

Something to soften the blow

A photo-based exhibition

by

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A thesis exhibition

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2023

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Something to soften the blow is a visual arts exhibition featuring photography, textile, and video artworks that explore feminist critiques of representation in film, specifically looking at the slasher genre. What began as a casual consumption of horror films bloomed into a binge-watching experience over the last 3 years during the COVID-19 pandemic, which inspired the themes incorporated into this body of work. In referencing select films from the 1970's to 2020's, I consider parallels to contemporary culture and how patriarchy and misogyny feature in representations of real and fictional women. This text is split into twelve subtitled chapters that reflect the approach to my artistic practice, choice of materials, and conceptual underpinnings.

Acknowledgements

In this paper, I reflect and critique the systemic structures that uphold white supremacist values and reinforce acts of violence against indigenous communities and recognize my privilege in these systems. The last two years of my artistic practice and studies have taken place in the Kitchener-Waterloo region. As a result, I am keenly aware that the Waterloo, Kitchener, and Cambridge campuses of the University of Waterloo are situated on the Haldimand Tract, land that was granted to the Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations of the Grand River, and are within the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples. With this acknowledgement, I want show solidarity to Indigenous communities with legacies rooted in this region. During my graduate studies I had the honor of working briefly with O:se Kenhionhata:tie, known as Land Back Camp, a community-organized effort to educate and support Indigenous, Queer, and Trans youth of the KW region— Land Back Camp continues to fight for access to land, providing spaces for Indigenous groups to organize and settle, to which they deserve support and recognition for these efforts. I draw attention to the work of Land Back Camp to illustrate my commitment to the Indigenous sovereignty, to support them via social media or monetary donations:

<https://www.landbackcamp.com/support>.

Moreover, my art practice began and continues to develop in the Niagara Region, Ontario, known as the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples. The territory of Niagara is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties and is within the land protected by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Agreement. The Dish with One Spoon

is a treaty bounding the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee to share the territory and protect the land. Newcomers, such as European settlers, were invited into the treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship, and respect. The “dish” is represented as southern Ontario, shared by all with one spoon. The dish needs to be cared for and never emptied, with all who inhabit it need to take responsibility to care for the land and creatures we share it with. I would like to recognize The Niagara Regional Native Centre (NRNC), for their efforts in becoming a safe space for Indigenous peoples of Niagara and for working with academic institutions to open the opportunity for settlers to educate themselves on Indigenous rights and issues and become involved in Idle No More and Land Back efforts.

I want to share my gratitude and thanks for the support and enthusiasm of the alternating members of my committee; Cora Cluett, Bojana Videkanic, and Logan McDonald. The encouragement, kindnesses and wisdom from my committee will stay with me for a long time.

Thank you to Paulette Phillips for your time and considerations as the external advisor for this support paper and body of work.

Thank you to Lois Andison, Tara Cooper, Alexis Dolphin, and Rebecca MacAlpine, for teaching me in the last two years across courses in art, education, anthropology, and gender studies. Thank you, Natalie Hunter and Laura Magnusson, for fantastic studio visits!

Thank you to the phenomenal technicians of ECH: Adam Glover, Rick Nixon, Timothy Walker. Thank you to our wonderful librarian Jean Stevenson— location scout extraordinaire!

Thank you to the MFA cohort— Brent, Christine, Clara, Stephanie— and the support of the cohort after us, especially for indulging me in screening Jordan Peele’s *Nope* and Wes Craven’s *The People Under the Stairs* when I picked the evening entertainment on our fall seminar trip.

Thank you to Laura Stevens, taking me under your wing in the sprawling city of Paris, forever impacting me.

Thank you to Amy Friend, your never-ending influence, advice, and care.

Thank you to my friends, made in person and found on the internet, for all your cheerleading.

Thank you to my parents, your continuous love, and mom’s home cooking. You too, Emma.

And thank you to Josh— for everything, especially watching movies with me.

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Introduction

“How many ladies have to die to make it good?”

-In the Cut (dir. Jane Campion, 2003)

Something to soften the blow is a thesis exhibition of photographic, textile, and video work culminating from two years of my studio practice. The exhibition looks at familiar tropes of the slasher horror genre to address not only representations of the female body in film, but also more broadly in society. This body of work focuses on the familiar yet understudied character of what I call the First Girl, a female character that appears early in a film whose brutalized body is often used to set the plot and her identity is an afterthought. The First Girl appears throughout the show overtly (a body visible in photographs and video) and covertly (in rugs, and overall, the core narrative of the show). The First Girl serves as a way to address sexism and misogyny in both mainstream film and contemporary society, as a first victim who refuses to fade and disappear. Her figure takes up space throughout the exhibition, as well as functioning as the organizing structure throughout this support paper. The short chapters of this text are divided by subtitles containing the name of a First Girl from a film, followed by her time of death. The short time span of her life, marked within the first 20 minutes of a film, serves as a reference to her finite mortality and the ongoing theme of death throughout in this body of work.

My thesis work, titled “*Something to soften the blow*”, is best introduced through introducing myself and the research-based process that led to this exhibition, representing a body of work culminating from two years of studio research and scholarship.

