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LEVICK-PARKIN, Melanie <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3925-9792>>

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“It Tells You What it Wants to Be”

How Women Make, with Immanence, Love, Decay and other Transgressions

Melanie Levick-Parkin
Sheffield Hallam University

Keywords

Female Making, Immanence, Design Ontology, Material Agency, Feminist Design Critique.

Abstract

This paper discusses how a close encounter with a woman's making practice, when viewed through a critical feminist lens, can give space to a broader discussion on how female creative labour is viewed and valued. Drawing on a 2018 doctoral thesis titled 'How women make – exploring female making practice through design anthropology', the focus here is firstly, on how conceptions of immanence in a making practice have implications for ontological concepts of agency and, secondly, on the re-working of normative identity positions within women's different crafting and up-cycling practices. These in turn point to certain conceptions of the feminine in the public realm and how visual and material voice is perceived based on gender. Different opportunities for subversion materialise in the women's work through the interplay of concepts of beauty, femininity, nature, decay and death. The discussion highlights excerpts of a series of close up vignettes, which combined ethnographic, auto-ethnographic accounts and reflections informed by feminist theory and critique.

1. Introduction

This paper draws on research for my 2018 doctoral thesis *How women make – exploring female making practice through design anthropology*. I am here taking the opportunity to focus in on some of fieldwork with 2 of the 11 women who participated. The aim is to give space for the close-up vignettes, combining ethnographic, auto-ethnographic accounts with reflections informed by feminist theory and critique.

This extract is from larger body of ethnographic accounts which looked in close details at the What – i.e. what is the specific making practice of this particular woman, the How – i.e. the actual *process* of making; how this particular woman made at a particular point in time, and included the *emerging and analysis* of particular insights I had gained in the context of that particular woman’s making. In this paper, I am specifically surfacing how conceptions of agency within individual female making practice can allow us to consider ontological implications, as well as how thematic choices are communicated through visual and material voice making practices. My study combined ethnographic fieldwork with a critical holistic approach, which informed a research process that was concerned with the uncovering of social and material relations (Kjærsgaard & Otto, 2012).

Drawing on the fieldwork with one participant in particular called Bill, the discussion will consider how conceptualisations of immanence have historic importance in feminist theory, stemming from De Beauvoir’s (1949/2011) critique of immanence vs. transcendence in relation to gender. They are of interest because of how they surface ontological concepts of

agency and how such concepts relate to value judgements. Barad (2008) highlights that for both feminist and scientific analysis, understanding how foundational inscriptions of nature/culture dualism forecloses “the understanding of how ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are formed” is crucial. “It tells you what it wants to be”, highlights the ethnographic account of Bill’s conception of immanence in her making practice in relation to ontological concepts of agency; secondly, on the re-working of normative identity positions in her crafting and up-cycling practice. The paper then also takes account of the different contexts in which the feminine can be both subverted and subverting, using the two very different examples of practice from Bill and another participant called Kaz. Analysing different approaches to in Bill’s and Kaz’s making practices will point to conceptions of the feminine in the public realm and how visual and material voice is perceived based on gender. Different aspects of subversion can be detected and discussed through playing with juxtaposing concepts, such as beauty, nature, death, femininity, motherhood and womanhood in the women’s work.

2. Thematic Framing of Women’s Making

When Parker and Pollock (1981) explored women’s place in the History of Art, they pointed out that the way the History of Art had been evaluated and studied up to that point, was “not an exercise of neutral ‘objective’ scholarship, but an ideological practice” (p. XVII), which unconsciously reproduced existing beliefs and values, through particular ways of seeing and interpreting. Having trained and practised as a Designer/Design Educator within a patriarchal and Western value system, I tried to remain alert to how this impacted on my own value percep-

tion – as to what counts as creative practice and what doesn’t. Part of the reason for choosing the term “make” was to release me of my own potential bias and ontological entrapment. Thus, the focus of this work did not lie with the specifics of the artefactual outcomes of the participants’ making practices. Whilst the outcomes of the making were observed and the makers’ interaction with their practices documented and reflected on, this was done in the context of a holistic looking at the different aspects of “how women make” and their own conceptualisation of it as well as my own.

