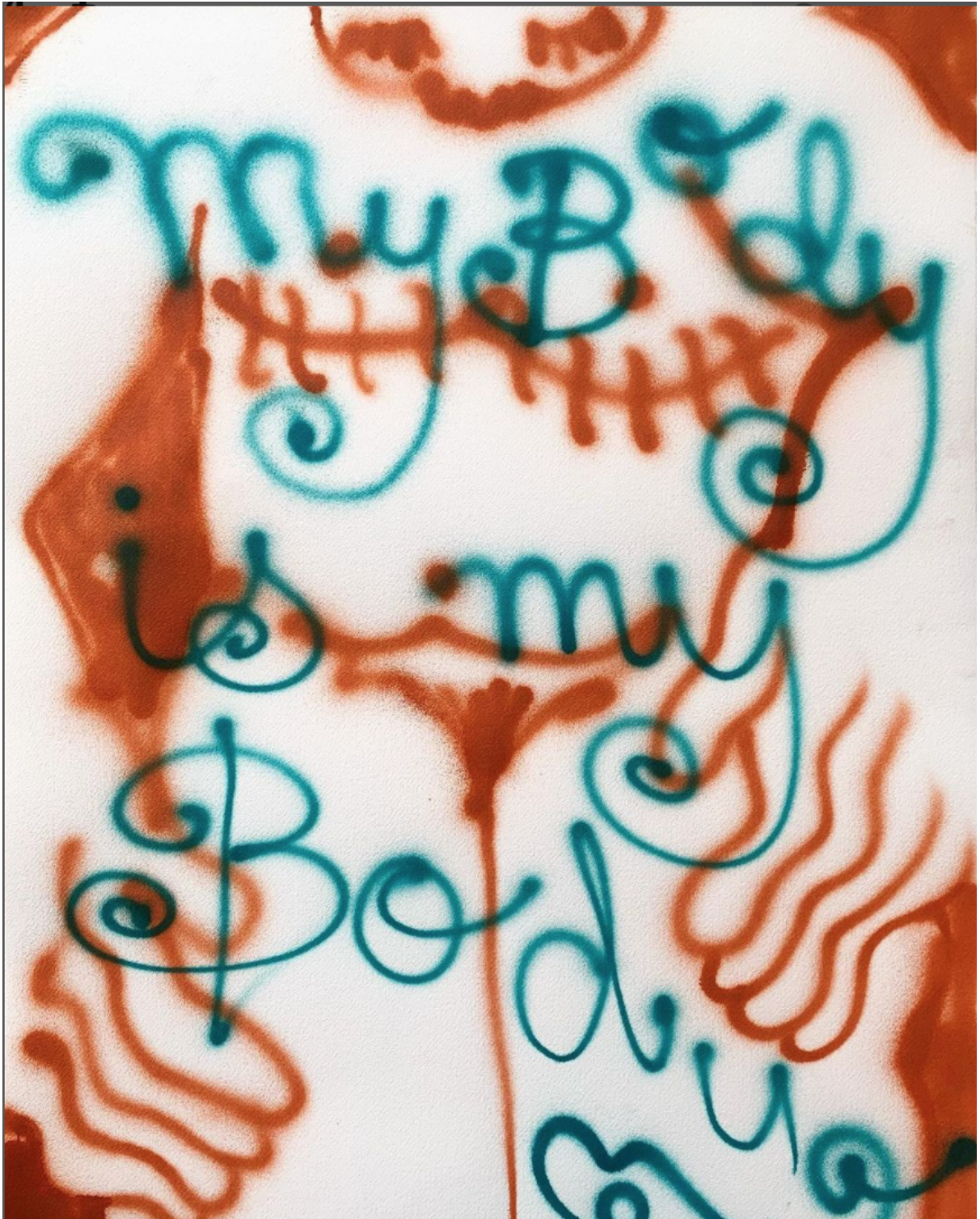


Fig.11. Frances Cannon,(2021) *my body is my body*. Instagram.



