

**Beauty and the Grotesque in the porcelain work of
Shary Boyle: a study in subversion**

by

Sarah Grace Murphy
B.A., University of Victoria, 2005

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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In the Department of History in Art

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Abstract

Contemporary Canadian artist Shary Boyle's varied body of work includes: drawings, paintings, performance art and sculpture. While Boyle has received national and international recognition, there has not been an in-depth scholarly study of this prolific artist. In particular, this thesis will focus on Boyle's lace draped porcelain figures, created between 2002-2006, as well as select drawings from her "Porcelain Fantasy Series." It will examine her use of both the familiar, as well as the subversive powers of the grotesque, as she appropriates visual motifs used in traditional porcelain figurines. Through the grotesque she disrupts and challenges patriarchal constructions, and the consumption, of feminine beauty that is typically represented in these figurines. Her work both critiques and draws attention to restrictions these constructions have placed on women, as well as providing images of emancipation.

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Introduction

Shary Boyle's porcelain sculptures conjure images of female figurines we may have seen before on our grandmother's mantle piece or in cabinets at china shops. They are strikingly beautiful and intricately detailed. However, Boyle's sculptures bear the marks of physical pain and disfigurement in the form of cuts and bruises, strange growths and multiple body parts. In this thesis, I will argue that it is through Boyle's use of the grotesque that she disrupts and challenges patriarchal constructions, and the consumption, of femininity that is typically represented in historical and contemporary porcelain figurines. While this thesis will be primarily concerned with constructions of feminine beauty, identities based on race and class will also be addressed since Boyle's work portrays a white, upper-class feminine ideal.

Through Boyle's use of vintage moulds and the traditional porcelain medium she creates a sense of the familiar and displays these constructions of gender rather than ignoring them. It is this sense of the familiar and the intersection of both beauty and the grotesque that is a crucial aspect of her work. The delicate balance between beauty and the grotesque adds to the attraction of her sculptures and makes what she is subverting recognizable. The familiar porcelain aesthetic that Boyle presents is confronted with a variety of grotesque elements. Here the grotesque is manifested through deformities and disfigurements as well as a variety of hybrid forms that combine human with plant, animal or insect.¹ These grotesque features act to visually disrupt and question notions of white,

¹ Three types of the grotesque, the deformative or exaggerated, combinatory, and metamorphic are defined by Frances S. Connelly and Elizabeth C. Childs in *Modern Art*

upper-class feminine beauty that have been constructed and reiterated by patriarchal cultural forms. Additionally, Boyle uses a traditional medium that has its own gender and class-based history, and brings it into the realm of contemporary feminist art. She explains:

Porcelain as a material product is steeped in European hierarchies of class and economy. My interest in porcelain embraces ambiguity, playing with historical ideals of beauty, delicacy and exclusivity, while confronting those same standards used to mask the oppression of women and the poor. My respect for both the current hobby-culture and artistic history of porcelain lace-draping inspires me to 'sample' it. By appropriating this craft-genre I subvert the boundaries of contemporary sculpture and challenge our assumptions about fragility and the feminine.²

Through her porcelain figures she both critiques and draws attention to restrictions these constructions have placed on women as well as providing images that create new representations of women. It is through her use of the grotesque, that her work is able to interrupt patriarchal assumptions about gender typically represented in both traditional porcelain and the more recent mass-produced Royal Doulton figures. In Boyle's porcelain sculptures from the "Lace Figures Series," as well as select drawings from the "Porcelain Fantasy Series," she demonstrates a transgressive use of porcelain by

and the Grotesque, ed. by Frances S. Connelly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). These categories will be described in the main body of this thesis.

² Shary Boyle, "Subverting the Craft: Lace-Draping and the Dresden Doll," lecture presented to the Sculpture Department of the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst, in Dresden, Germany on April 13, 2005.

“sampling” and subverting these traditional figurines. Further, Boyle not only critiques these constructions but also offers alternative representations of feminine beauty. Through this study, Boyle’s important contribution to feminist scholarship and art practice will be made evident.

This introduction will outline the various mediums in which she works, highlight themes featured across her artwork and review the literature that is pertinent to her porcelain sculptures.

Shary Boyle is a multidisciplinary artist whose work includes drawing, painting, performance art and sculpture. She was born in 1972 in Toronto, Ontario. Boyle was raised in the suburbs of Scarborough, Ontario in a working class family.³ She grew up in a traditional male-dominated household where men’s stories and experiences were valued over women’s.⁴ After high school, Boyle went to the Ontario College of Art and Design and graduated with a Diploma of Fine Arts in 1994. Since then, she has had numerous group and solo shows and residencies in Canada the United States and Europe.⁵ She is currently based in Toronto. In recent years, Boyle’s work has been included in the permanent collections of numerous museums and galleries.⁶ While her work is mainly exhibited in art galleries she also reaches a larger audience outside of the gallery setting through her illustrations in various publications and live drawing performances in cafés

³ Peter Goddard, “Ten People to Watch, Shary Boyle: Artist,” *Toronto Star*, December 31, 2006.

⁴ Daryl Vocat, “Shary Boyle Knows Shame: Reclusive Artist Subverts Our Most Vulnerable Moments,” *Shameless*, Spring 2005, pp.38-39. Vocat states: “Boyle was raised in a male-dominated household with hunters, and the experiences of the women in her family were undervalued. After a childhood saturated with men’s stories, she decided to balance things out by talking about women. Although it may sound like she’s motivated by politics, Boyle says her working method is intuitive and emotional” (p.39).

⁵ See Appendix

⁶ See Appendix

or at concerts. This divide between her gallery practice and her public performances will be returned to shortly.

Boyle's drawings and watercolour paintings have been included in graphic novels, on album covers, magazines, as illustrations in books, or featured in her self-published bookworks.⁷ A selected collection of these bookworks, as well as some of her drawings was published in 2004 under the title *Witness My Shame*. In 2005 she created a series of drawings titled the "Porcelain Fantasy Series." These pen and watercolour works were made after she had completed the majority of her porcelain sculptures, as ideas for future porcelains.⁸

In 2003 she started to experiment with oil painting and admits that she no longer has the ability to work spontaneously and complete a painting in a day.⁹ Wanting to challenge herself and distance her work from current trends, she decided to overhaul her practice and learn classical oil painting through the use of Old Master techniques.¹⁰ She started to paint more slowly and experimented with historical methods such as layering paint and applying transparent glazes.¹¹ The result has been three series of oil on canvas portraits.¹² This body of work is similar to her porcelain figures in that Boyle uses a

⁷ See Appendix

⁸ Eleven of her "Porcelain Fantasy Series" drawings were published in the graphic anthology, *Kramer's Ergot 6*, edited by Sammy Harkham (Oakland: Buenaventura Press & Avodah Books, 2006). Additionally, the National Gallery of Canada purchased ten of the "Porcelain Fantasy Series" drawings in 2007. There are sixteen in total.

⁹ Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh, "Uneasy Painting: The Ambiguous Art of Shary Boyle," *Border Crossings*, no.103, August 2007, p.88. (The majority of Boyle's earlier drawings and paintings were created in a single sitting).

¹⁰ Sengara, "Porcelain Dreams and Nightmares," p.96.

¹¹ Enright and Walsh, pp.88-92.

¹² The first series was a group of fictional portraits exhibited in "Companions," at the Or Gallery, in Vancouver, British Columbia, in June 2004. The second series includes portraits (some of which are based on friends) and a self-portrait. These were exhibited

traditional medium within the history of art. Additionally, with both of these mediums she placed herself in the position of a novice and, in the case of her oil paintings, taught herself through trial and error.

Since 2000 she has used an overhead projector to create live paintings or drawings, and animate her pre-drawn images, bringing them to life in front of an audience. By incorporating live drawing into her performances, the audience has a chance to watch her work unfold, watching each brush stroke as she makes it. This is connected to a history of live action painting where artistic mastery is turned into a public spectacle. Boyle borrows from this tradition and transforms the solitary act of drawing into a public performance.¹³ These performances are often done in collaboration with a musician, and the images are magnified and projected onto a screen, behind the performer on stage.¹⁴ Boyle uses her pre-drawn images, and gradually layers them in time with the music to create new meanings. Her performances have taken place in a variety of spaces from campgrounds to opera houses. These venues differ from the museums and galleries where her paintings and sculptures are exhibited. It is through these alternative venues, outside of the gallery setting, that her artwork reaches new audiences.¹⁵

at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, Toronto, Ontario in February 2007. The third series of oil on panel paintings titled "Highland Series" was created in 2007.

¹³ Si Si Penelosa, "Back from Berlin," *C Magazine*, December 2001.

¹⁴ A visual artist accompanying a musician through the use of an overhead projector is something that has gained popularity over the last few years. Other musicians that feature overhead projection artists are Final Fantasy (Stephanie Comilang), The Hidden Cameras (Daniel Barrow) and Feist.

¹⁵ David Carrier has examined gallery culture and emphasizes how the art museum is not yet a true public space. He looks towards "mass culture" and highlights how a truly heterogeneous audience appears not at museums but in movie theaters, at rock concerts,

While Boyle's practice has mostly been based in drawing and painting, in 1997 she made her first miniature polymer clay sculpture. She was motivated by the need to create art that was more tangible and more physical than her two-dimensional work.¹⁶ Boyle has made many more of these tiny sculptures over the years. However, because of their private subject matter most of them had remained tucked away in her studio until February 2007, when thirty-one of them were exhibited at the Canadian Clay and Glass Museum in Waterloo, Ontario. Most of these polymer clay sculptures range in height from three to nine centimeters. Some of them are painted using soft, pastel colours. She uses her fingers as well as dental tools to add minute details. Many of these miniature sculptures combine unlike elements and feature hybrid forms, much like her porcelain sculptures.

In early 2002 Boyle created her first lace draped porcelain figure. It is this area of her work that will be the focus of my thesis. Since this first porcelain sculpture, she has gone on to create sixteen in total that are part of the "Lace Figures Series;" most of which are between sixteen and twenty-five centimeters tall.¹⁷ Boyle creates her figures by using vintage moulds, carefully sculpting additional features, applying lace and painting each one. She has traveled across Canada and the United States working alongside women (most of whom were many years older than she) in their basement studios learning this skill and has relied on the help of these hobbyists as well as access to their moulds and

and in front of television and Web sites. David Carrier, *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), p.213.

¹⁶ Shary Boyle's artists talk for *Aspects and Excess* at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, Waterloo, Ontario, 14 January 2007.