“Unnamed woman” 00:03:10 (*The Invitation*, dir. Jessica M. Thompson, 2022)

My background is from a sheltered, middle-class neighbourhood in southern Ontario where all our neighbours were cops. My dad, now retired, was working as a homicide detective. I would occasionally see him on the news at some horrible crime scenes, but that was the extent to my knowledge of his job and where he was most of the time. I grew up attending Catholic school where I was taught to not be questioning or challenging of authority, and the realities of the Catholic church were hidden under the surface. When I started high school, every day I walked by the memorial of a female student who was brutally murdered at my age. Her photo was behind glass, and I could see my reflection in her image in our matching uniforms. I began to understand violence as a peripheral constant in my everyday life. In that first year of high school, I experienced a decline in my mental health and was diagnosed with anxiety and depression.

When I went to university, I quickly learned that the Catholic education I was raised in was full of half-truths, indoctrinating us at a young age to not question the patriarchy, the government, or the capitalist system itself. As the friends I made in school started having children and getting married before reaching age 20, I met my own mounting frustrations and

a drive to push back from those normative expectations. While going to university in the 21st century isn't a radical idea, I am only the second woman in my entire extended family to pursue a post-secondary education.

In 2020, our world experienced a massive shift as all of our lives were upturned by the COVID-19 pandemic. For months, Canada was under stringent lockdown rules that put a halt to our daily routines and life as we knew it. It was during this time that I sought comfort in binge-watching and turned to seeking out horror films, horror being the genre I was least familiar with but discovered a new obsession in. I found myself identifying with female characters in the horror genre, with a specific interest in the slasher film. The slasher is formulaic and prescriptive, and within those conditions watching these movies offered a sense of control in a chaotic time. For me, the slasher film inspires feelings of dread, discomfort, and fear, all emotions that speak to my experience of womanhood. I chose to watch horror during the pandemic because of its predictability in an unpredictable time, and I continue to watch it today for those reasons as a form of comfort. Taking into consideration my work today which focuses on the negative representations in this genre, I also find empowerment in seeing female characters assert power and express rage on screen. Finding a pattern in the frustration of the more commonly stereotypical depictions of women, my film-watching practices began to inspire me in my artmaking. While my undergraduate degree is in studio arts, feminist issues and lens-based media are passionate interests of mine that take persistence in my art practice.

One of the many tropes of the slasher genre is that a range of characters are killed off throughout the film, and most often the virginal and female character survives to the end,

known as the Final Girl.¹ Aside from the Final Girl, other characters in slasher films are frequently women who are picked-off throughout the film as they are deemed too promiscuous to deserve survival.

In my work I have chosen to concentrate on the character of what I call the First Girl, who is a counterpart to the popular Final Girl. The Final Girl and First Girl represent a well-known dichotomy found in classic psychoanalytic theory—the Madonna-whore complex. They function as archetypes: typically, the First Girl is a white woman, punished for her independence and misbehavior by being brutalized within the first twenty minutes of a film, while the Final Girl, also often white, survives and defeats the killer at the end as an “exemplary” woman, who by her survival upholds patriarchal values.

I approach the slasher genre with criticality as I try to understand *how* my own subject-position would fare within these narrative troupes. The disposability of the First Girl and how her depictions relate to larger contemporary discourses of gender, sexism, and racism, is explored through a series of four large scale photographs, a rug installation, and video work, which encompasses the work presented in my “*Something to soften the blow*” graduate art exhibition.

This work developed at a time when women’s rights have come under attack, and I was reflecting on the ways various medias perpetuate these challenges. I feel a responsibility to speak to some of the urgent issues surrounding women’s rights, like how our bodies are

¹ Film scholar Carol J. Clover coined the term “Final Girl” in 1992 in her text *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. Clover defines the final girl as “the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified”. (Clover 35)

objectified, while at times treated as if they are not our own. While these issues were visible and simmering in the public consciousness for many years, I felt frustration and sadness in the summer of 2022 during the confluence of highly publicized events curbing women's rights. During this summer, I was abroad for the first time in my life, feeling alone and overwhelmed, and as a response to the frustration from the news I turned to my photographic practise to work out my emotions. *Something to soften the blow* (Figure 1) is a single photograph taken in a 13th century convent in Corsica, France, where I was on an internship assisting a professional photographer. One day my fellow artists at the convent were discussing the livestreamed trial of actor Amber Heard and were questioning the credibility of Heard's claims of experiencing domestic violence. I involved myself in their conversation by stating they shouldn't have an opinion about another woman's body and experiences, but my interjection was ignored, and the conversation continued, peppered with jokes about Heard. I removed myself and took solace in the reading room (captured in Figure 1) and thought about performing dead as an expression of my resentments.

“Clara” 00:29:05 (Ready or Not, dir. Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillet, 2019)

“A consequence can be recruited as a cause. It might be assumed you caused your own damage because you left the safety of a brightly lit path. Gender norms too can work like this: when femininity is registered as fragility, when that fragility is used to explain what happens to her, or what she can and cannot do, a consequence of power is recruited as the cause”.

Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 164-5

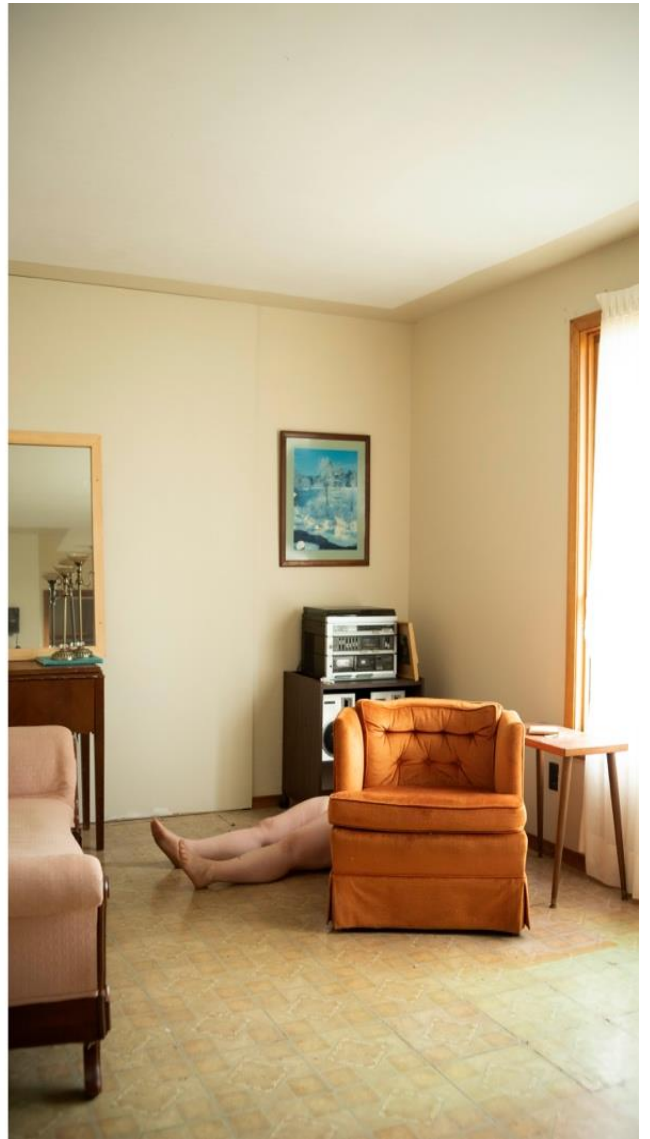


Fig. 1 & 2: *Something to soften the blow*, Sarah Martin, set of 2 archival pigment prints on vinyl, 44x72 inches, 2022.



Fig. 3: Sarah Martin, *Something to soften the blow*, Exhibition installation, University of Waterloo Art Gallery 2023, photo by Robert McNair.

“Unnamed woman” 00:16:23 (*The Stendhal Syndrome*, dir. Dario Argento, 1996)

Something to soften the blow (Figures 1 & 2) is a set of two photographic works, printed large-scale (44" x 72") on vinyl. Mounted directly on the wall, the vinyl print reaches down to where the wall meets the ground, creating an expanded relationship between the print and the rugs on the floor, representative of a doorway or a portal. In this set of images, I put myself in the position of the First Girl, recasting myself inside the frame in the role of the disposed body, as splayed female-presenting ligaments, mimicking familiar visual compositional tropes found in horror movies. By doing this I am implicating my own subjectivity in this narrative. While I am critical of the way that misogyny in horror casts women's bodies as disposable, I am also cognizant of how victimhood in mainstream movies is selective, portraying mostly white female bodily as vulnerable, as either victims or survivors. However, at the same time, the genre often erases historically marginalized women, thereby making the white victim the unquestioning subject again and again. I do not consider this work self-portraiture, but a critical reflection on my own subject position of a white woman repeating the stereotype of a white female body in horror. There is an intentional lack of blood and guts— by removing the gruesome from a violent death leaves the female body in a state to be objectified without hesitation, the last remnants of the woman embodying her hyper-sexualized identity. In this set of images, I am positioned in two very different spaces but both images speak the same language— a disposed body left behind. Using the visual trope of female death as entertainment, the intent of becoming the latest

First Girl is to question— what does it mean to be both the viewer/voyeur and the victim? What does it mean to see yourself in both realities? What does it mean to consume narratives that consistently fantasize about your own death?

“Telephone repair woman” 00:05:30 (*The Slumber Party Massacre*, dir. Amy Holden Jones, 1982)

FIRST GIRL MANIFESTO: FIRST GIRL RULES (Figure 4) is a text-based work I have developed that operates as a list of “rules”, which I consider and have consolidated here as tropes of the First Girl character. The list of actions or descriptions are common traits among First Girl characters and are often seen as the reasons *for* a female characters’ demise within a typical slasher film narrative. If she participates in these acts, her death is likely, and supposedly justified. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed coins this victim-blaming thought process as “gender fatalism”, wherein if a woman “fails” to modify her behavior in accordance with her environment, violence acted against them can be justified as “inevitable”. (pg. 19)

To compliment the 12 rules that comprise the *FIRST GIRL MANIFESTO: FIRST GIRL RULES*, I have interjected this text by listing the films and timestamps of 12 First Girls, selected from films I’ve seen and that have informed this body of work, which are provided as headers breaking up the overall thesis.