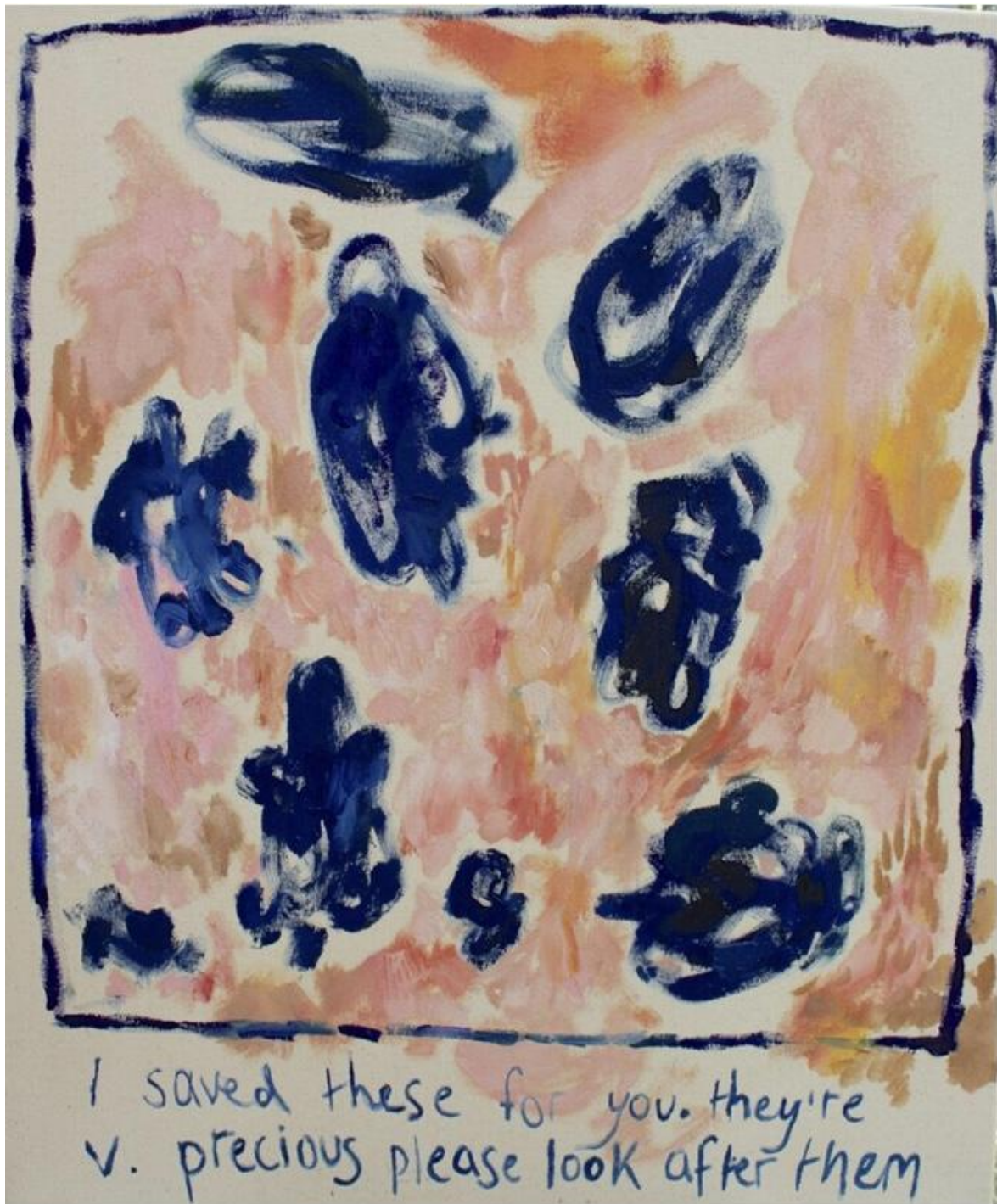


Fig.12 Kelly-McDonnell, (2020) *To hold*. Instagram.

Text is also used by Kelly-McDonnell, like Salomon and Sigler, to increase their work's accessibility, "it gives an access point into a painting for an audience that otherwise wouldn't engage with just the visual language of the work" (2022, p.54). However, similar to Salomon, the specific text used by Kelly-McDonnell makes the work more accessible only to a specific audience "I think it takes on more of a queer diy/""girly""/internet coded aesthetic sometimes"(2022, p.55). Although the phrases are in English, the use of online language and syntax means that it could only be comprehensively grasped by someone who understands online culture, specifically queer online culture in the case of Kelly-McDonnell's work. While this was unintentional on Kelly-McDonnell's behalf, they acknowledge that the use of text does specify the audience for their work just as Salomons' use of Yiddish specified the audience of her work, (2022, p.58).