¹⁷ She is currently working on a new series, inspired by eighteenth-century German porcelain, that will have many figures per sculpture, expected to be ready by the fall of 2008, as stated in: Chiemi Isozaki, "Shary Boyle: Marvelous Kitsch Oddities," *Ping Mag*, Japan, 25 September, 2007.

kilns. Furthermore, there is a performative element to working alongside these women, as Boyle had to balance creating the figures the way that she wants without offending the other hobbyists.¹⁸ The particular workshop where Boyle was first introduced to this medium was titled “World of Porcelain” and was taught by an eighty-six year old named Vivian Hausle from the basement of her suburban home in Seattle, Washington. From her first introduction to the craft of lace draped figures she saw their potential and knew that she could alter them in a way that would comment on the restrictions that an idealized beauty has placed on woman throughout history.¹⁹ It is through her addition of a variety of grotesque features that Boyle creates this subversion. While the resulting figures are similar to the ones we have seen before, Boyle’s alterations confront the viewer and force them to consider the oppression of women within a patriarchal society. Additionally, in 2005, Boyle went to Germany to study the art of eighteenth-century European porcelain, visiting historic factories in Meissen, Dresden and Sitzendorf.²⁰ While in Germany she took a workshop in porcelain painting at the Staatliche Porzellan Manufaktur, in Meissen.

The “Lace Figures Series” was first exhibited in March 2006 at the Power Plant Gallery in Toronto in a solo exhibition. Since then eleven of these figures have been purchased for the permanent collection of art museums both nationally and internationally. While this is just a brief introduction to Boyle’s porcelain work, to conclude the biography and overview of her mediums, I will return to a detailed analysis

¹⁸ This performative aspect can be linked to her projection performances in that Boyle is creating her art in front of an audience.

¹⁹ Boyle quoted in Isozaki

²⁰ Boyle, artists talk.

of these figures in the main body of my thesis. The themes that span Boyle's artwork will now be addressed.

While Boyle works with a variety of mediums, similar themes are featured across her work. For example, her own experiences have influenced her work and themes of isolation and alienation come up often. This is especially reflected in her earlier drawings that depict lone characters in vulnerable states. Shame, desire and dysfunction are also manifested in a variety of her art. These themes are probably featured most prominently in the drawings published in *Witness My Shame*. Boyle's drawings are both humorous and painful at the same time. Many feature deeply personal experiences from childhood and adolescence, both real and imagined.²¹ Moreover, these drawings are about articulating what is not talked about, what makes us uncomfortable. They have a confiding tone and immediately draw the viewer in. They express emotions that are not always easily communicated with words. Furthermore, while Boyle represents real life situations, there is also an otherworldly quality to her work.

A 2003 solo show titled "Travels to the Realm Between" at Toronto's Katharine Mulherin Gallery featured paintings that John Bentley Mays describes as a "mysterious and perverse and romantic visual conjuring from the shadows of fairytale, dream, myths of transformation and transmigration."²² In this body of work she moves away from the themes of "real life situations" depicted in her earlier drawings and strives to create a new

²¹ For example, Boyle's drawings featured in the graphic novel *Scheherazade: Comics about Love, Treachery, Mothers, and Monsters* edited by Megan Kelso (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2004) are based on real experiences from Boyle's childhood and she includes herself in the illustrations. However, with some of the drawings in *Witness My Shame* it is unclear if they are personal or imagined events.

²² John Bentley Mays, "The Extraordinary, Fantastical, Uncool World of Shary Boyle," *Lola Magazine*, Toronto, Summer 2003, p.23.

world.²³ This utopian sensibility and longing for a just world is why most of her work is situated in a different time or place. Even when her work is situated in this time there is always an added element to take it back into a fantasy setting. By combining unlike, or unusual elements she challenges the viewer by subverting the expected or familiar. This theme of hybrid forms is carried over to her sculptures as well.

In her miniature polymer clay sculptures some of her figures have extra limbs, or combine representations of the human with animal or plant. While these works are small and delicate, they often have dark overtones. This combination of beauty with disturbing themes results in a body of works that is, as one review states, “gorgeously twisted.”²⁴ While androgynous creatures, animals and hybrid forms are included across all of the mediums in which she works, women are one of her main subjects. Women’s stories and experiences have been featured prominently from her early bookworks to her most recent series of porcelain sculptures. In 2000, when asked about her subjects Boyle explains, “I don’t say ‘I’m going to make an image and it’s going to be about women.’ It’s more like a projection of myself. These images are myself and I’m a woman.”²⁵ Again, in 2008, Boyle states that her work “is totally concerned with re-representing women and myself.”²⁶ Boyle’s artwork is generated out of her own personal situation. By displaying her own feelings about femininity she eradicates the division between the private and public. Boyle links her work to social concerns thus affirming that the personal is political.

²³ Boyle wants this new world to be filled with “images of what could have been. I have to create fantasy images to create those wishful worlds” (Ibid, p.23).

²⁴ Barbara Isherwood, “Fantasia,” *Border Crossings*, August 2006, p.111.

²⁵ Ryan Bigge “I Feel Funny Mommy: Shary Boyle and the Art of Shame (and Fame),” *Broken Pencil*, Fall 2000.

²⁶ Interview with author, January 25, 2008.

Through Shary Boyle's porcelain figures she sheds light on crucial issues such as the oppression of women in patriarchal societies. According to Emily Vey Duke: "Boyle is a feminist artist at a historical moment when it's decidedly unfashionable to be a feminist."²⁷ Furthermore, in an essay examining the feminist aesthetic, Marilyn French argues that there are two fundamental principles that make a work of art feminist: first, it should approach reality from a feminist perspective and secondly, it must endorse the female experience.²⁸ Boyle's sculptures possess both of these qualities. While her work highlights important issues in feminism, the only artistic movement that Boyle has aligned herself with has been Outsider Art.²⁹ Many of her earlier drawings and watercolour paintings were executed in one sitting and were about working spontaneously and immediately.³⁰ Part of Boyle's creative approach is to invoke a quiet space where the process of envisioning can occur.³¹ This type of spontaneous creation and inspiration is one that is often described in relation to Outsider Art.

British writer Roger Cardinal coined the term "Outsider Art" in 1972 as an English-language equivalent for the French term "Art Brut," originally formulated by

²⁷ Emily Vey Duke, "Afterword," in Shary Boyle's *Witness My Shame* (Montréal: Conundrum Press, 2004), p.168.

²⁸ Marilyn French, "Is There a Feminist Aesthetic?" in *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, edited by Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp.68-78, p.69.

²⁹ When I asked Boyle if she ever aligns herself as a "feminist artist" she explained that she does, but it is just "so reductionist and as soon as you say that you are a feminist artist you are shunned into the far nether regions of relevance and interest and desire... I'm fighting it out... all I can do is be a feminist and be really scrappy about it, I don't really have a choice, but I feel that it's really bad for your career and most curators don't want to touch you with a ten foot pole, let alone any institutions, and once in a blue moon you get a feminist group exhibition" (January 25, 2008).

³⁰ Daryl Vocat, "The Dark Abyss Amplifies Magic and Beauty," *Xtra!*, no.521, 14 October 2005.

³¹ Bigge "I Feel Funny Mommy"

Jean Dubuffet, a French painter, in the mid 1940s.³² Dubuffet defined this type of art as being from the artists' "own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art" as well as "a completely pure artistic operation, raw, brute, and entirely reinvented in all of its phases solely by means of the artists' own impulses."³³ In a recent article Boyle states: "I honestly do feel way more connected to Outsider art and the kind of work that is made by people who are intensely influenced by an internal world and the need to translate that somehow."³⁴ While she is more attached to this movement, over the contemporary art world of which she is a part, scholarly definitions of Outsider Art are strict in the sense that the artist must truly operate outside of the art world and exist in the margins of society. Once these artists gain some notoriety, or their work is included in a gallery exhibition, they lose their Outsider status, as their art has been included on the "inside." Additionally, defined in economic terms, a work of art is no longer on the "outside" once it has had a monetary value placed on it. Boyle does not fit within these strict definitions of an Outsider artist yet maintains this alignment. This could be understood as being a strategic move on Boyle's part to get away from the "feminist artist" label, which would restrict her career in terms of exhibitions and sales within the gallery world.³⁵ While some articles have discussed Boyle's connection to these art movements, as well as the themes that run throughout her work, I will now turn my attention to a review of the literature that focuses on her porcelain sculptures.

While this is the first lengthy scholarly study of Shary Boyle's work, there have

³² Colin Rhodes, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.24.

³⁴ Lorissa Sengara, "Porcelain Dreams and Nightmares: The multi-dimensional Shary Boyle," *Canadian Art*, vol.23, no.3, Fall 2006, pp.94-98, p.98.

³⁵ See footnote 36.

been numerous insightful essays and articles devoted to her. To date, approximately fifty articles, interviews, and exhibition reviews written about Boyle and her artwork have been published in newspapers, art journals, magazines, on-line publications and exhibition catalogues. I will concentrate on those that discuss Boyle's lace draped porcelain sculptures highlighting their strengths and also how my work will build on what has been written. It is important to note that the majority of the following articles are brief and range from one paragraph to a few pages. Many offer perceptive comments yet do not expand on those ideas due to their restricted length.

Prior to Shary Boyle's *Lace Figures* exhibition in March 2006, Laura deCarufel published a one page article titled "Flesh and Lace" in the Winter 2005 issue of *The Look Magazine*. deCarufel describes one of Boyle's sculptures in detail, noting the six fingers on each hand. As well, in asking about her technique she quotes Boyle as saying, "I'm using lace in a somewhat confrontational way."³⁶ Overall, "Flesh and Lace" is one of the first articles to look at Boyle's porcelains and focuses on the intersection of fashion and art. In the press release from *Lace Figures* curated by Reid Shier at Toronto's Power Plant Gallery, Shier highlights Boyle's introduction to porcelain and lace draping. As well, he discusses the shift in porcelain from an eighteenth-century European product produced for the privileged upper class to its popularity in the twentieth-century with female hobby-craft groups. Shier explains that in Boyle's work "her fantastic landscapes and surreal tableaus are predominantly populated by women and animals whose transformations and fixations are inscribed in wounds, bruises, excretions and

³⁶ Laura deCarufel, "Flesh and Lace," *The Look Magazine*, Toronto, Winter 2005, p.19.

disfigurements,” yet he does not connect this to the grotesque in a matter of words.³⁷ As well, Shier looks at the themes across Boyle’s work – “the artist’s fascination with repressed undercurrents in mythology and fairy tales” – and how she has found a new medium in which to express them.³⁸

Like Shier, Jen Anisef’s article also highlights the shift in production of porcelain figures and focuses on female hobby-crafters. In Anisef’s Internet blog (the “Toronto Craft Alert”) she provides a perceptive interview with Boyle titled “Arsenic and Old Lace: a chat with Shary Boyle,” which was posted on March 30, 2006. First, Anisef talks with Boyle about her technique and then focuses on the issues surrounding her relationships with the hobbyists she works alongside. Boyle comments on the challenge of developing relationships with these women while appropriating the craft, as well as introducing disturbing content to an often very mainstream arena.³⁹ Anisef’s article makes an important contribution in its focus on this community of hobbyists and Boyle’s role amongst them.