Because it is a re-occurring question in relation to my research, I feel the need to make it clear that I will not be discussing women’s making in juxtaposition, comparison or difference, etc. to men’s making. I am not doing so consciously, as it would defeat the objective of this work, – which is for female making practice to be discussed and framed on and within its own terms and spaces. Whilst I do not preclude considering or analysing others thoughts on these matters, I do not wish to tend that field myself in this instance. When, – if ever – is a male writing about another man’s work asked how it might be framed in relation to female making practice? My work aims to give attention to female making practice outside of male oriented frameworks, – which as Criado-Perez (2019) points out, views men as the human default fundamental to human structure to the point where nothing can be discussed or created without maleness as a central reference point. I am not maliciously or accidentally omitting the male in my discussion, the omission is part of a carefully analysed and deliberated positionality of my work.

3. Methodology

This paper will discuss how the data ‘created’ during field-work with specific female makers connects to theory and broader discourse linked to female making practices. It shows some of the interpretative discussions and analysis and links to certain emerging themes.

In this paper, space is specifically given to two ethnographic accounts extracted from my larger body of work on women’s making. In that larger body of work, I wrote a series of vignettes to make visible women’s making practice in a holistic way. The vignettes were conceived as representational devices, which I used to enhance the understanding of the ‘story’ within the ethnographic accounts and how and why the interpretative discussion and analysis which followed emerged. The ethnographic account I am focusing on here is based on my encounters with Bill spring to summer 2017. She was one of my 12 participants, who I spent time with while they were making, – as with the others, I watched her make, I co-made with her, we chatted about her making and I also did a more formal semi-structured interview with her.

I am using the term vignettes as these written pieces were edited into snap-shot narratives to give an insight into what is particular about that woman’s practice and her conceptualisation of it. These specifics are then built on, to form my interpretive discussion and analysis.

I am framing these potential case studies as ethnographic accounts as ethnography is most closely aligned with Anthropology. My ethnographic accounts and their vignettes

are also reflected by Van Maanen’s (1995) description of ethnography as storytelling, which White et al. (2009) highlight, entails the ‘researcher drawing ‘close to people and events’ and then writing about what was learned in situ’ (p. 24). Humphreys and Watson (2009) describe the use of vignettes within ethnography as a ‘descriptive scene-setting’, with an emphasis on ‘being there’ (p. 46), from which the interpretative discussion and analysis can be constructed (2009, p. 46).

4. Bill’s Making

Bill’s making is an integral part of her life. I met Bill a few years ago, because she is the sister of a friend. She is middle-aged, white and from a working-class background in South Yorkshire. Before I ever met Bill, I knew that she had made a lot of up-cycled furniture and artefacts. At that time Bill had a stand in a craft unit space in Sheffield from which she was selling her work. She has since had to give this up due to ill health. Currently her making practice focuses on a wide range of smaller craft-based items ranging from decorative picture frames, cake toppers, key rings, to typographic decorations and lots of other things. Many are wood based, but interact with lots of other materials depending on intended use and visual effect. It doesn’t seem that any particular material or artefact production defines Bill’s making, but the particular contexts and materials she can get her hands on determine her materials practice at any particular point in her life. What follows is an extract of a longer write up of conversations we had about Bills making.

4.1. Talking with Bill about Making

When asked about her history of making Bill says:

I’ve always mended stuff. I’ve never been able to afford new things and I think it’s wasteful having new things, you know, just because you need black worktops in your kitchen, your appliances need to be so and so colour. Me I’d rather just wait until they break and then mend them.