Similar to Salomon, Sigler and Kahlo, Kelly-McDonnell chose an expressive artistic style, "Ultimately I leant into drawing/writing intuitively." (Kelly-McDonnell, 2022, p.56). Kelly-McDonnell contrasts soft colours with jagged, unpredictable mark-making, Fig.12. Kelly-McDonnell's decision to communicate intuitively through this artistic style is inseparable from the centrality of text in their work.

Kelly-McDonnell begins drawing loosely,

while also keeping a list of phrases/lines of text that would pop into my head...sometimes the text became incorporated into the painting or became the central focus."(2022, p.56 ).

Kelly-McDonnell's colour palette of soft pastels and saturated reds, emerges from a desire to represent the duality of their experience as queer person, in a way

reminscent of Salomon's desire to represent the duality of her experience as a Jewish woman forced to assimilate into German society. Through these colours Kelly-McDonnell wants

very badly to communicate the duality of things e.g ~wow being alive is profound and beautiful but also terrifying and brutal and everyone I love is going to die~ and ~being queer is the most wonderful thing ever but is also full of rage and I want to crawl out of my body~ (2022, p.56)

The use of their artistic style to expressively represent the duality of queer identity complement's Kelly-McDonnell's use of snippets of poetic text to represent their fragmented interior life through their art.

However, there are drawbacks to this genre of art becoming popular online. As mentioned previously Kelly-McDonnell's work, similar to Salomon's *Leben? Oder Theatre?* is not intended to be understood as autobiographical. Similarly to how Salomon's sophisticated artwork has been reduced to memoir by many interpreters, Kelly-McDonnell fears their work could be interpreted as a diary, "I get worried that people will take the text in my work V literally as an autobiographical statement" (2022,p.55). This fear of misinterpretation is influenced by, "the idea that vulnerability/authenticity is rewarded on the internet and that leads to a pressure to share work that's v personal" and so viewers of Kelly-McDonnell's work online may assume that their paintings are directly autobiographical rather than complex artistic statements (2022, p.55). Negotiating the interpretation of artworks online is complex and so Kelly-McDonnell often does not post artworks that contain text online anymore (2022, p.55).



Despite these complications, Kelly-McDonnell feels compelled “to create my own visual language,”(2022, p.58). This emerged from Kelly-McDonnell’s alienation from the cisgender, male artistic tradition (2022, p.58). Kelly-McDonnell’s impulse to construct a more representative visual language is shared with Salomon, Sigler and Kahlo who, as discussed above, all constructed their own visual languages in order to escape the traditional artistic styles which did not accommodate their marginalised experiences. Kelly-McDonnell’s development of a personal visual language is inspired by “looking at art by women and queer people”.(2022, p.58) Through absorbing the “many languages that reject cis-straight male canon” Kelly-McDonnell developed a visual language that reflects, “something closer to what I experience in the world”.(2022, p.58) Kelly-McDonnell’s revelation that, as a marginalized artist they feel alienated from cisgender male art and so feel compelled to draw inspiration from other marginalized artists, points to the likelihood that other marginalized artists online develop their styles in a similar way. Many of these online artists likely unknowingly experienced a trickle down of influence from the artworks of prominent marginalized artists Charlotte Salomon, Frida Kahlo, and Hollis Sigler. The visual languages of Salomon, Kahlo and Sigler seem undeniably paralleled and perhaps intentionally referenced in the visual languages of these online marginalized artists, in terms of their intuitive art styles and fragmented, poetic, autobiographical text.

## Conclusion

This essay has investigated why many marginalised artists, particularly female artists, have constructed their own personal visual language by combining expressive, faux-naïf imagery with poetic, autobiographical text. To investigate this question the works of Charlotte Salomon, Frida Kahlo, Hollis Sigler and Phoebe Kelly-McDonnell were explored. Chapter One examined the benefits for these artists of incorporating aspects of literature into their art. These benefits include the clearer communication of ideas text can achieve, the capacity autobiography has for expressing the complex dual identities of marginalised individuals, the potential for autobiography to act as the text of the oppressed and the capacity for text to speak to a more specific audience, particularly in the case of Charlotte Salomon. Chapter Two explored why these artists all work in an expressive style rather than a realist or academically technical style. It was argued that all the artists chose this style as it is a more intuitive method of expressing their subjective reality as marginalised individuals. In the case of Salomon, this style helped, in conjunction with the text, to mark her artwork representative of Jewish identity. For Sigler this style made her artwork more accessible. This style allowed Kahlo to cathartically and unselfconsciously process her inner feelings. Finally this essay examined why this type of visual language, the combination of imagery and poetic text, is so popular among online marginalized artists. The work of Kelly-McDonnell was analysed as a representative case study of this phenomenon, with supportive evidence from an interview. By analysing the contributing factors which Kelly-McDonnell provided as to why artists online make artworks of this nature, this essay came to the conclusion that a likely reason why many marginalised artists combine text and expressive symbolic imagery in their visual art is because a counter-visual language has been