Fig. 4 A FIRST GIRL MANIFESTO: FIRST GIRL RULES

1. THE FIRST GIRL FUCKS
2. THE FIRST GIRL GOES OUT AT NIGHT ALONE
3. THE FIRST GIRL SAYS NO
4. THE FIRST GIRL TRIED THEIR BEST
5. THE FIRST GIRL CAN'T RUN
6. THE FIRST GIRL HAS NO NAME
7. THE FIRST GIRL THOUGHT THEY WOULD SURVIVE TOO
8. THE FIRST GIRL BROKE THE RULES
9. THE FIRST GIRL WAS RECKLESS
10. THE FIRST GIRL ASKED FOR IT
11. THE FIRST GIRL GOT WHAT THEY DESERVED
12. THE FIRST GIRL DIES

“Pat” 00:11:45 (*Suspiria*, dir. Dario Argento, 1977)

I have found that horror films typically present narratives that are intended to convince viewers that the female victim deserved the violence and cruelties committed against them. This casual violence in depiction of women reveals deep-seated patriarchal values within the genre. As I continued watching films and making this work, I looked at how the actions, behaviors, and attitudes leading to a victim’s demise, within any given horror film narrative, is illustrative of the social messaging that affirms and normalizes the disposability of women. I think of this disposability as symptomatic of a broader misogyny and patriarchy embedded in Western culture. The fictional First Girls, in their fleeting moments of being alive on screen, push against the heteronormative values and the expectations of their gender, acting recklessly under the rules of horror but act on their own agency until the end. I am inspired by First Girls and strive to be that type of woman.

I am cognizant, as I make this work, that through my positionality I am an unwilling beneficiary to white-supremacist systems of misogynist patriarchal thinking and values. It is a sour privilege I try to dismantle and address critically throughout this series of artworks. My work therefore exists in tension between the continued usage of the white female body as a ubiquitous first victim, over-represented, and privileged in real-life situations in which its victimhood is weaponized. My aim has been to be critical of both present-day patriarchal systems in our society, and the ways that some white women can weaponize their victimhood— often at the cost of historically marginalized people. I realize that my own body, signified as a white cis-woman, is implicated in this conversation, which is why I chose to

intentionally locate myself in the work— as a measure of accountability and awareness of the social privileges I have access to that are intrinsic to whiteness in western culture.

One of the fundamental texts that informed my thinking when creating this work was bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), where hooks challenged popular theories of the active white “male gaze” attributed to the audience, and a passive (and white) “female gaze” attributed to the mostly white feminism in film theory. To make space for black female spectators watching films critically, hooks came up with the notion of an oppositional gaze to defy both the active male gaze and the passive female gaze. The oppositional gaze is an act of resistance by simply exercising the right to look, specifically pertaining to black female moviegoers, when cinema was so blatantly made to be consumed by mainly white audiences. (122) hooks' notion of the oppositional gaze, or a third perspective within viewership, recognized a blind spot, or a positionality that I could not have imagined in my early days of consuming horror films for this work. With the knowledge of hooks' oppositional gaze, I began to critically understand how whiteness dominating film screens and how thus white supremacy permeates Western mainstream films, especially in the crucial absence of significant roles played by black women. This is not to say there were no black women in film, rather that the issue lies in the abundance of white-serving Western film narratives, in which the horror genre is not immune. (Ugwu)²

Some favorite recent entries of mine in the mainstream horror genre that feature black female

² It is necessary to mention the breadth of horror films that exist that feature black talent in front of and behind the camera. Black stories within the horror genre have existed since early filmmaking but was unawarded of mainstream recognition due to the racism of the film industry, leading to exclusion in film scholarship/theory/etc. until recent efforts in the 90's from theorists like bell hooks.

main actors include Angela Bassett in *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995), Jada Pinkett Smith in *Scream 2* (1997)³, Naomie Harris in *28 Days Later* (2002), Halle Berry in *Gothika* (2003), Sanaa Lathan in *Alien vs. Predator* (2004), Lupita Nyong'o in *Us* (2019), Octavia Spencer in *Ma* (2019), Teyonah Paris in *Candyman* (2021), and Keke Palmer in *Nope* (2022).⁴

“Clare” 00:11:54 (*Black Christmas*, dir. Bob Clark, 1974)

Working with the list of horror films I've watched— a majority of which were viewed only in the last three years during the COVID-19 pandemic— I have been able to conveniently track and catalogue each viewed film through using the social media app *Letterboxd* (Figure 5). With this app, I have narrowed my list down to a group of fifty movies that informed and inspired this body of work. I have conceptually connected over fifty movies by creating my own way of classifying them: a) the first death in the film is that of a white woman, b) their death scenes usually occur in the first 2 to 20 minutes, c) the movies range from the early 1970's to the 2020's. The choice of this timeframe was deliberate: to consider how these movies' narratives may relate to social issues, specifically waves of feminism (second and third/fourth), at the time of release.⁵ This limited selection of films is intentionally dogmatic

³ Pinkett-Smith is one of the few Black First Girls.