In a review of the *Lace Figures* exhibition for the *Globe and Mail* newspaper, Sarah Milroy states that Boyle’s figures are “delicately horrifying studies in the feminine grotesque.”⁴⁰ Milroy then focuses on one sculpture in particular, and highlights how Boyle has overthrown the decorative norm. While others have addressed the subversive nature of Boyle’s work, only some have discussed exactly what it is that makes it subversive. Milroy’s brief article is the only one to specifically mention Boyle’s use of

³⁷ Shier, “Shary Boyle: Lace Figures”

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Jen Anisef, “Arsenic and Old Lace: a chat with Shary Boyle,” 30 March 2006
<http://torontocraftalert.blogspot.com/2006_03_01_archive.html>

⁴⁰ Sarah Milroy, “Exhibit A: Feminine Grotesque,” *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, 7 April 2006.

the “feminine grotesque” and draws attention to how these works are both beautiful and grotesque at the same time.

David Jager’s article, titled “Porcelain Pain,” is also a review of the *Lace Figures* exhibition. Like Milroy, Jager emphasizes the presence of conflicting elements in Boyle’s work. He begins by noting that “nothing portrays our cloying ideal of femininity better than German porcelain figurines...for Shary Boyle they are the best medium for her darkly comic and surreal take on womanhood.”⁴¹ Jager then looks at the presence of violence in these works, as well as the co-existence of both the “fine and the grotesque.”⁴² Similar to Milroy’s article Jager only hints at these ideas in a limited amount of space. Jager’s article is important in that he sets up Boyle’s use of the familiar. By appropriating porcelain figurines, Boyle is working with a medium almost everyone recognizes immediately. The types of female porcelain figurines that Boyle is referencing have a long history dating back to porcelain factories in Europe during the eighteenth-century. Similar female figurines are part of popular culture and still mass-produced today. Therefore Boyle’s viewers’ recognize this medium making its subversion, through the additions of grotesque features, all the more successful. It pushes her audiences to question the feminine ideals that the original figurines represent and reiterate. While Jager sets up the familiar element of Boyle’s figures, Lorissa Sengara highlights Boyle’s influences from eighteenth-century German porcelain.

Lorissa Sengara’s “Porcelain Dreams and Nightmares: The multi-dimensional Shary Boyle,” published in *Canadian Art* magazine, is one of the more lengthy articles to date. In regards to Boyle’s porcelain work, she highlights the influence of Meissen

⁴¹ David Jager, “Porcelain Pain,” *NOW Magazine*, Toronto, April 13-19, 2006.

⁴² *Ibid.*

porcelain, particularly the work of J.J. Kändler who was an influential Meissen modeler during the eighteenth-century. Then, after reviewing the imperfections of some of the figures, Sengara concludes: “that the collusion between the beautiful and the confrontational underlying it all might be Boyle’s trademark.”⁴³ Sengara’s interpretation of some of these grotesque details symbolizing the oppressive nature of feminine ideals is a central aspect of Boyle’s project that I will develop in my analysis. Furthermore, this idea of the symbolic and the psychological representations playing an important role in these works is touched on again in Sandra Firmin’s review of the *Lace Figures* exhibition.

In a feature on up-and-coming international contemporary artists in *Art Papers* magazine, Sandra Firmin describes a few of the features of select sculptures, remarking on their “phantasmagorias of physiological oddities,” and discusses Boyle’s technique.⁴⁴ Additionally, Firmin draws attention to the figures possible psychological states constructed by Boyle and concludes: “Since the laws dictating the inner life of each figure elude us, we can only revel in a transcendent view of their surfaces.”⁴⁵ While Firmin hints at the psychological states represented by these figures, her analysis falls short in that she does not attempt to explore what may have caused these strange mutations.

In May 2008, a second book on Shary Boyle’s artwork was published. *Otherworld Uprising* features photographs of all of Boyle’s porcelain figures as well as

⁴³ Sengara, p.96.

⁴⁴ Sandra Firmin, “Shary Boyle: Toronto,” *Art Papers*, Atlanta, Georgia, July/August 2006, pp.71-72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.72.

essays by Shelia Heti and Josée Drouin-Brisebois.⁴⁶ Drouin-Brisebois' essay, "Ornamental Impulse," is the longest and most detailed work on Boyle's lace figures so far. She focuses on Boyle's porcelain sculptures in relation to ornamentation, fantasy and the grotesque. She looks towards a resurgence in ornamentation and outdated artistic techniques as "challenging the established divide between craft and high art."⁴⁷ In her discussion of Boyle's ornamentation of these figures she argues that the decoration takes on a life of its own and through this she effectively creates alternatives to these stereotypes.⁴⁸ Additionally, Drouin-Brisebois discusses the figures' relationship to Meissen porcelain figures as well as Royal Doulton. Drouin-Brisebois brings her essay to a close by stating, "For artists like Boyle, hybridity, ambiguity and the chaos found in nature become strategies to critique the loss of individuality, the rise of conservatism and a society of control."⁴⁹ I will build on Josée Drouin-Brisebois' essay by offering an alternative analysis to some of the sculptures and by providing a feminist reading of Boyle's use of the grotesque as a strategy of resistance.

My thesis has developed out of the literature on Shary Boyle's work and will present a more in-depth analysis of her porcelain sculptures. It will focus on Boyle's use of the grotesque and her contribution to feminism and feminist art practices. As well, I will examine some of the drawings from the "Porcelain Fantasy Series" that have not yet received attention. In addition, this thesis will add to the scholarly body of work that

⁴⁶ Shelia Heti's essay "No Walls," is a fictional story that weaves Heti's comments on Boyle's work into the text. In particular she discusses her changing relationship with one of Boyle's miniature polymer clay pieces that she had purchased years ago.

⁴⁷ Josée Drouin-Brisebois, "Ornamental Impulse," in *Otherworld Uprising* (Montréal: Conundrum Press and the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 2008) forthcoming.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

focuses on the grotesque. This contribution is important as art historian Frances S. Connelly notes, “Given the prominent role of the grotesque in modern image culture, there are surprisingly few significant studies on these issues, a failure that reveals a blind spot in art-historical theory and practice.”⁵⁰ My methodology will concentrate on the use of the grotesque in contemporary visual art, particularly when used as a strategy to “disrupt and challenge established realities.”⁵¹ These “established realities” that I will be focusing on are the patriarchal notions of gender and constructions of feminine beauty typically represented in porcelain figurines. Although my focus is on gender, reference will also be made to class and race since traditional porcelain figurines privilege an upper class, white femininity. I will incorporate a variety of theories on the use of the grotesque in visual art, from Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts to feminist appropriations of his work. Additionally, analytical methods presented in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, particularly those that divide the grotesque into three categories (deformative or exaggerated, combinatory, and metamorphic) will be utilized.⁵²

Chapter One establishes a context for the history of porcelain as it relates to Shary Boyle’s work. It discusses eighteenth-century European porcelain from the Meissen factory, twentieth-century mass-produced figurines, such as Royal Doulton, and the female hobbyists who make these figures. As well, the art market for both traditional porcelain figures and Boyle’s sculptures will be addressed. Identifying the similar visual

⁵⁰ Frances S. Connelly, introduction to *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.2.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.2.

⁵² This breakdown of categories is posed by Connelly in the introduction and then used by Elizabeth C. Childs in “Eden’s Other: Gauguin and the Ethnographic Grotesque,” *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.175-192.

motifs between Boyle's sculptures and the traditional porcelain figurines that she is appropriating will establish her influences and use of the familiar. Additionally, this chapter will briefly examine the work of other contemporary artists working in a similar medium and subject matter to highlight what sets Boyle's work apart.

Chapter Two serves to introduce and define the grotesque. It provides an overview of the history and scholarship on the grotesque within visual art, focusing on its subversive power, particularly in relation to feminist art. The grotesque details in Boyle's figures will then be emphasized.

In Chapters Three and Four I will provide my analysis of these figures and selected drawings from the "Porcelain Fantasy Series." Chapter Three examines her earlier porcelain figures made between 2002-2005 with a focus on images of oppression and violence. Chapter Four explores figures and drawings from 2005-2006 that offer strategies of resistance. These later works shift in subject matter and provide images of female desire and agency. The conclusion will connect and assess the main arguments of the previous chapters and stress the importance of Boyle's work.

Chapter One

Traditions in Porcelain: From Eighteenth-Century Europe to Contemporary Craft

Porcelain figurines have a long history from their invention in China to their present day popularity amongst collectors and hobbyists. In this chapter I provide background information on this history as it relates to Shary Boyle's sculptures. In particular, I will focus on Meissen porcelain and the work of modeler J.J. Kändler as Boyle cites his work as one of her main influences.⁵³ By examining the shift of porcelain figurines between production during the eighteenth-century for royalty and privileged classes to a twentieth-century medium associated more with mass-production, kitsch and craft, issues of class, the art market and consumption will be focused on. Through concentrating on the visual details of historical porcelain, and relating those to examples from Boyle's figures, it will become apparent how she is both influenced by and adapts this medium. Furthermore, the performativity of gender and construction of a white, upper class feminine ideal within these traditional figurines will be addressed. In addition, this chapter will briefly discuss two other contemporary artists who work with this medium and how Boyle's figures differ.

Porcelain was invented in China as early as the sixth-century. Through trade it eventually made its way to Europe where it was treasured as an "almost magical possession."⁵⁴ In the Netherlands, the Dutch were so taken with the cobalt blue and

⁵³ Boyle states this in both Sengara's article and in an interview with the author.

⁵⁴ William B. Honey, *Dresden China: an Introduction to the Study of Meissen Porcelain* (New York: Rosenfeld, 1946), p.2.

white patterns of Chinese porcelain that they started to manufacture blue-painted earthenware, referred to as “Delft-ware,” during the second half of the seventeenth-century.⁵⁵ It was not until the eighteenth-century that a material very close to Chinese porcelain was first produced in Germany, in the court of Dresden. Johann Friedrich Böttger, an alchemist from Saxony, was credited with this accomplishment.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Böttger founded the Meissen China Factory in 1710, which became the starting point for European china manufacture. Böttger died in 1719 and Johann Gregorius Höroldt, best known for his porcelain painting abilities, took over until 1735.⁵⁷ It was during this period that porcelain became a much sought-after luxury item, was nicknamed ‘white-gold’ and hoarded in royal treasuries.⁵⁸ In fact, King Augustus the Strong’s exorbitant wishes for an inestimable amount of porcelain pieces necessitated an expansion of the manufactory. More kilns were added to meet the demands and the Meissen China Factory became one of the largest and most influential porcelain manufacturers in eighteenth-century Europe.⁵⁹

Porcelain as a medium is the ideal substance for Boyle to use to convey notions of femininity. It is a “feminine” medium because of specific visual properties. Erin Campbell states that:

Porcelain relied on sensual appeal, on the surface effects of colour and ornament, smooth polished surfaces, and delicacy, all of which were deemed feminine within a classical critique of style and

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.5.