She says that now she is older she can afford things, but that it “goes against the grain” and that she has always loved recycling furniture. She identifies that she has always been creative, always liked making and as a kid used to make clothes, built things and helped her dad with cars, the scrapyard being her favourite place. Bill and her husband had their own painting and decorating business for around 10 years, working long hours and over weekends, whilst also having the unit with the upcycled furniture until Bill got ill, triggered by a neck injury. Since then she had to scale down, give up the decorating and the unit and is currently focusing on making smaller things to sell at craft fairs or online.

4.2. “Intra-Action” with Material

Bill highlights her frustration with having had to change her material practice because of her health problems, saying “I liked the upcycling of furniture, I loved that” and that she would still be doing that if her health would allow it:

I wouldn’t have looked twice at the little stuff that I make now, I like the big stuff, I like the, it’s, with big stuff it’s like instant gratification. You see something worn down and not being used and then you turn it into something beautiful, not like the stuff I make now.



Figure 1. *The table that carved itself.* Courtesy of Belinda Askew 2017.

When I ask whether the reason why she likes up-cycling furniture so much is because each piece is by necessity different, she doesn't only confirm this explicitly, but also goes deeper into her experience of up-cycling:

Yes, and each piece tells you what it wants to be. I know that sounds crazy. I got a wooden coffee table, a big coffee table and I thought “Oh I know what I'll do with that. I'll carve a river in it, carve a river with all the little inlets and what-have-you and then fill it all with photo luminescent resin.” So, I started carving this river and it turned into a tree. It honestly wouldn't go where I wanted it, every time I got to it, it would carve another bloody branch or something and it just did it itself. It didn't want to be a river. (Figure 1)

I ask her if it feels like the thing is already there and she says “Yes, it's just screaming to get out.” I comment that she seems to feel quite strongly about this and she says:

Absolutely. I did another one and that started as something else and it turned into an ammonite with the photo luminescent, but I didn't like that as much as the tree because that really, really spoke to me.

Bill seems to feel strongly that the larger items she has worked with and up-cycled, bring a kind of immanence with them. Another thing that is part of her up-cycling practice is the act of naming her creations:

Me: “So, you were just talking about that you'd done a light and then you said that you named it. Just describe what the light is and what you called it.”

Bill: “Yes, it’s a round brown wagon wheel kind of thing with three drops, three pendants, and the bottom of the pendants are hats, ladies’ hats, and I call it Ascot, or Ladies’ Day. It’s just a nice thing, it tells you what it wants to be.”

She tells me that she used to use those names on the labels to sell the items, but that she would not have to write the names down for herself as once she had named a creation, she does not forget its name.

4.3. Concepts of Immanence in Bill’s Making and Her Conceptualisation of It

When Bill talks about why she loved up-cycling so much, she is very clear in her assertions that part of the enjoyment is a feeling that the objects already come with a making destination of their own – “It tells you what it wants to be.” What she is describing appears to be a kind of power immanent in the objects – her material/matter, which are strong enough to ‘act back’ even against Bill’s personal plans for the object. (The planned river carving turning into a carving of a tree.) In order to challenge the positioning of materiality as either a given or a mere effect of human agency, Barrad (2008) proposes ‘a post-humanist materialist account of performativity’ (p. 145), which positions agency as a matter of intra-acting. This account of intra-acting also aligns to some extent to Ingold’s (2010) understanding “textility of making” (p. 92) and of “correspondence” (2013a), though he is less willing to divorce agency from human intentionality.