⁴ Two excellent documentaries that provide further context about Black representation in contemporary cinema: *Horror Noire* (dir. Xavier Burgin, 2019), *Is That Black Enough for You?!?* (dir. Elvis Mitchell, 2022)

⁵ In Cynthia Freeland's *Feminist Framework for Horror Films*, she notes how films in the late 70's reflected the cultural anxieties surrounding shifting gender roles, and the second wave of feminisms' response to these reactions (628). This is an inciting revelation that helped me build my own framework of selecting movies that spoke to the year in which it was made, and how that reflected feminist efforts of the time frame.

to draw parallels of how the brutal deaths of female characters fail to evolve from the 1970's to 2020's, even though the social conditions of the second and third waves of feminism during that time call for development in female representation— a call that went largely unanswered in mainstream cinema.⁶



Fig. 5: Screenshot of a small section of my “watched” movies on the app *Letterboxd*, 2023.

⁶ In a study from 2007 to 2017, female speaking characters across 1100 films were granted only 30.6% of screentime (Smith 1).



Fig. 6: *FIRST GIRL FANCAM (00:52)*, Sarah Martin, 3:50 min. video on single-channel monitor, 2023.



Fig. 7: Sarah Martin, *FIRST GIRL FANCAM, Something to soften the blow* exhibition installation, University of Waterloo Art Gallery 2023, photo by Robert McNair.

“Megan” 00:11:50 (*Sorority Row*, dir. Stewart Hendler, 2009)

I was born on the cusp of the Generation Z, identifying with the rise of the Internet and Internet culture. As a user of many social media platforms, I’ve engaged with countless videos made by fans that splice together clips of their favourite actors or celebrities to make a video edit exclusively of that person. The “fancam” has existed since it was possible to record media on TV, through the origins of “vidding” by using two VCRs to play back and

record simultaneously. (Coppa 123) To me, a natural creative progression in this work was to begin manipulating these films as source material to retell a story and rewrite the narrative. This led to the creation of my video *FIRST GIRL FANCAM* (Figure 6).

FIRST GIRL FANCAM is a single channel video that plays on a Sony Trinitron television sitting on the floor of the gallery. Using the Trinitron TV was an intentional signifier to connect the work to the time period that most of the films I examined were created from (late 90's), as well as to create a sense of familiarity in the gallery. In addition, the plush rugs also are intended to allude to the late 90's television viewing on the floor. For me this reinvigorated my personal sense of nostalgia that permeates throughout the exhibition. *FIRST GIRL FANCAM* is comprised of a remix from spliced scenes from the 50-film-archive used as inspiration for the body of this work. With minimal sound, the video offers only the crackling audio of static from the CRT television, with louder static interjections reminiscent of flipping channels. *FIRST GIRL FANCAM* was created by focusing on using the anticipatory scenes of the First Girl's death, drawing out the events prior to death to negate the inevitable violence. This creates suspense, as we focus on the First Girl in the moment before— forever. In my edit of their stories, they exist together in the same universe, in a pattern of expressing their own autonomies, isolated but alive, their moment of death now voided and offscreen.

The act of watching, re-watching, and reproducing this found footage allowed me to re-contextualize the First Girl with my own words. The visual language of the 4-minute video intentionally uses the repeatedly appropriated, low resolution imagery as a counter to

the high-definition glossiness in horror films today, by using grain and heightening the moiré patterns the “afterlife” of the image becomes embodied. (Steyerl 18) I credit *MOTHER & FATHER* (Figure 8) by Candice Brietz as an inspiration in the making of this work, a 12-channel installation that exhibits the duality of how both men and women are consistently stereotyped in mainstream film. Brietz’s found footage video work is an incredible alteration of its source material, pulling from various drama films in the 1990’s, distilling several characters to create a composite, singular character drawn from the expectations of their gender.

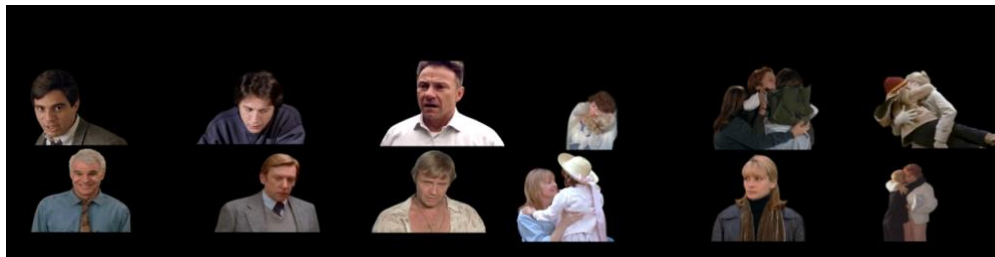


Fig. 8: Candice Brietz, screenshot from *MOTHER & FATHER*, 2 6-channel video installation, 2005.