⁵⁶ K. Berling, ed., *Meissen China: An Illustrated History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1972), pp.1-6.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Sengara, “Porcelain Dreams,” p.97.

⁵⁹ Otto Walcha, *Meissen Porcelain* (London: Studio Vista, ca. 1980), p.87.

medium in which the seemingly disordered, the purely sensual, and the merely ornamental were viewed as antithetical to classicism.⁶⁰

Porcelain is then associated with the feminine for its visually beautiful qualities and how it contrasted against the more valued style of art known as classicism. Further, the notion in which porcelain is moulded is important to consider when we examine at how femininity is shaped in porcelain figurines. Beth Kowaleski-Wallace theorizes that porcelain offers a “blank, textual surface upon which culture could write its notions of gender. At the same time, however, china inevitably reminds us of the ‘fictile’ process through which gender is constructed.”⁶¹ In Boyle’s porcelain figures she borrows from this tradition of figurines that are constructions of feminine beauty in both subject and medium.

The Meissen China Factory and the work of Johann Joachim Kändler will be the focus of the historical component of this review as they were one of the leading manufactures and a main inspiration for Boyle’s work.⁶² Kändler joined the Meissen

⁶⁰ Erin Campbell, “Balancing Act: Displaying Imported Porcelain in Eighteenth-Century Venice,” in Michael Yonan and Alden Cavanaugh, ed.s, *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited (forthcoming).

⁶¹ Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, “Woman, China, and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol.29, no.2, 1996, pp.153-167, p.154.

⁶² Boyle explains: “My personal interest and what really gets me excited is the old German porcelain...particularly the work of J.J. Kändler. His stuff was so naturalistic, so beautiful his characters were so alive...he was a master sculpture and he animated everything. His imagination was out of control and he was just so prolific.” (Interview with author, January 25, 2008). Furthermore, this influence is particularly evident in Boyle’s later drawings and sculptures (2005-2006) created after she traveled to Germany to study porcelain (in April 2005). Her earlier sculptures (2002-2005) are more related to the individual Royal Doulton figures, while the last few sculptures of the “Lace Figures Series” as well as her “Porcelain Fantasy Series” drawings and current series feature more of a Meissen influence.

Factory in 1730 and set the standard for European porcelain art. He became one of the most important modelers whose work would serve as an inspiration for centuries. In the early years, Kändler sculpted birds, animals and designed the Swan Service.⁶³ This service was one of his best-known works. It is a multi-pieced porcelain table service that incorporated swans, women, shells, mythological creatures and Rococo lines. The Swan Service was made for the minister Count Bruehl and was the grandest service ever manufactured in Meissen.⁶⁴

In 1735 the production of figures began with the miniature representation of a Chinese couple. In 1736, Kändler produced many more figures that included Harlequins, figures from mythology, figures representing different countries, musicians, allegorical groups, Greek gods and goddesses as well as multi-figured porcelains reflecting themes of love and the luxury of court life. This genre of multi-figured porcelains, sometimes referred to as a "Crinoline Group," often featured ornate gold scrollwork either on the base or on other details in the sculpture and a female figure dressed in an elaborate gown with wide crinoline taking up most of the space of the sculpture. The subjects of these sculptures were similar and usually involved the female figure being courted by an admirer. The themes of courtly love reflected in these sculptures can be traced to the literature of this period. Romance played a prominent role in contemporary poetry and is reflected in the art of the period.⁶⁵ As well many other multi-figured porcelains featured romantic settings in nature that presented an idealized image of rural life influenced by

⁶³ For an image of the Swan Service and other Meissen porcelain see Otto Walcha's *Meissen Porcelain* (London: Studio Vista, ca. 1980).

⁶⁴ Berling, p.29.

⁶⁵ Peter Wilhelm Meister and Horst Reber, *European Porcelain of the 18th Century* (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1983), p.205.

pastoral plays and literature. These sculptures featured flowers, leaves, animals and trees. Furthermore, this tradition of courtship reflected in the art of the period can be traced back to the medieval period where certain poetic compositions focused on feminine beauty and romance.⁶⁶ In examining several images of porcelain sculptures that feature romantic scenes, the woman always takes a submissive role. Her eyes are downcast as her lover courts her, and the male figure takes the dominant role.⁶⁷ While Kändler portrayed many romantic scenes there was also an element of wit present in his works.

During his career at Meissen Kändler produced several hundred figures. Part of what made his work so unique was his sense of humour. During the 1740s he created the

⁶⁶ Umberto Eco, ed., *History of Beauty* (New York: Rizzoli, 2004), pp.154-160. In this section Eco examines literature from this period and provides an illumination from the Codex Manesse c.1300 that depicts a knight in the arms of a beautiful shepherdess.

⁶⁷ To the best of my knowledge there is a lack of scholarship that focuses specifically on analyzing these European historical porcelain figurines. Alden Cavanaugh and Michael Yonan support this by stating (in their session abstract for the College Art Association Conference February 22-25, 2006) that: Meissen is a standard touchpoint in the history of 18th century art “yet art historians have only fleetingly assessed the visual aspects of porcelain, its physical and aesthetic qualities, as part of a larger nexus of cultural ideas about beauty, elegance, and social identity... can porcelain’s physical characteristics be interpreted within larger cultural discourses about class, race, gender, ethnicity, and social manners?” (p.28). Many different books outline the history of Meissen figurines and their aesthetic value, yet none focus on a contemporary reading of constructions of gender and class. A few articles that do examine larger themes in porcelain (but not specifically 18th century Meissen figures) are as follows: David L. Porter looks at the aesthetics and gendered consumption of early eighteenth-century British chinoiserie in his article, “Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste” (*Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol.35, no.3, 2002, pp.395-411) but he does not focus specifically on figurines. In “Hummel Figurines: Molding a Collectible Germany” (*Journal of Material Culture*, vol.49, no.6, 2001, pp.49-66) John Chaimov focuses on the symbolic nature of Hummel figurines and how they sell a specific image of post-war Germany. Another article that contributes to this limited body of scholarship is Beth Kowaleski-Wallace’s “Woman, China, and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England” (*Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol.29, no.2, 1996, pp.153-167). Here she explores the historical conditions that generated china (or porcelain) as an appropriate trope for the feminine and then examines literature that deploys the image of china.

Monkey Orchestra, a series of monkeys in court attire playing musical instruments.⁶⁸

This element of the fantastical in Kändler's sculptures is also present in Boyle's work.

While her sculptures make important statements about the oppression of women, they also are very imaginative in their combination of unlike elements. A detailed analysis of Boyle's works and their thematic concerns will be returned to in Chapters Three and Four. At this point I will turn my attention to representations of women and the various visual elements that construct an upper class idealized femininity.

Both Kändler and other eighteenth-century European modelers presented their female figurines in beautiful period attire: extravagant dresses with short ruffled sleeves, revealing slender wrists and accentuating tiny waists, heeled shoes, little hats or bonnets with bows, and delicately painted features. These constructions of feminine beauty went with the period ideals that were reflected within the art and literature.⁶⁹ In multi-figured porcelains, women are often in romantic or maternal situations: with a lover, or surrounded by children. Even in Kändler's single porcelain figures of females in various roles (as a peasant, bird-catcher, the fish mongers' wife or a shepherdess) the women are always elegantly dressed but in more simplified costumes. As well, the female figures are portrayed as very graceful and frail, with one arm outstretched to a lover, or a hand resting delicately on their skirt.⁷⁰ Props are often added, a lady seated at a desk or carrying a small fan or little basket of flowers, for example. Kändler's assistant sculptor, Johann Elias Meyer, as well as others, would look to paintings for ideas. In particular,

⁶⁸ For an image of the Monkey Orchestra and other Meissen porcelain see Otto Walcha's *Meissen Porcelain* (London: Studio Vista, ca. 1980).

⁶⁹ Eco, pp.216-240.

⁷⁰ "Grace" is a particular ideal that was established during the Renaissance. "The theme of Grace, closely connected to that of Beauty, paved the way for subjectivist and particularist concepts of Beauty" (Eco, p.216).

the work of the French painter Antoine Watteau's depictions of pastoral festivities as the setting for courtly love, featuring ornately clad bourgeois characters, provided much inspiration. This is significant as women from a higher class were looked to as embodying the ideal beauty which defined femininity – a notion that is reiterated in porcelain figurines today.

It is important to note that these constructions of femininity are ones that are based on a particular canon of female beauty that dates back to Greek and Roman times.⁷¹ This canon that defines woman in terms of her beauty is something that has been documented and reiterated throughout the history of art (and literature). Seventeenth-century painter Pietro Testa outlined the ideals for a woman's face as follows:

The eyebrows are to be dark, and they should curve in perfect arches that taper gently towards the ends. Beautiful eyes are large and prominent, oval in shape, and blue or dark chestnut in color. The ear is soft and rosy, while the cheeks are gleaming white and vermilion, softly curving. The mouth should be on the small side, neither too angular nor too flat...⁷²

These characteristics were not Testa's own formulations rather ones that were taken from a long history of constructions of feminine beauty in art. Moreover, these concepts of beauty that were circulated were ones that looked to aristocratic European woman as

⁷¹ Eco, pp. 37-47.

⁷² This is just a small portion of the descriptions of features that render a woman beautiful taken from Italian Baroque era painter Pietro Testa's notes on painting from Elizabeth Cropper's article "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, *Petrarchismo*, and the Vernacular Style" in *Art Bulletin*, vol.58, 1976, pp.374-393, p.374.

exemplifying this beauty – hence beauty is defined in terms of being white and upper-class.

While these traditional porcelain figurines reiterate constructions of femininity as established through a particular canon of beauty it is interesting to consider the shift in consumption of these figures. The origins of porcelain figurines in Europe were a product, created by men, for nobility and the elite. However, during the second half of the eighteenth-century many more manufactories were established. Due to industrial progress and a burgeoning middle class, porcelain began to be accessible and collected by the middle classes as well.⁷³ During this period porcelain became a commodity and it is suspected that the primary consumers were women.⁷⁴ Middle class women could now own these types of porcelain figurines and a piece of a world that exemplifies a refined, upper class ideal of beauty.