For Bill the smaller craft items she is producing from scratch ‘are boring’ – to her they do not possess the same strength of

power to act back as the old furniture and other re-purposed artefacts have. When Bill works on the furniture she appears to be experiencing what Barad (2008) calls ‘a congealing of agency’ (p. 139), where ‘matter is a substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing’ (p. 139). When the intended river becomes a tree, Bill’s account of this is very reminiscent of what Ingold (2010) describes as the “textility of making”. He refers to Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004) account of the splitting of timber with an axe, where the blade enters the wood and is then guided by the history of the growth within the tree. This means ‘surrendering to the wood and following where it leads’ (Ingold, 2010, p. 451). I also propose that Bill’s perception that there is a pre-existing force or power within the pieces, is a kind of belief in immanence. Roelli (2004) reminds us that in Western metaphysics, the concepts of immanence and transcendence can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, representing two divergent tendencies which place reality, as it can be known, either within or outside of the world. In religious terms, believing in transcendence is closely aligned with the ‘one’ god, external to oneself and materiality (Haynes, 2012). In contrast to this, immanence is aligned to beliefs of animism common in many religions around the world, where “god” or spirit can exist in matter and material alike. De Beauvoir (1949/2011) repeatedly critiqued women’s supposed leaning towards beliefs in immanence and situated it negatively in relation to men’s apparent striving to transcend.

De Beauvoir’s (1949/2011) particular take on immanence, which followed a deeply patriarchal tradition of Cartesian dualism with its roots in Greek philosophy, has been much critiqued

in feminist literature (Bartlett, 2004; Donovan, 1985; Grosz, 1994). De Beauvoir's (1949/2011) evaluation was not only an explicit value judgement in terms of the idea that transcendence is a nobler concept than immanence, she also re-positioned the term specifically to denote different types of labour – creative labour is equated with transcendence primarily pursued by men, whereas women's repetitive, mundane labour resides in immanence (Donovan, 1985). I would argue that Barad's (2008) suggestion that 'crucial to understanding the workings of power is an understanding of the nature of power in the fullness of its materiality' (p. 128), is typical of a material feminist epistemology, using its plasticity to examine power and agency, both within the micro and the macro. It furthermore questions the Cartesian tradition of considering matter as primarily passive and immutable, whilst granting language and culture their own agency and historicity (Barad, 2007, 2008).

In that context, Bill's belief in immanence would have to be differentiated from her actual activity of carving the wood, which based on De Beauvoir's (1949/2011) distinction, would be an act of creativity and, as such, transcendent. De Beauvoir's differentiations between acts residing in immanence or transcendence have been contested by many feminist theorists because of their construction within, and acceptance of, patriarchal hierarchies and value judgement (Haynes, 2012; Grosz, 1994). I would argue that De Beauvoir's (1949/2011) distinction still has some importance if only because it inadvertently made visible how (female) labour was, and often still is, viewed and valued within patriarchy. I reject those evaluations in terms of having any ontological validity to my feminist world view and agree

in this context with Grosz (1994), who points out that feminist writing that adopts patriarchal philosophical assumption about the mind and body and its actions “can be regarded as complicit in the misogyny that characterizes Western reason” (p. 3). To understand the “making/feeling/imagining” trajectory of Bill’s belief in immanence, it is more helpful to consider Barad’s (2007, 2008) proposition of Onto-epistem-ology as the study of knowing in being, which she suggests as a better way of understanding how specific intra-actions matter, which I also think is more fruitful in relation to understanding female creative labour in general. The relational and dialogical nature of agency is easier to understand when we consider Barad’s (2008) proposition that “Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfiguration of the world” (p. 126) and that “the very idea of matter as being vibrant is a philosophical as well as a political one” (p. 135).

5. The normative feminine as subversive

My thesis included an in-depth account of Kaz’s making, but here I am highlighting a selective aspect in order to surface different possibilities of subversion in female making practice. Kaz’s work plays with both the conceptions of femininity and the subversion of it. She works with both overtly feminine themes and some which are overtly male. In her feminine themed work, she often uses pastel colour themes and glitter, in some of the mosaics these are glitter tiles. She had told me how she just *had* to make something with them when she first saw them because they were so beautiful. In body adornment, glitter is often read as an amplification of femininity and indulging in excessive femininity carries its own moral cul-

tural condemnation (White, 2015). White (2015, p. 10) explains that through the societal lens, excess of glitter is often read as a demarcation of infantilism as well as sexual deviance, yet many women knowingly choose to ignore such connotations, because glitter affords them a personal aesthetic experience that is deeply satisfying. Thus, I would argue that, at least in the context of this societal lens, Kaz's themes of love, hearts, pinks and glitter are intrinsically subversive, because they overstep and ignore boundaries of moral judgement associated with excessive femininity, while her masculine themes subvert because they play with stereotypes of gender and are juxtaposed to feminine "softness" (Figures 2-3-4).