The idea of a “fancam” itself is that someone is always watching another person’s movements, the watched subject often performing on a stage— but what better metaphor to the experience of womanhood than through acts of performance witnessed through someone else’s eyes? A sense of dread builds throughout the video as half-second scenes of violence are spliced in throughout, breaking up an on-going phone conversation between the characters who are beginning to sense something is not right. First Girls in peril are shown throughout the phone conversation as characters react to sounds offscreen, muted for the

viewer, as if reacting to the footage of the other girls under attack. Through my re-editing of film footage, the video implicates the audience to anticipate the expected scene of violence, while my manipulated footage rewrites these First Girls' stories to instead eliminate their scene of death.

Much of my art practice is inspired and informed by cinema, so it felt like a natural progression to begin manipulating the source videos to retell a story and rewrite the narrative. In exploring both the singular still image in my photographic work and sequences of images that make up a video in this piece, I examine the contrasted relationship of photo and video in my work by considering the narrative potential both mediums hold. The permanence of the still image is a death, a final moment, but the video work allows life to thrive.⁷ Both elements of life and death, video, and photo, are fundamental to this body of work.

⁷ A very influential conversation in photography theory is the relationship of death and the photograph. Susan Sontag reflects on this relationship in the seminal text *On Photography*: "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt". (15)

“Robin” 00:07:53 (*Prom Night*, dir. Paul Lynch, 1980)

“Giving a woman a ‘taste of her own medicine’, that is, seeking vengeance against her, on the part of those who feel treated by her often falsely and unfairly. For his wounds may be due to an illicit sense of entitlement to be the subject of her gaze, the focus on her attention, or the beneficiary of her tender ministrations. He feels less human or, perhaps better, less humanized, than he believes he deserves, and was expecting, to be made to feel. And so he returns the favor as payback”.

Kate Manne, *Down Girl*, 169



Fig. 9: Sarah Martin, *Blood rug 1-10, Something to soften the blow* exhibition installation, University of Waterloo Art Gallery 2023, photo by Robert McNair.



Fig. 10: Sarah Martin, *Blood rug 1-10, Something to soften the blow* exhibition installation, University of Waterloo Art Gallery 2023, photo by Robert McNair.

“Gloria” 00:20:45 (*Body Double*, dir. Brian de Palma, 1984)

My textile work *Blood rug 1-10* (Figure 9) is exactly what the title implies, a series of large red cotton soft sculpture floor carpets that present as suggestive imagery of pools of blood. The rugs, however, do little to *soften* the blow of intense emotional tensions the work posits to unravel. I am intentionally connecting a domestic object, in this case a rug, to blood and violence as a strategy to both build tension and insert humour. The rug therefore becomes a nostalgic connection to my experience of watching slasher films at home, the rug is also an object of comfort while here in my work it represents abject horror. (Kristeva 3)⁸ The title *Blood rug* refers to the material and standard props in film industry made of silicone that replicate a staged pool of blood (bloodrugs.com/shop). In my work the silicone is replaced by wool. Using the rug-making process is intended to soften the visual language inspired by horror, turning something sticky and violent into soft and comforting. Making these rugs, however, is physically demanding and rigorous work, and the process itself could also be perceived as violent. Using a rug tufting machine (which is ironically shaped as a semi-automatic gun and looks like AK-47), the yarn is fed through a front-loaded needle and then repeatedly stabbed into a stretched piece canvas. Each pull of the trigger explodes out small cut pieces of yarn as it pierces through the fabric.

⁸ Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* uses the term “abject horror” as a self-abasing, primal breakdown between a subject-object. (3) Kristeva examples a human experience of abject horror as one’s own bodily fluids, the ultimate expulsion of one’s hidden insides and collapses the border of inside/outside. (Kristeva 53)

The rugs are figurative representations of the body within the gallery space, referencing leftover blood pools from sites of violence, each existing as an absent figure. They are also made of bright red acrylic yard – an exaggeration of blood that evokes a pop-cartoon aesthetic, which I chose deliberately to connect to how camp and humorous some of the violence depicted in horror films can be.⁹¹⁰ The installation of these rugs presents them spread across the floor. As an installation, the rug series challenges the museum/gallery experience that asks visitors to walk around an artwork, rather, these floor pieces are unavoidable— and it is anticipated that viewers will walk on them. This decision was made with the conceit that they may be stepped on or damaged, as a metaphor that connects to the disregard and disposability of the female bodies on film—being simultaneously active, passive, ever-present and absent, both essential to the plot yet easily discarded. As the viewer moves through the space, towards the next body/rug, the process of choosing to look or ignoring repeats as they circumnavigate/or walk over the ten rugs splayed throughout the gallery floor.

⁹ Camp is playful and anti-serious, a humorous aesthetic and sensibility that is stylistic and revels in artifice. Susan Sontag wrote the seminal essay *Notes on Camp* in 1964, exemplifying art nouveau as an artistic style that exudes camp: “it is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off’, of things-being-what-they-are-not”. (Sontag 3)

¹⁰ “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman.’ To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater”. (Sontag 4)



Fig. 11: Sarah Martin, *Wrapped in plastic, Blood rug 1-10, Something to soften the blow* exhibition installation, University of Waterloo Art Gallery 2023, photo by Robert McNair.