developing since the early 20th century. This visual language was and is being constructed in opposition to the straight male artistic hegemony and pivotal to this new visual language is a prioritisation of intuitive artistic expression and inclusion of text to speak to a fragmented experience.



## Appendices

### Email Interview with Phoebe Kelly-McDonnell (January 18th 2022.)

**ML: *What brought you to combine text and image in many of your paintings and drawings?***

PKM: I felt like the abstract images without words were potentially too blank/cold and had the danger of slipping into pure technical formality/aesthetics? I've always written and been frustrated that the words were just words that I felt I didn't have the talent to make truly visual – so frustration led to the combination and it's been appeased for the moment.

**ML: *Do you think the inclusion of text in your work makes it more accessible?***

PKM: Yes and no –

Yes in that it gives an access point into a painting for an audience that otherwise wouldn't engage with just the visual language of the work

No because the text is still v abstract and vague and I worry people find it pretentious/that it obscures meaning further

**ML: *Do you think the use of text in your work excludes anyone or turns your work into something for a more specific audience?***

PKM: Yes! I think it takes on more of a queer diy/""girly""/internet coded aesthetic sometimes and while I don't intend it to I think that some people definitely find that excluding/just don't like it

**ML: Do you think the necessity of posting work online has affected your painting practice?**

PKM: YES I make things now with the view that I won't be posting them on Instagram because I know otherwise that I will overthink and Not make things/censor myself – particularly with text in drawings/paintings. I've found myself not letting things leave my head or sketchbook because I don't want them to be seen/judged and Instagram would often be the first place things get seen.

**ML: For example, does the format of Instagram influence the format of your paintings directly or indirectly?**

**PKM:** Instagram hasn't directly influenced the format of my paintings but I could see a potential link to reading/consuming lots of snippets of people's lives/emotions in a narrative format on places like IG and youtube and adopting that into my paintings if that makes sense?

I do think that how language is used on the internet has influenced how I write in drawings/paintings and Instagram is definitely part of that. Even just in how fragmented the text in my work is and how there's only ever a small bit of text I can see how I've been influenced by growing up with like v angsty/absurd tumblr text posts and then continuing to consume angsty/absurd IG captions and memes.

**ML: Does the knowledge that you will be posting a work to Instagram and that it will be viewed by a specific audience there affect the text/images/subject matter you decide to use?**

PKM: Posting things with text in makes me nervous - because of the personal nature of Instagram I get worried that people will take the text in my work V literally as an autobiographical statement, rather than something I've worked on/edited to portray a specific thing.

Ultimately if something feels too vulnerable/icky to post to a bunch of faceless people I just don't post and like I said earlier, I make things with the assumption that I won't be posting them – otherwise I would be prone to just anxiously censoring text/image/subject matter.

Basically I find Instagram stressful as hell and I resent the idea that artists have to be visible online while they're starting out for the opportunity to be successful.

**ML: Do you think there is pressure to create and share artwork that is intimate/ references personal subject matter or trauma online?**

PKM: Yes, I think there's an idea that vulnerability/authenticity is rewarded on the internet and that leads to a pressure to share work that's v personal

**ML:Do you think works which reference the artist's personal life 'perform' better/ are more successful online than works that have more abstract/conceptual themes?**

PKM: Generally speaking I'd say that work that references personal life performs better as it's more accessible on a platform that isn't really designed for prolonged engagement with one piece of work?.

**ML: Do you think artworks that include text are better suited to instagram/online art posting than artworks that do not include text?**



PKM: To a certain extent yes, I think the popularity of webcomics/personal diary style illustrations have become really popular over the years and because they provide a narrative that makes them more easily accessible/readable when scrolling.