The re-occurrences of the word "love", heart, heart shapes, expressions of hope and ideals of life in Kaz's work could easily be construed as representing the timid, passive, typically "female" insipidness so condemned by De Beauvoir (1949/2011) in *The Second Sex*. I choose to read these themes in a very different way. I would argue that read in a particular way, Kaz's thematic concepts could also be considered radical. Patriarchal, neo-liberal capitalism often asks of women (and men) to accept divisive loneliness in order to attain success and get ahead (Foster, 2016). During my conversations with Kaz, emerged an account of the long intellectual and emotional struggle she had been through to reclaim her making and define success on her own terms. Which is why, to me, the conceptual themes in her work communicate a refusal of the harshness of these external pressures, whilst putting forward an alternative narrative of lived and aspirational values she situates herself in.



Figures 2-3-4. *Love Pancake*, *Love Shrine* and *Love Sky*. Courtesy of Karen Nolan 2017.

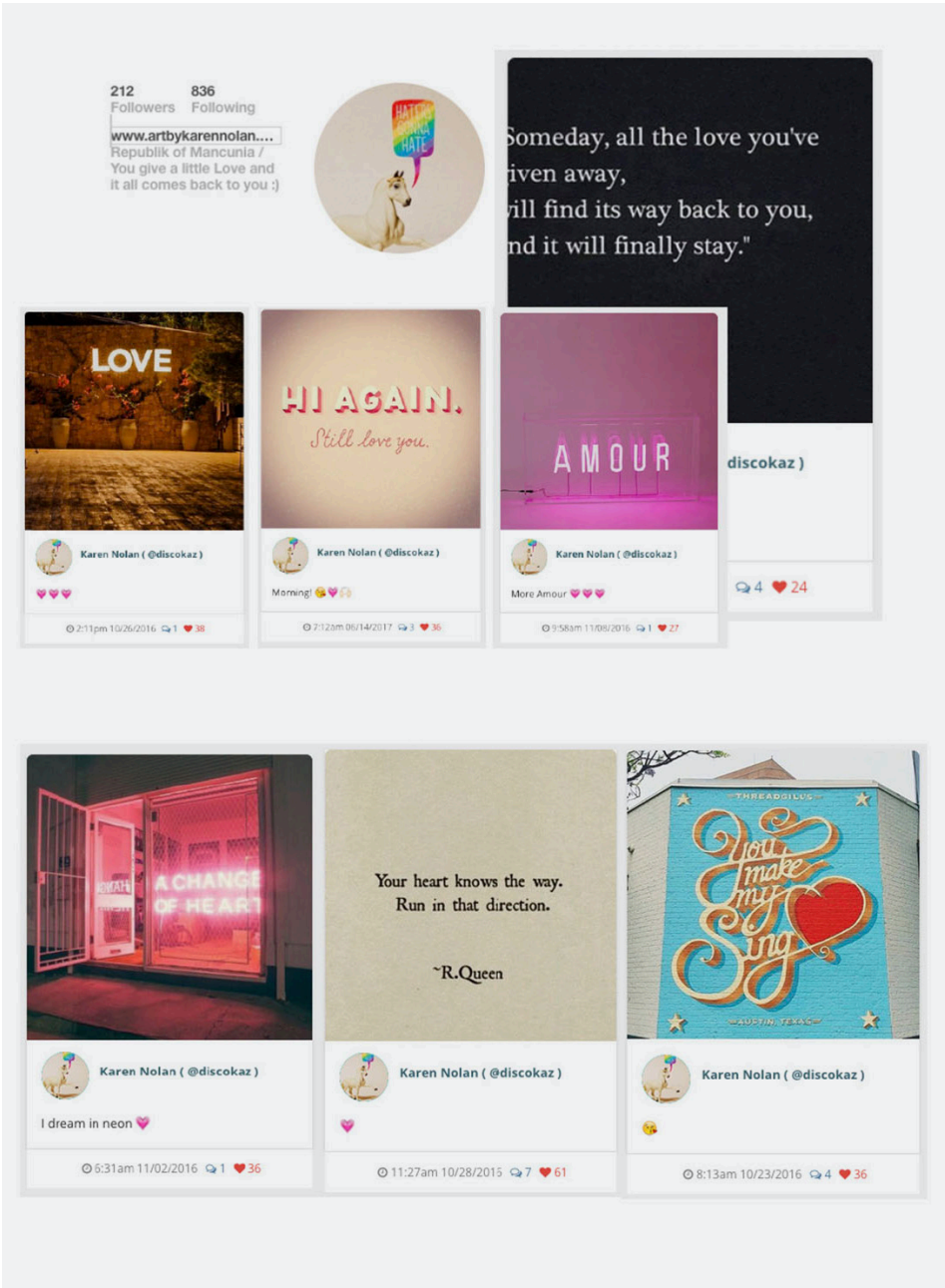