“Judith” 00:05:54 (*Halloween*, dir. John Carpenter, 1978)

Wrapped in plastic (Figure 11) casts the body nearly offscreen, lit by an emanating blue glow reminiscent of a television screen. The body in this image is wrapped in plastic, prepared for disposal, removing most of the body’s identity except for their whiteness. The space feels abandoned, with no obvious signs of furniture or life in the aged space with its vintage wallpaper and plywood accents. While posing in this photo, I felt a sense of suffocation and dread. To more fully enact the photograph I imagined, I needed the assistance of a loved one who helped drag my body across the floor. This experience furthered my sense of dread. The photo was taken in early November, on the day of the first snowfall, and the cold linoleum stung and scratched as I lay there. The setting of this image drew inspiration from one of my first encounters with the horror genre, the television show *Twin Peaks*, in which within the first few minutes of the pilot episode a local teenage girl is found dead, wrapped in plastic. (Lynch 4:30) In Alice Bolin’s series of essays, *Dead Girls*, she reflects on the impact of that opening scene on pop culture’s obsession with dead female bodies. Bolin writes: “Dead Girls help us work out our complicated feelings about the privileged status of white women in our culture. The paradox of the perfect victim, effacing the deaths of leagues of nonwhite or poor or ugly or disabled or immigrant or drug-addicted or gay or trans victims, encapsulates the combination of worshipful covetousness and violent rage that drives the Dead Girl Show”. (30) Since *Twin Peaks*, a boom in what Bolin calls the “Dead Girl Shows” began and continues to thrive in contemporary television— notable titles like *Veronica Mars*, *NCSI*,

Law and Order: SVU, Dexter, True Detective, Under the Banner of Heaven, How to Get Away with Murder, Mare of Easttown—many of which are prestigious and award-winning multi-season shows. Bolin notes that all these shows begin with the discovery of a young, murdered woman, but by the end of their story, “there can be no redemption for the Dead Girl, but it is available to the person solving her murder... just as for the murderers, for the detectives, the victim’s body is a neutral arena on which to work out male problems”. (25)



Fig. 12: Sarah Martin, *Something to soften the blow* exhibition installation, University of Waterloo Art Gallery 2023, photo by Robert McNair.