Since this period, porcelain figures have continued to be mass-produced. The Royal Doulton Company, founded in England in 1815, is best known for these types of female figurines. Currently most of their figures are divided into collections, such as the “Pretty Ladies” and have names like “Blossom Time” and “Buttercup,” as well as a variety of ultra-feminine women’s names.⁷⁵ Vintage figurines made by Royal Doulton featured titles such as: “Miss Demure,” “Fair Lady,” “Sweet Sixteen,” and “Darling.”⁷⁶ All of the Royal Doulton figures feature a refined individual female figure, inspired by

⁷³ Meister and Reber, pp.280-284.

⁷⁴ Outlined both in Porter’s article, “Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste” and Kowaleski-Wallace’s “Woman, China, and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England.” While these articles focus on decorative household items (plates, vases etc.) this argument could be extended to figurines as well.

⁷⁵ As seen on their website www.royaldoulton.com

⁷⁶ As found in various internet auctions on Ebay, www.ebay.com

their eighteenth-century European counterparts, in a beautiful dress with white skin and delicate features. Royal Doulton figurines, as well as figures made by hobby-crafters, are commonly viewed as “low art” or “kitsch.” Kitsch has been described as a “commercial substitute produced by capitalism in order to fill the void left by the marginalization of aristocratic culture and the destruction pure and simple of artisanal local traditions by urbanization and mandatory literacy.”⁷⁷ Boyle comments on the figurines association with kitsch as follows:

I’m not interested in them because they are kitsch. I’m interested in the figurines and their relationship with the women that make them and collect them and maybe the kind of class stuff involved with that and that does involve kitsch, because kitsch is something that is not considered quality. It’s not considered legitimate or intelligent. It’s stupid, decorative art – for women. I’m interested in that connection.⁷⁸

This connection to women is significant in that since the introduction of these figurines to North America in the twentieth-century, female hobbyists have embraced the porcelain tradition.

Since the late 1940s hobbyists have been creating figurines out of their homes from moulds purchased at craft stores. The craft of creating porcelain figures was introduced to North America during the twentieth-century. According to oral history,

⁷⁷ Yve-Alain, in *Formless: A User’s Guide*, by Yve-Alain and Rosalind E. Krauss (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p.117. Kitsch was also examined by Clement Greenberg in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), where he described it as an “ersatz culture.”

⁷⁸ Interview with artist, January 25, 2008.

during the 1950s Marty Newell, of “Newell’s Porcelain,” went to Europe and saw examples of Dresden lace draped porcelain figures. Once back in America she started experimenting on figures produced by her family’s company. As soon as her technique was perfected she began instructing at workshops across America.⁷⁹ This skill of applying lace to the porcelain figures is a crucial aspect of Shary Boyle’s sculptures.

The Sitzendorfer Porzellanmanufaktur in Thuringia, Germany invented “lace draping” in the late 19th century. Due to the time consuming and labour intensive aspect of this process, only a few factories worldwide still practice this technique.⁸⁰ First, the cotton lace is saturated in liquid porcelain. It is then carefully applied by hand, or by using a lace tool, to the unfired porcelain figure forming it into the desired shape and sealing it with porcelain. The figure is then placed in a kiln and flash-fired, burning away the lace and leaving behind a porcelain skeleton of lace.⁸¹ This results in a figure wearing a gown with porcelain lace-shaped accents, adding beauty, texture and volume. When making these figures most hobbyists are concerned with creating historically accurate representations.⁸² By using moulds, draping the lace, then firing the figure in the kiln and painting it with the proper colours, the outcome looks something along the lines of a traditional porcelain figurine.

Through Boyle’s appropriation of this medium she draws attention the art of lace draped porcelain figures. Her work is anti mass-production as each figure is unique. Her figures are not affordable to the middle classes; rather they cater to a moneyed and

⁷⁹ Boyle, “Subverting the Craft”

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Anisef, “Arsenic and Old Lace”

⁸² Boyle is not concerned with making historically accurate representations and dressing the figures in period attire (more on this in Chapters Three).

knowing collector base as eleven of her figures have been purchased by art museums for their permanent collections.⁸³ This recognition is important, as decorative art made by women is often relegated to the status of “craft” or “low art.” For example, textiles, ceramics, quilting, weaving and embroidery by women has been devalued throughout the history of art.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Boyle draws her audiences’ attention to how women are represented in both these traditional porcelain figures as well as the art world at large.

In Boyle’s sculptures she displays the visual constructions of female beauty typically embodied in these porcelain sculptures by using vintage moulds and featuring many similar details. In doing so she creates a sense of the familiar and her viewer is immediately reminded of the traditional porcelain figurines that she is referencing. For example, most of the sculptures in her “Lace Figures Series” are dressed in elaborate lace draped gowns.⁸⁵ Figure 1, *Untitled*, is wearing a floor-length sage green dress. Folds of porcelain lace are gathered at the front creating volume, which highlights the tiny waist. Three small red roses with emerald leaves are attached to the front of the dress for ornamentation. Both Figure 2, *Untitled*, and Figure 3, *Untitled*, are dressed in pastel coloured gowns with black lace details. The black lace ruff around the shoulders of Figure 2, and the black puffed-sleeves of Figure 3, accentuates the creamy white complexion of both of these figures. As well, the tiny basket slung over the arm of Figure 2 is a popular motif in traditional figurines. Additionally, Figures 4 and 5 (both

⁸³ The purpose and scope of this thesis examines the combination of beauty and the grotesque in Boyle’s works and provide one possible interpretation of these figures. While the collecting and display practices of both historical figurines and Boyle’s work have only been touched on briefly this is an area that could be returned to in the future.

⁸⁴ Pollock, pp.24-25.

⁸⁵ In this section I focus only on the visual qualities of the figure, the ideological implications will be examined during my analysis in Chapters Three and Four.

Untitled) feature beautiful dresses with fitted bodices and full skirts layered with lace and delicately painted in cream, gold, black and pastel shades. The dresses and accessories that Boyle adorns her figures with are very similar to the ones featured on figurines made by hobbyists as well as the historical figurines that they are copying.

Moreover, the majority of Boyle's figures have the same neatly coiffed form of hair, delicate features, painted nails and made-up faces as other female figurines. For example, although in Figure 6, *Untitled*, her dress is out of control, her brown hair remains perfectly in place and her eyes are outlined in light-blue glaze to replicate the look of eyeshadow. Figure 7, *Untitled*, has red painted lips and matching red fingernails that draw attention to the figure's dainty hands. Boyle's earlier figures focus more on a Royal Doulton or hobbyist tradition which usually just focuses on a single standing figure without a specific base.

The eighteenth-century Meissen influences are reflected more in Boyle's later drawings and sculptures after her travels to Germany. For example, Figure 7 is placed in a tree stump – a popular motif from eighteenth-century porcelain figures. In Figure 8, *Ouroboros*, the detailed chinoiserie pattern on the figure's gown reflect elements of eighteenth-century porcelain. The base of *Ouroboros* features gold scrollwork in curving, Rococo lines as well as patches of brightly coloured flowers and grass. Similar styles of historical porcelain bases are portrayed again in Figures 9, 10 and 11, *Untitled* drawings from Boyle's "Porcelain Fantasy Series" as they all feature either gold scrollwork, flowers or a tree stump. Furthermore, Figure 12, *Snowball*, is a direct reference to a vase made by the Meissen sculptor J.J. Kändler in approximately 1740. This vase features a Japanese snowball tree decoration with many tiny white flowers. The vase also has

round balls of white flowers, a green, leafy vine and two almost identical birds in similar positions to those on Boyle's sculpture. Boyle has taken the pattern from the vase and applied it to one of her figures.⁸⁶ The influence of eighteenth-century European porcelain, especially Meissen, is particularly noticeable in *Snowball* and *Ouroboros*, while her earlier figures reflect more of a Royal Doulton tradition. The ideological implications of this shift and a further analysis of these figures and drawings will be returned to in Chapters Three and Four. While I have reviewed the various visual details that have influenced Boyle's work, I will now turn my attention to the construction of femininity within patriarchal cultural forms.

By appropriating these figurines and referencing the visual details in her work, Boyle is commenting on stereotypes of femininity featured in these traditional figurines. These stereotypes define women as beautiful, graceful and delicate, as established by specific ideals outlined through the canon of feminine beauty. Furthermore, she highlights both the performativity of gender and the ways in which it is a socially constructed concept. The division of male and female bodies by their sex highlights biological differences, whereas gender differences, the behavioural and psychological traits associated with masculinity and femininity are socially constructed.⁸⁷ It is believed that gender roles are learned and shaped through social conditioning and our interaction with social structures such as the family, school, the media, as well as images in popular

⁸⁶ Boyle, Artists talk. (Boyle expressed her passion for German porcelain and explained that *Snowball* was inspired by this vase and was the first sculpture she made when she returned from Germany).

⁸⁷ Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, and Kathleen Lennon, *Theorizing Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p.26.

culture.⁸⁸ These social structures and social relations of gender are ones in which women are treated as inferior and subordinate to men, therefore making gender divisions exploitive and oppressive.⁸⁹ Moreover, Judith Butler has conceptualized gender identity in terms of performance through dress, movement and gestures.⁹⁰ Femininity becomes created and defined through performance and by visual appearance.

To bring this argument back to the typical representations of women in porcelain figurines, we must examine the visual “norms” imposed on the female body. Some women try to live up to these “norms” imposed by society through dieting, make-up, exercise, dress, skin-whitening creams, and cosmetic surgery, to name a few. The norms of femininity are constituted by the surface presentation of the body.⁹¹ While Boyle adorns her porcelain figures in frilly feminine gowns, with painted nails and rouged cheeks, they are subversive, and transgress imposed patriarchal notions of gender. Boyle critiques the visual norms of femininity, established through the discourse of feminine beauty, by adding elements of the grotesque.⁹² As I have previously outlined she uses vintage moulds to create her figures so that they are very similar to historical porcelain figures that she is imitating and adapting. Furthermore, through her addition of the grotesque she ruins the perfection of these figures and challenges our assumptions about

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.66. However, “Social Role Theory” can be problematic in that it does not explain how some people accept the roles while others reject them.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.67.

⁹⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Butler has expanded and clarified her theories on performativity in numerous publications since 1990 (most notably in *Undoing Gender*, 2004). Performance through dress will be returned to in Chapter Three.

⁹¹ Ibid., 167.