Figure 5. Online sentiments of love. Courtesy of Karen Nolan 2017.

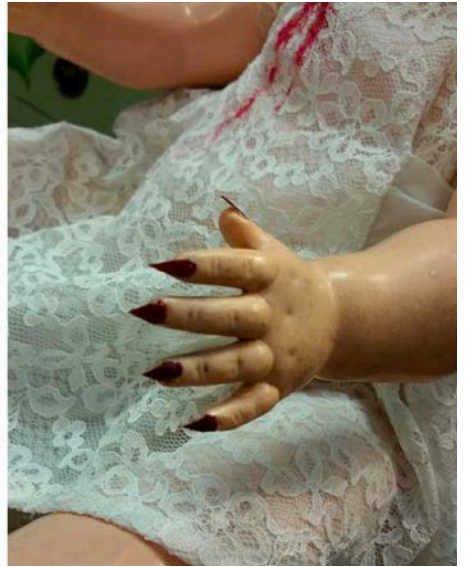
Kaz’s conceptual continuity intermingles with her collection of the work of others, on both her Instagram and Facebook pages (Figure 5). Her re-posting of love-based visuals, reflects the hues of pink and red, cursive scripts, glitter and uplifting messages of her own work. White (2015) points to a quote from the Urban Dictionary which posits Facebook as a place where “fake girls can ’write on each other’s walls how much they LOVE each other” (2015, p. 10). Thus, the idea of LOVE is rendered at once feminine as well as fake, negating such posts’ validity as a meaning-making gestures. Women are not unaware of how they are judged, they experience more trolling and abuse online than their male counterparts (White, 2015; Foster, 2016), which is why an insistence on posting themes that could be described as displaying normative femininity, could be considered as an act of subversion or resistance in itself, because of the broader misogynistic context that this is situated within.



Figures 6-7. *Halloween Baby* and *Coffin as Wardrobe*. Courtesy of Belinda Askew 2017.