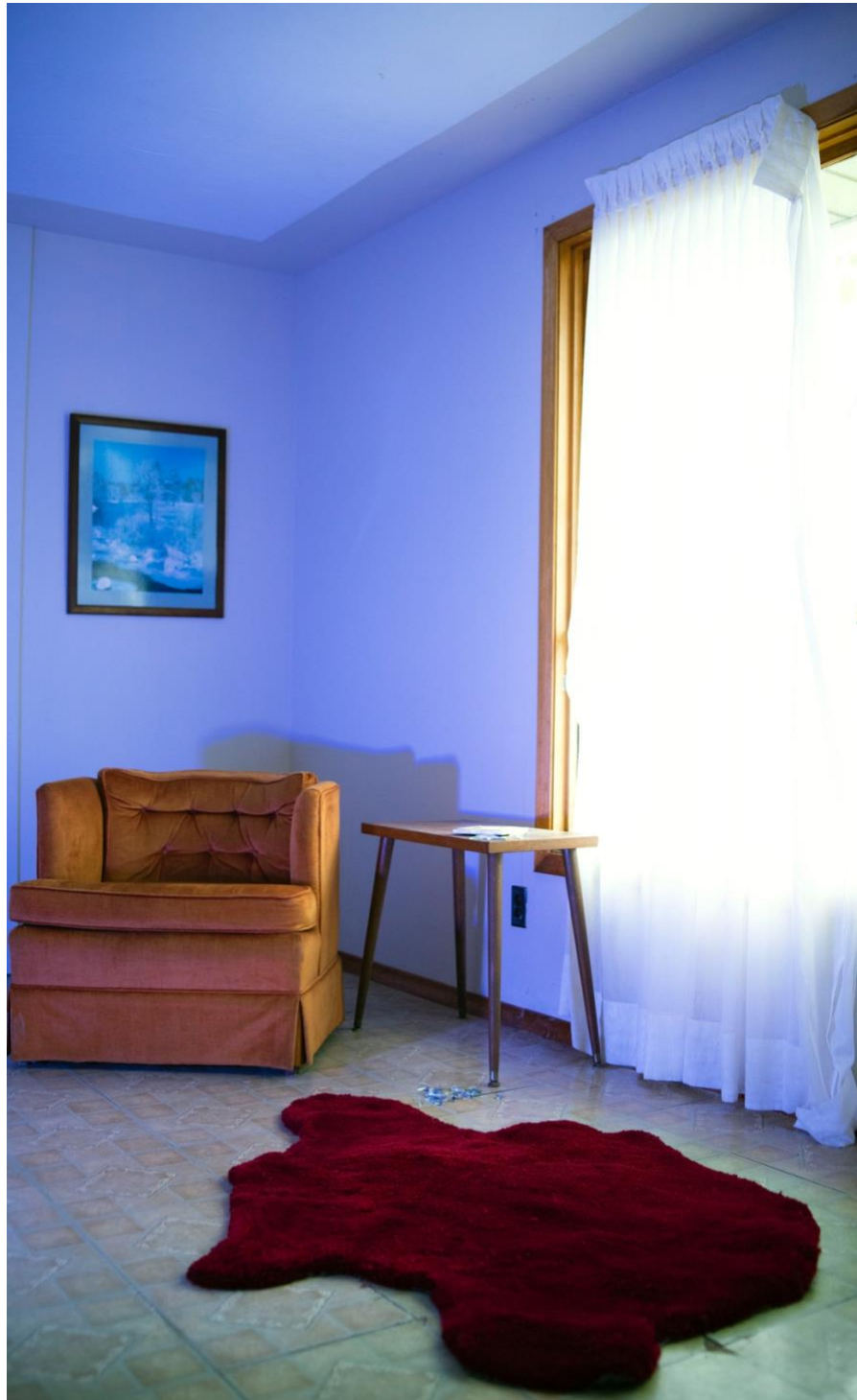


Fig. 13: Sarah Martin, *Aftermath*, archival pigment print on vinyl, 44x72", 2023.

“Unnamed woman” 00:20:25 (*Hellraiser: Inferno*, dir. Scott Derrickson, 2000)

In the installation of these 4 large scale photographic works, the images can be read as a linear narrative to tell a story of someone becoming a victim. *Aftermath* (Figure 13) is on its own wall, positioned off-center towards the right of the wall, but not quite in the corner (seen in exhibition installation views in Figures 12 and 15). The chair and rug photographed in *Aftermath* can be seen in the exhibition as if the set has come to life, inviting the viewer to step in and sit down, faced in front of the monitor playing *FIRST GIRL FANCAM*. *Aftermath* is the only image out of the 4 photographic works to be absent of the human body, but instead leaves *Blood rug* in its place as a reminder of the site of violence. Small details throughout the photograph hint at the aftermath of a struggle within a domestic space—broken glass, a curtain pulled off its hinges. Light emits from the window in a blown-out, ethereal glow that contrasts with the television glow, similar to the glow which emits in *Wrapped in plastic*. The television screen glow references back towards to the gallery installation of *FIRST GIRL FANCAM*, allowing the viewer to experience the physical installation of the photographic image. I wanted this to create a surreal sense of tension, playing with the idea of treating the gallery space as something that could be set-dressed, thus creating a physical re-creation of my own work.

With photography as the primary focus of my practice, this support document would be unfinished without reference to the artists that inspire me (collaged in Figure 14). Laurie Simmons’ collaged photographic series *The Instant Decorator* (2001-2004), Jo Ann Callis’

entire body of work, Sarah Sudhoff's striking portraits of blood in *At the Hour of Our Death* (2010), and Sara Cwynar's investigative photographic series and video *Rose Gold* (2017). Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) was one of the first artworks that ever inspired me to make art myself. Her influential series continues to impact my work and interests in how photography and performance intersect.



Fig. 14: Jo Ann Callis, Sarah Sudhoff, Cindy Sherman, Sara Cwynar, Laurie Simmons
(clockwise from top left).



Fig. 15: Sarah Martin, *Something to soften the blow* exhibition installation, University of Waterloo Art Gallery 2023, photo by Robert McNair.

“Casey” 00:11:02 (*Scream*, dir. Wes Craven, 1996)

While I have taken the time to critique the horror genre and representations in mainstream cinema, I still have a deep love for horror film. I have found a kinship within the tropes of its genre, where women are constantly pushed to meet expectations and the few that find agency are often punished for their choices. Coming to my own as an adult woman, I found myself being challenged under the limits of the patriarchy, constantly feeling the

burden of the choices I make for myself being seen as right or wrong. In the last year alone, I have seen female autonomy viciously under attack and women being punished for seeking autonomy over their own bodies.¹¹ I love to watch horror for its ability to push boundaries and offer critical responses to political questions, but I also challenge it for its enforcement of patriarchal values. My exhibition focuses on the life and death of the female figure in these horror tropes— their expendability, their disposability, but also their life, vitality, and effervescent attraction to subverting expectation, regardless of punishment. Violence often becomes sensationalized, in real life and fiction, and the result of that sensationalism reduces the victim, the First Girl, to being only her body, the spilling of her blood, and revealing of her flesh. This aestheticized violence affects more than one kind of girl, even though the imagery presented in pop culture assumes a purity inextricably linked with whiteness. With this body of work, I translate my viewership into my art practice, reflecting my life experience as I digest and navigate the harsh realities of patriarchy and misogyny.

¹¹ I am directly referencing the world events beginning in 2022 that focus on women's rights: the "Women, Life, Freedom" protest movement in Iran following Mahsa Amini's death, and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* that led to the criminalization of abortion in 13 US states.

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