⁹² Boyle states, “I totally believe in the redemptive beauty of nature... but I’m also dealing with the claustrophobic way in which those ideals can be imposed on women... There is something in me that begs to confront that.” Quoted in Milroy, “Feminine Grotesque.”

the feminine. These additional features are an important part of Boyle's work as parody alone is not subversive.

The argument that parody on its own is not subversive has been examined in relation to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1981). In this series of eighty-five black-and-white photographs, Sherman, both the artist and the subject, parodies a wide variety of female stereotypes by dressing up as a career girl, housewife, 1950s movie star, sex object and so on. By actively acting out the stereotypes of the passive female, Sherman attempts to expose femininity as a social construct. However, this series has been critiqued in feminist circles as it has been argued that in her "attempt to deconstruct 'feminine' stereotypes, she merely reinstates them."⁹³ It is important to note that, according to some critics, it was not until Cindy Sherman's *Untitled* series created in 1991-1992 that featured grotesque images of mutilated plastic dolls that she "succeeded in disrupting the scopophilic gaze."⁹⁴ This is significant in that I would argue that Boyle's use of the grotesque is crucial to her ability to disrupt constructions of feminine beauty. Without these grotesque additions her work may also have been viewed as reinstating constructions of femininity in porcelain. I will return to Boyle's use of the grotesque shortly. First I will briefly examine the work of two other artists who are also working with traditional porcelain figurines to demonstrate how Boyle's figures are unique.

⁹³ Maura Reily, "Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*: Reproductive or Transgressive Mimicry? (1977-81)," *Women Making Art: Women in the Visual, Literary, and Performing Arts Since 1960*, ed. by Deborah Johnson and Wendy Oliver (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), pp.117-140, p.119.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.138.

Both Ruth Claxton (b.1971) and Barnaby Barford (b. 1977) are only two examples of a new generation of artists who are working with porcelain in a subversive manner.⁹⁵ Ruth Claxton is based in England and her work carries similar themes to Boyle's sculptures. Since 2005 she has reconfigured many pre-existing sculptures by adding other materials to cover the figurines faces. Coloured wire is completely wrapped around one, while pink, day-glo clay streams from the face of another female figure. The manner in which she covers the majority of her figure's faces turns them into an "object," rather than a "character." Barnaby Barford is also based in England and creates new sculptures by breaking the heads off mass-produced figures and rearranging them with other figures to create hybrid forms. The result of one of these works is a female figurine with an elephant's face fastened over her own. Once again, by covering the face of the figure and using a readymade object this figure lacks the emotion that Boyle is able to portray in her figures by customizing each one. While these three artists are all concerned with creating alternatives to traditional porcelain figurines, Boyle's technique is different. She carefully sculpts, lace drapes and paints each of her porcelain figures, rather than using pre-existing sculptures. Her working method is anti mass-production. As well, Boyle creates tiny details, which brings the spectator closer. She manages to convey a range of expressions and creates subtle gestures to add to their meaning.

Boyle, through her artistic abilities, turns her sculptures into characters. Like many of the characters across her work her porcelain figures have their own narrative and

⁹⁵ This is an area that has gained significant popularity over the last few years within the realm of contemporary art. For more information see *Breaking the Mould: New Approaches to Ceramics* (London: Black Dog, 2007) or *Fragiles: Porcelain, Glass and Ceramics* (Berlin: Die Gestalten Verlag, 2008).

history.⁹⁶ While she admires the work of many of her fellow artists she has had trouble connecting to their characters and felt that they did not tell a story.⁹⁷ Boyle's earlier porcelain figures tell a story that many women can relate to – one of oppression and violence. She explains that she tries to invest each individual figurine with a whole character “like they are actually a person. They have all this stuff on top of them that they have to carry, they are supposed to represent and they are filled with rage and defiance.”⁹⁸ This “stuff” that her figures have to carry is both all the lace and frills of their costumes and, metaphorically, the weight and pressures of having to try and measure up to a beauty that defines identity and the feminine ideals imposed on women within a patriarchal society. Moreover, when critics have commented on the unsettling nature of her figures Boyle has responded, “Maybe my work seems disturbing, because I do not burden my characters with a false innocence.”⁹⁹ This type of false innocence is represented in traditional porcelain figurines that depict constructions of women only as demure, fragile beauty queens.

In this chapter I have focused on the history and aesthetic details of both Meissen and Royal Doulton figurines, as well as the figures created by hobbyists. Through the shift in production and consumption of these figures, issues of class were addressed through both their affordability to the middle classes and their representations of an

⁹⁶ Boyle made this clear in a recent interview by explaining that all of her characters have a “whole private history and that carries a dignity and a real complexity.” Enright and Walsh, pp.90-92.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.90-92. Boyle commented on the work of contemporary artists Marcel Dzama and Amy Cutler. Both of these artists feature themes similar to Boyle's in their work. Additionally, in an interview with the author Boyle states that she finds Ruth Claxton's work beautiful but lacking in content.

⁹⁸ Interview with author, January 25, 2008.

⁹⁹ Goddard, “Ten People to Watch in 2007.”

idealized upper-class femininity. Details in Boyle's work were examined to set up the visual similarity between her figures and traditional porcelain figurines. As well, the social constructions and performative nature of gender "norms" were outlined. Finally, two contemporary artists working with porcelain were considered to stress the distinct nature of Boyle's work.

As I identified earlier in this chapter, parody alone is not subversive. While I have set up and emphasized the ways in which Boyle creates a sense of the familiar through using vintage moulds and visually referencing traditional figurines, I will now introduce the grotesque element in her work and how it functions as a subversive strategy to disrupt these constructions of femininity.

Chapter Two

Strategies of the Grotesque

The grotesque elements in Shary Boyle's porcelain sculptures function as both a strategy to subvert constructions of femininity as well as a way to create alternative forms of beauty. This chapter will define the grotesque, and its various categories, as it relates to Boyle's work. I will outline the history of the grotesque in visual art and the scholarship that focuses on its disruptive powers. Through this, variations of the grotesque such as the "feminine grotesque" and other feminist appropriations will be examined. Finally, the grotesque additions featured in Boyle's figures and drawings will be emphasized through various categories. In particular, three types proposed by art historian Frances S. Connelly, the deformative or exaggerated, combinatory and metamorphic, as well as the realistic grotesque, will be considered.

The term "grotesque" is commonly used to describe something that is ugly or repulsive. That is not my intention when I identify Boyle's sculptures as "grotesque." In fact, the meaning of the word has gone through many changes since its origin. The word grotesque was first used to describe a certain ornamental style of painting that came to light during 15th century excavations in Italy. *La grottesca* and *grottesco* refer to *grotta* which means cave – where these paintings were found.¹⁰⁰ This style featured classical motifs mixed with fantastical birds, monstrous animals and hybrid forms that combined human bodies with foliage.¹⁰¹ Moreover, this inspired the painters of the following

¹⁰⁰ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, translated by Ulrich Weisstein, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1963), p.19.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

centuries to experiment with this style that subverted the natural order of things.¹⁰² The grotesque is often associated with a “topsy-turvy” world where unlike elements are combined. This term spread to other countries, and by 1694 was defined in the Dictionary of the French Academy as: “Figuratively speaking, it signifies silly, bizarre, extravagant.”¹⁰³ However, there was a change in the meaning of “grotesque” during the middle of the nineteenth-century. It began to “signify something negative and was more than occasionally used to designate a minor, eccentric form of art.”¹⁰⁴ By the turn of the twentieth-century the concept of the word “grotesque” had a renewal and was used in an appreciative and distinctly positive sense. This was especially true when “the grotesque was considered not just an artistic style, but a more general strategy of opposition to prevailing aesthetic and moral norms.”¹⁰⁵

It is unfortunate that during the present period at the beginning of the twenty-first century we have varied the meaning of the grotesque. Robert Storr explains: “in short, for something to be grotesque, it has to be in disharmony with the world as we normally understand it. However, such nuances are generally lost in common parlance, where the word ‘grotesque’ has come to mean anything disgusting, upsetting or absurd.”¹⁰⁶ This is not the understanding of the word that I am using to describe Boyle’s sculptures. The definition of the grotesque that I am drawing on is as follows:

¹⁰² Kayser, p.21.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.26.

¹⁰⁴ Pamela Kort, “The Grotesque: Modernism’s Other,” in *Comic Grotesque: Wit and Mockery in German Art, 1870-1940*, edited by Pamela Kort (New York: Prestel, 2004), pp.12-42, p.14.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Jelavich, “Grotesque and Carnavalesque: Negation and Renewal around 1900,” in *Comic Grotesque*, pp.89-129, p.89.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Storr, “Reason’s Dream, Reason’s Nightmare,” in *Comic Grotesque*, pp.211-217, p.211.

The meaning of the grotesque is constituted by the norm which it contradicts: the order it destroys, the values it upsets, the authority and morality it derides, the religion it ridicules, the harmony it breaks up, the heaven it brings down to earth, the position of classes, races, and sexes it reverses, the beauty and goodness it questions. The word “grotesque” makes sense only if one knows what the ‘norm’ represents – in art and in life.¹⁰⁷

The “norm” that Boyle is disrupting through the use of the grotesque is the representations of women embodied in porcelain figurines. As Chapter One established, there is a long history of the construction of a white, upper class feminine ideal that is embedded in these types of figurines, as well as other cultural forms within patriarchal society. By Boyle’s addition of the grotesque she contradicts and destroys these “norms” and challenges her viewers to question their own assumptions about feminine beauty.

This is my interpretation and chosen methodology to examine Boyle’s porcelain sculptures. Previously, she has expressed in numerous articles her desire to challenge the overly feminine nature of these representations of women, yet made it clear that she was not interested in the grotesque.¹⁰⁸ Boyle’s relationship to this term and its meaning has

¹⁰⁷ Ewa Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex: The Grotesque: Origins, Iconography, Techniques* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1987), p.11.

¹⁰⁸ In both Robin Laurence, “Companions (at the Or Gallery),” *The Georgia Straight*, Vancouver, 24 June, 2004 and Lorissa Sengara, “Porcelain Dreams and Nightmares: The multi-dimensional Shary Boyle,” *Canadian Art* XXXIII, 3, Fall 2006, pp.94-98, Boyle insists that she has “no interest in the grotesque.”

changed since then.¹⁰⁹ However, it is important to note that while Boyle's work is grotesque it is not about shock.¹¹⁰

This is a crucial distinction to make. For other contemporary artists that use the grotesque to repulse, shock can be an important aspect of their work.¹¹¹ The grotesque has been used in art in a manner to disgust audiences. For a work of art to be shocking it has to have an unfamiliar quality to it. David Beech explains, "To be shocked by art is connected to being puzzled by it."¹¹² With Boyle's porcelain sculptures we immediately recognize what she is referencing – her work is familiar. This familiarity could be from owning a porcelain figurine, or knowing someone who collects them, or perhaps coveting these figures and viewing them from a distance at a store. My grandmother practiced the art of lace draping so I am immediately reminded of the figures that she would create – minus the grotesque additions. Another familiar aspect of Boyle's figures is the traditional medium in which she works. As I have illustrated in Chapter One, there is a lengthy history associated with porcelain. Her work merges a historical medium with contemporary themes. Curator Andrea Smith identifies Boyle's work as being one "that

¹⁰⁹ In a recent interview I explained how I view her figures and defined the grotesque as stated above. She replied by clarifying that this definition of the grotesque was "not something I went in knowing. Since then, in the last couple of years, I've had that word applied in those terms, so it's becoming familiar to me and I totally agree with it." Interview with author, January 25, 2008.