**ML: Do you think Instagram provides an alternative to the white cube of the gallery? Furthermore, do you think that the online culture of art posting is a more level playing field for artists of marginalised identities than the culture of the art institution is?**

PKM: I've discovered a ton of artists of marginalised identities through Instagram, either from finding their own accounts or through art history/critique accounts that post about older artists who are regularly not included in canon – so yep I think sometimes it provides a good alternative to traditional physical gallery spaces re:representation of different identities and experiences.

I don't think I know enough about algorithms and the internet to answer the second part of the question in any useful way! I think the internet functions with the same biases as traditional galleries and therefore while it's maybe more possible for artists of marginalised identities to be seen on the internet I think it's maybe led to a culture of visibility over tangible support (in the shape of funding and institutional support) for those artists to make their work. ? Does that make sense ?

**ML: The looseness and spontaneity of your work is beautiful. And the contrast of soft colours and jagged/unpredictable mark-making you often make is extremely appealing. How did you develop this painting/drawing style?**

PKM: ((Thank you! <3)) The process that led to this was kind of circular – I started drawing v loosely and intuitively, while also keeping a list of phrases/lines of text that would pop into my head. I'd use text from that list as a starting point for a drawing or painting, sometimes the text would become the title, sometimes the text became incorporated into the painting or became the central focus. Ultimately I leant into drawing/writing intuitively and this is what happened.

**ML: What drew you to the colour palette you often use? (pastels, saturated reds).**

PKM: I think I've been drawn to those colours because I want very badly to communicate the duality of things e.g ~wow being alive is profound and beautiful but also terrifying and brutal and everyone I love is going to die~ and ~being queer is the most wonderful thing ever but is also full of rage and I want to crawl out of my body~ and using saturated colours like red fulfils that need to have something faster(?) And gaudy/violent in contrast to the pastels that I use a lot.

**ML: Does your experience as a nonbinary person influence your fine art practice, or more specifically your painting and drawing style?**

PKM: I think figuring out my relationship to gender has made me feel a lot more solid as a person – so in turn that has made me happier to delve into work that is a little bit more ambiguous and not feel the need to use as much explicit figurative imagery as before and made me more confident in my use of language – I haven't really fully figured this out yet but it's a v interesting question!

**ML: Do you consider your work to be autobiographical?**

PKM: I don't really consider my work to be About me and my feelings/thoughts in the sense that I can't point at a piece and say "this is about X that happened to me" .

The work comes from feelings and thoughts I have and I do view my work as a form of documentation - but there's an amount of fictionalisation/dramatization that I v. purposely do and play with that ultimately separates it from me. So yes and no? It's personal but it's not me.

**ML: If so, is the inclusion text significant in illuminating the personal nature of the work?**

PKM: Text is significant, my work started to feel far more personal when I started to include words. I think that's something that will continue to develop - for now the text is often obscure/fictionalised to stop me having a vulnerability break down but it is still v personal to me and is something that's becoming an integral part of my work.

**ML:Do you think the inclusion of text helps you create a more authentic expression of your reality/ "interior life" as a nonbinary artist/ artist of a marganised gender?**

PKM: Yes? But I cannot eloquently explain why!

**ML: Do you ever feel alienated from the visual language of the canon of cis, straight male art history? Did you feel the need to create your own visual language?**

PKM: Yes – I've definitely felt like a lot of cis, straight male art either didn't apply to me, didn't leave any space for other viewpoints or just straight up made me feel like an object. The very obvious examples of that visual language is some male artists use of women & non-men's bodies in art, w women/nb's depicted as fragments,

muses or porn – talking specifically about older canon artists like Gauguin and Picasso and Baselitz vibes.

I did feel the need to create my own visual language and that's still a huge work in progress, looking at art by women and queer people was and is essential to this, in seeing how there's so many languages that reject cis straight male canon and reflect something closer to what I experience in the world.

**ML: Do you think the inclusion of text allows your work to express yourself more specifically?**

**PKM:** Yes, some paintings/drawings feel empty or useless without words, I think including text makes things more precise.

**ML: Do you think there is pressure for marginalised artists to create work of a personal / autobiographical nature?**

**PKM:** Yes, I think there's an expectation for queer artists to relate their identity to their work and also to speak for queer people as a group - same applies to women artists, I've had my work related to being a woman(ish) a lot in institutional settings, never initiated by me/anything I said

**ML: Do you consider your work to be for a specific audience?**

**PKM:** I don't really but if women/queer people appreciate my work I do take that as far more of a compliment than cis straight men's opinions.



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