6. Subversions of Concepts of Motherhood and the Feminine

Bill subverts the normative feminine by juxtaposing feminine beauty with death and feminine creation with decay. When Bill sent me her archival material of some of her previous creations we had talked about during my visit, I was struck at how different her aesthetic was to Kaz’s work, for example. But what I thought was interesting was that they were possibly similarly subversive in that they defied normative value judgement of femininity. With her themed Halloween babies and repurposing coffins as wardrobes, Bill’s work showed a lot of correlation with some of the female-making cultures Michele White discusses in *Producing Women – the internet, traditional femininity, queerness, and creativity* (2015) (Figures 6-7). Themes of death and decay are explored almost gleefully and Bill recounted happily how “grossed out” some people were by both here re-purposed coffins and her “Halloween babies”. These augmented dolls created by Bill for Halloween, reminded me of White (2015), who explains that the “reborn’ artists” community (who create life-like baby dolls for adult collectors), disturb understandings of the human, because the dolls are so lifelike that people outside of the reborn community often “read” them as dead babies. As such the women who engage in the reborn community become the most monstrous of humans – “mothers who allow their children to die or kill them” (p. 86). This perception is further strengthened by the creation of reborn premature babies, which are ill and attached to tubes and machinery to keep them “alive” (p. 87). Bill’s augmented Halloween dolls are not augmented to make them look kept alive but to make them look “deader” (Figures 8-9-10).



Figures 8-9-10. *Halloween Child*, *Halloween baby2*, *Halloween Teddy*. Courtesy of Belinda Askew 2017.

The underlying theme of decay in Bill's creations, – lovingly de-constructed with their scars, decay, bloody wound and added tech components, is deeply subversive. Her creations disturb not only because of what they are but also because they are created by a woman and, as such, transgress strong held societal beliefs about mothering, care, nurture. White (2015) describes the reborn community as also intersecting with the zombie bride community, where women dress up, use make up and plastic prosthetics in order to become “zombies” in public. She highlights that one of the reborn artists she observed made her first “creepy monster babies” for a friend who is part of the zombie bride community and how the public's reaction to these creations is often very hostile (p. 87). She proposes that the reason for this is that the public, consciously or un-consciously, identify it as a subversion of the societal norm of mothering and female stereotypes, and the zombie babies are identified as “contorted and perverse” (White, 2015, p. 87). Although Bill's Halloween creations are clearly not life-like, there is a similar subversion at play, and she uses very similar themes in making the toys dead-like – bones stick out, stapled together bloody wounds and discarded computer components are added, to tell visual and material narratives, familiar from horror films.

7. Conclusion

Subversion is an astonishingly shapeshifting act, since it conceptually depends on the context in which it is subverting. This means that two things quite the opposite of each other can be equally subversive because they are read and understood within different contexts.

In the women’s making I observed, I encountered subversion in a range of different ways. Here, I have highlighted the subversion of the normative feminine through concepts of death and decay in one woman’s practice (Bill) in juxtaposition with the overt use of feminine coded themes and materials as subverting in another’s (Kaz).

It’s worth recalling Bill talking about why she loved up-cycling so much more in contrast to making smaller craft items from scratch:

You see something worn down and not being used and then you turn it into something beautiful, not like the stuff I make now.

Whilst some of Bill’s practice aspires to beauty, this could not really be said of her Halloween range. However, her description of her experience of up-cycling does not just talk about the beauty value of the end product, but of the beauty she finds in the process of “making new” itself, – even if the making new involves death and horror. Channelling Persephone, Bill plays with concepts of beauty, nature, death, decay, femininity, motherhood and womanhood, whilst holding strong beliefs of immanence in connection to the material she works with. An immanence that urges her on in her creative endeavours.

This points to a discursive material practice where agency is not an attribute located in either her *or* her material, but is as Barad (2008) calls it “doing/being in its intra-activity” (p. 144). Which means that agency in Bill’s making is what happens between her and her material during making.

This understanding of material agency was surprisingly common in the women's making practices. Form-giving and meaning-making activities were very much situated at eye level with material and maker. Making was often conceptualised as an exchange with the inanimate, with the inanimate becoming animate and where the making is not static, but flows. Paying attention to one women's making can give space to discussions of ontology and can help us to gain insights within broader critical and philosophical frameworks, which frame agency as a site of transgression as well as transcendence and values it anew.

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