¹¹⁰ Boyle stated that she has "no interest in shocking people" (p.97) in Lorissa Sengara's article. Additionally, Robert Enright explained that Boyle's work "is not about shock" in 'Figuratively Speaking', *The Globe and Mail*, January 31, 2007.

¹¹¹ For example, the element of shock is featured prominently in the some of the sculptural work of Jake and Dinos Chapman.

¹¹² Dave Beech, "Shock: A Report on Contemporary Art," in *Jake and Dinos Chapman: Bad Art for Bad People*, ed. by Christoph Grunenberg (London: Tate Liverpool, 2006), pp.99-110, p.101.

talks with and advances art history.”¹¹³ Her use of a historical medium and the traditional figurine form creates a sense of the familiar. This familiarity is significant in that it sets up the “norm” (feminine ideals) that she contradicts and confronts by combining it with the grotesque. Part of what makes Boyle’s work so effective is her combination of beauty and the grotesque. Through this stimulation of unexpected juxtapositions we are drawn to their beauty and a sense of the familiar which, in turn, makes this subversion all the more forceful once we notice the sculptures’ grotesque details. In Boyle’s words, they are both “exquisite and confrontational at once.”¹¹⁴

At this point I will turn my attention to a brief overview of previous scholarship on the grotesque in visual art. In particular, I will focus on those that discuss the grotesque as a subversive strategy to push beyond established boundaries. I will conclude my overview with the work of Frances S. Connelly. By using her proposed categories, as well as the realistic grotesque, I will relate these aspects to visual examples from a variety of Boyle’s figures and drawings.

Theorists have written on the grotesque in a variety of ways. In 1940 Mikhail Bakhtin published *Rabelais and His World* which highlighted the “carnavalesque” aspect of the grotesque. Carnavalesque refers to the notion of a “world upside-down” where fools were crowned as kings and social conventions were disrupted and overturned. Bakhtin saw the carnivalesque as revolutionary and the voice of the people. He tied this notion to the grotesque body as follows: “The body that figures in all the expressions of the unofficial speech of the people is the body that fecundates and is fecundated, that

¹¹³ Andrea Smith and Scott Zieher, *Important Canadian Art*, exhib. cat. (New York: ZieherSmith Gallery, May 2004), p.1.

¹¹⁴ Isozaki

gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks, defecates, is sick and dying.”¹¹⁵

Bakhtin’s idea of the grotesque body as alive in many forms has been built on since the 1940 publication, and English translation in 1968, of *Rabelais and His World*.

Furthermore, while Bakhtin has mainly focused on the grotesque in relation to literature, and has been critiqued by scholars for the masculine bias of his work, his theories can still be applied to the visual arts and appropriated accordingly.¹¹⁶ Following Bakhtin’s work, a few surveys on the grotesque in art were published such as Wolfgang Kayser’s *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* and Geoffrey Harpham’s *On the Grottesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. While both of these studies define and identify the grotesque as a strategy of resistance they do not address how the grotesque functions in relation to the female body.

Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body has been drawn on and reinterpreted most notably by Julia Kristeva and Mary Russo. Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) focuses on the abject (menstrual blood, excrement, vomit, waste etc.) that is outside of our body and is deeply rooted in psychoanalytical theory. For example, Kristeva uses abjection to describe the horror the child experiences as it attempts to separate itself from the pre-Oedipal mother in the passage from the Imaginary to the

¹¹⁵ Frances S. Connelly, Introduction to *Modern Art and the Grottesque*, ed. by Frances S. Connelly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.8.

¹¹⁶ Bakhtin has been critiqued for not considering gender in his work. However, many different scholars have appropriated his work. One example of this is a series of essays, *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), that apply his theories, with the addition of a feminist perspective. As well, Sue Vice explains in the introduction of her book, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), she has done what many Bakhtinian critics do, “which is to extend the implications of his arguments to fields or purposes he did not have in mind. Hence the appearance of his work in film, post-structuralist, post-colonial and queer theory, following the route mapped out by feminist extensions of his work.”

Symbolic Order.¹¹⁷ The abject, is situated outside the symbolic order and like the grotesque it crosses boundaries. Further, it exists in between the object and the subject and constantly threatens to dissolve the unity of the subject.

In 1995, Mary Russo published *The Female Grotesque: risk, excess, and modernity*, which combine theories from both Bakhtin and Kristeva's work and concentrates on the "feminine grotesque." The female grotesque links the grotesque to the female body. This connection dates back to the origin of the term and its association with the *grotta*, or cave, a dark earthy place that invokes the female body. According to Russo, the "classical body" is closed, static and self-contained, while the "grotesque body" is open, protruding, irregular, and identified with social transformation.¹¹⁸ This classical body is linked to the male body and the grotesque connected to the female body and transgression. Robert Storr builds on the idea of transformation by explaining, "It is more useful and more accurate to think of the grotesque as a full-fledged, multilayered countertradition, a powerful current that continuously stirs calmer waters, sometimes redirecting their flow."¹¹⁹ These ideas can be related back to Boyle's sculptures in that the "flow" that Boyle attempts to redirect is constructions of a white, upper class feminine ideal. Moreover, the "feminine grotesque" has been adapted and used as a strategy of resistance by many feminist artists.¹²⁰ As cultural theorist Anne Hole explains, "The grotesque body is not an ugly body, but a non-conformist body... it

¹¹⁷ Christine Ross, "Redefinitions of Abjection in Contemporary Performances of the Female Body," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. by Frances S. Connelly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 281-290, p.281.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.8.

¹¹⁹ Robert Storr quoted in Drouin-Brisebois.

¹²⁰ Cindy Sherman, Jenny Saville and Jo Spence, for example.

destroys internal restraints, freeing laughter; and shatters social order in a creative, regenerative way.”¹²¹

In 2003, Frances S. Connelly edited a series of essays that examine the use of the grotesque within modern art to transgress boundaries and break down established norms. These essays address theories on the grotesque that have been established in the last few decades and encompass a range of visual media and subjects. Further, this study “demonstrates how the grotesque in modern art directly ties into current debates regarding the representation of race and gender, abjection and the Other, globalization and appropriation.”¹²² In the introduction, Connelly poses three actions, or processes at work in the grotesque image: the deformative or exaggerated, the combinatory or hybrid, and the metamorphic.¹²³ It is important to note that these grotesques are not fixed categories and are not exclusive of one another. Many of Boyle’s porcelain figurines and drawings possess these three elements of the grotesque. I will now define these categories and bring in examples from her work.

Connelly describes the deformative or exaggerated as follows:

Those that deform or decompose things...Grotesque also describes the aberration from ideal form or from accepted convention, to create the misshapen, ugly, exaggerated, or even formless. This type runs the gamut from the deliberate exaggerations of caricature, to the unintended aberrations, accidents, and failures of the everyday world represented in

¹²¹ Anne Hole, “Television,” in Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, eds., *Feminist Visual Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp.281-293, p.286.

¹²² Connelly, p. xv.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p.2.

realist imagery, to the dissolution of bodies, forms and categories.¹²⁴

Boyle's use of the deformative or exaggerated is especially apparent in her earlier sculptures. For example, in Figure 1, *Untitled*, and Figure 4, *Untitled*, Boyle has placed certain body parts backwards. The arm of one is completely twisted to face the other way, while the head of the other has been fastened backwards. In Figure 5, *Untitled*, two bodies are attached together to form Siamese twins. Both Figure 2, *Untitled*, and Figure 3, *Untitled*, have severed and dismembered body parts and their stumps have been painted in a manner to signify the bloody remains of this act. Around the hands, wrists and eyes of Figure 13, *Haunt*, Boyle has painted deep purple and black bruises that cover the figure's white skin. In Figure 6, *Untitled*, the notion of exaggeration, or excess, is made apparent through the layers upon layers of lace that make up the figure's dress. Bakhtin has described the concept of excess as being connected to the grotesque and argues that "exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style."¹²⁵ He discusses how through the use of exaggeration, the classical style can be critiqued and mocked, which results in a way to bring down the established order.¹²⁶ In this case, the established order, or norm, that Boyle is shedding light on is the overpowering nature of traditional patriarchal attitudes surrounding femininity. As well, this figure has deformative features such as the six fingers on one hand and pieces of lace fastened to her face. Moreover, Elizabeth C.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, trans. by Helene Iswolsky, *Rabelais and His World* (Massachusetts: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968), p.303.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp.303-306.

Childs has looked at the use of the deformative grotesque as an alternative to European conventions of “high art” and as a way to undermine inherited notions of gender, taste, decorum, and society.¹²⁷ Through Boyle’s use of imperfections such as six fingers, as well as other deformative grotesque features, she disrupts and challenges constructions of a romanticized femininity that is reiterated throughout patriarchal society. Another strategy of resistance is the combinatory grotesque.

The combinatory grotesque style represents “creatures ranging from the centaur to the cyborg...it brings together things from separate worlds.”¹²⁸ Early in the history of art, the hybrid grotesque was viewed as unnatural and frivolous and typically relegated to the margins, as a design element rather than serious art. It was not until the twentieth-century that the hybrid, or combinatory, grotesque was recognized for its ability to cross and break down boundaries.¹²⁹ Furthermore, these types of categories that cross boundaries have been described as the “stimulation of unexpected juxtapositions” such as “human and animal, animal and mineral, and things alive and dead.”¹³⁰ The intersection of humans and animals, as well as other hybrid forms, is a feature across Boyle’s artwork. For example, Figure 14, *Untitled*, combine human and plant, as roses have been added to imply that they are growing from out of her arm. Figure 15, *La Bête*, is equally man and beast. Figure 7, *Untitled*, combines both the characteristics of woman and spider, while Figure 10, *Untitled*, is both woman and horse. Figure 11, *Untitled*, features both man and

¹²⁷ Elizabeth C. Childs, “Eden’s Other: Gauguin and the Ethnographic Grotesque”, *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. by Frances S. Connelly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 175-192, p.186.

¹²⁸ Connelly, p.2.

¹²⁹ Maria Makela, “Grotesque Bodies: Weimar-Era Medicine and the Photomontages of Hannah Höch,” in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. by Frances S. Connelly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.193-219, p.196.

¹³⁰ Childs, in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, p.183.

lion, as well as a centaur-like creature. In Figure 12, *Snowball*, there is both a combination of woman and bird through her beak and clawed foot. As well, while *Snowball* has a hybrid of body parts, she could also be viewed as representing a metamorphosis from one form into another as her beak and claw are not fully formed.

Connelly characterizes the metamorphic grotesque by explaining that while the deformative or exaggerated and combinatory grotesques “require an imaginative leap, the metamorphic grotesque does much of this work for the viewer. This grotesque can combine or deform in the same way as its static counterparts, but the metamorphic exists in the process.”¹³¹ I would argue that *Snowball* represents the process of changing from woman to bird. Moreover, Bakhtin explains that, “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming.”¹³² This notion of growth and becoming or “morphing,” changing from one form to another, is also reflected in Figure 8, *Ouroboros*. This figure is lying on her back with an arc of heads over her body connecting from her head to between her legs. While the multiple heads could also be viewed as deformative or exaggerated, I believe that they symbolize the changing from one form to another. The metamorphic grotesque is subversive in its ability to challenge notions of stable identity, as well as fixed categories or boundaries.

One final element of the grotesque that I will focus on is the realistic grotesque. This grotesque is founded in reality instead of the fantastical. It depicts the sides of human life that might be considered ugly in a natural manner without interpretation or embellishment. The realistic grotesque displays a lifelike representation based on

¹³¹ Connelly, p.3.

¹³² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.24.

actualities. In Boyle's work it functions to show a truth that has not been concealed by the sensibilities of femininity. For example, Figure 16, *Untitled*, is a figure of a woman who is heavily pregnant. The form of her hair has been moulded to appear unkempt as a thick strands fall across her forehead. Heavy bags surround her eyes to represent a state of exhaustion. Figure 17, *Untitled*, is of a beggar. While the economically disenfranchised have been represented in porcelain figurines before they are always depicted in an unrealistic manner. Figure 17, *Untitled*, has been painted to make the skin of the figure appear weathered. The figure is depicted as missing a tooth and her outstretched arms are covered in marks and scratches, and light blue painted veins run down her arms. The types of imperfections on these two figures are rooted in the realistic grotesque and provide an image of reality that has been erased by a tradition of porcelain figurines that focus on feminine beauty and mask lived experiences of oppression.

This chapter has presented an overview of the grotesque. It has defined the origins of the term, its changing meaning, and the definition of the term that I am identifying with Boyle's sculptures and drawings. It has focused on the scholarship surrounding the grotesque and outlined how it can be used as a subversive strategy. Additionally, it has examined a variety of elements of the grotesque and highlighted those features in Boyle's work. While I have focused exclusively on the visual elements of the grotesque in Boyle's sculptures and drawings, I will now turn my attention to the final two chapters that provide a further detailed analysis of these works. I will discuss their ideological implications as well as how Boyle's porcelain sculptures move beyond the boundaries of the traditional porcelain figurine genre to create new images of beauty.

Chapter Three

Representations of Oppression

As I have outlined, Shary Boyle's figures juxtapose visual aspects appropriated from traditional porcelain figurines with elements of the grotesque. This combination acts to both display these constructions of an idealized beauty and disrupt conventions that favour upper class, white femininity. She both invokes and subverts these types of porcelain figurines. While the grotesque visually challenges the viewers' enjoyment and interpretation of these figures, it also serves to symbolize and express larger themes revolving around the oppression of woman within a patriarchal society. Through viewing the sixteen sculptures that make up the "Lace Figures Series" I perceived a narrative that runs through this body of work. The majority of her figures created between 2002-2005 present images of violence and feature symbolic representations that draw attention to the restrictions these constructions of femininity have placed on woman. In these earlier sculptures Boyle critiques the oppression of women through her use of the grotesque, while her later works (2005-2006) focus more on female agency and creating another form of beauty. While this may not have been an intentional shift there is trajectory within this series.¹³³

This chapter will focus on Boyle's earlier sculptures, while Chapter Four will discuss her later works. I must emphasize that this is my interpretation of Boyle's work

¹³³ When asked about this shift Boyle responded: "I think what happens when you are making a series is that the most intense and urgent subjects come first... and now that has been said I have been able to do that and it is out of my system and now it's more about the long term and more deeper and consistent thing" (Interview with author, January 25, 2008).

and only one possible reading. The scope of this thesis does not consider her varied audiences and take into account the many different points of view and subjectivities. These sculptures do not have fixed meanings and could be interpreted in many different ways.¹³⁴ Furthermore, these figures, like the majority of Boyle's work are "untitled."¹³⁵ By offering little in the way of titles, text and comments she encourages her viewers to come up with their own analyses. Moreover, through Boyle's decision not to name most of her figures she emphasizes the idea of "woman" – not the singular self but an ideological category. The first few figures that I will examine represent the oppression of woman through some form of violence or trauma.

Figure 1, *Untitled*, was the first lace draped porcelain figure that Boyle created at a weekend workshop in 2002. It features a woman in a green gown whose appearance signifies a state of distress. Her arms are both held up and bent in a rather alarmed pose. On her left arm just below her wrist Boyle has painted numerous bloody scars that could illustrate the result of self-mutilation. Although it is not immediately recognizable when we look at her other arm we notice that something is amiss. The carefully painted red nails on her hand suddenly signal that her right arm has been fastened backwards. As well, the low-cut bodice of her dress reveals a large painted slash above her left breast. Her lips are red, but only in the centre, creating a cupid-lipped effect. Her eyes are wide and slightly off-centre with dark circles painted underneath. Pink lace is piled on top of her head as a turban, or nest, with a small owl perched on top. To achieve the uncanny

¹³⁴ This is a possible topic for further research, to theorize how different viewers from varied backgrounds would interpret these porcelain figures.

¹³⁵ Boyle states: "Titles make things too reductive, I like to keep things open." in Milroy.

facial qualities of this figure, Boyle used a porcelain slip which allows her to build up certain areas and alter expressions.¹³⁶

Boyle's creative process and resistance stands out when you consider what would have been taught at Vivian Hausle's workshop where she created this figure. For example, in an instructional book by Hausle she explains, "there are three things that will add to the quality of your doll – a pretty face with features well done, beautiful and delicate looking hands, and a good job of draping the lace on your doll so that it has that natural look."¹³⁷ This idea of constructions of gender and sex as "natural" must be challenged (for example the notion that femininity equals woman). Further, these links between gender and sex limit the possibilities for multiple and indeterminate sex-gender-sexual positionings.¹³⁸ Through Boyle's use of the grotesque she resists discourses of "proper" feminine mannerisms and attire.¹³⁹ Boyle's figure is still wearing a beautiful gown and has "delicate looking hands," but grotesque elements have been added, such as the bloody scars and backwards arm to subvert constructions of gender.

While these symbolic wounds visually confront the viewer and force us to consider issues such as violence against woman, an internal conflict is represented as well. The rows of tiny scars painted on only one wrist of Figure 1 represent a self-inflicted wound. In a drawing from one of Boyle's early bookworks, *I Feel Funny*

¹³⁶ Anisef

¹³⁷ Vivian Hausle, *My World of Porcelain* (Seattle, Washington: Ballard Printing and Publishing, 1973).

¹³⁸ Transgender, lesbian, gay and bisexual for example.

¹³⁹ These ideas of constructions of the natural body/self and strategies of resistance are outlined in Ruth Holliday's article "Fashioning the Queer Self," in *Body Dressing*, ed. by Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001), pp.215-232.

Mommy (1999), a young girl is seated on a bed cutting her arm with a scalpel.¹⁴⁰ When asked about these types of works, Boyle responded: "I attempt to honestly represent familiar and unsettling subjects which are often repressed by bourgeois standards of taste and discretion."¹⁴¹ In representations of woman in traditional porcelain figurines (as well as other cultural forms) the oppression of woman is masked by a romanticized notion of femininity as defined by a particular canon of beauty. In Boyle's figures she refuses to ignore imperfections and challenges porcelain traditions, as well as critiquing culture at large. Furthermore, these painted scars on the porcelain figure could be a reflection of, what Sengara describes as, the "emotional and psychological costs of keeping up the artifices of femininity."¹⁴² The figure is beautifully presented in piles of lace yet her appearance is distressing. Through her expression, raised arms and deformities it is clear that all is not well.

Another figure that is emblematic of this violence and suffering is Figure 13, *Haunt*. Created in 2004, this figure is covered in a white porcelain sheet with holes cut out for the eyes. Similar to a child's Halloween costume this sheet covers the figure's head and body. It is patterned with a small design and is secured around the neck by a rope.¹⁴³ Alternating pink and blue ruffles make up the lower half of the figure's dress. Two black eyes are visible through the holes cut in the sheet and dark bruises have also been painted on her outstretched arms. These bruises contrast against the white skin and the layers of pastel lace. The majority of the bruises are around the figure's hands and

¹⁴⁰ See *Witness My Shame*, p.88.

¹⁴¹ Andrea Mantin, *Taboos, Titillations and Thrills*, exhib. cat. (Halifax: MSVU Art Gallery Publications, June 2000), p.6.

¹⁴² Sengara, p.96.

¹⁴³ *Haunt* is part of the permanent collection at the Paisley Museum in Scotland and I have only seen a two-dimensional photograph of this figure.

wrists – self-defense bruises to illustrate an attempt to fend off an attack. As well, some of these bruises are portrayed as older and have turned yellow, indicating that this may be an ongoing battle. Or, alternately this figure could be a nightmarish image from another world who has come back to remind us of this act of physical violence that was inflicted on her. Overall the wounds symbolize that she has tried to resist being covered and tied, but has been overpowered by a stronger force – the force of the repressive nature of feminine constructions within patriarchy. Figure 3, *Untitled*, shares similar thematic concerns.

This sculpture, created in 2005, is of a woman holding her decapitated head. The figure is dressed in an elaborate black and pale green dress with many different kinds of porcelain lace. From the waist down the lace alternates between layers of colours and patterns. A bright red rose adorns her waist. The pale low-cut bodice of the dress is accented with a trim of black lace, tiny black buttons, and black scalloped sleeves with lace eyelets outlined in white. Where her head was severed is a neck stump filled with blood-soaked lace. The figure delicately cradles her head, which is on its own little platter of bloody lace, between her hands. Her hands are gracefully posed, her form of brown hair neatly coiffed and nails painted red. The tip of her nose is painted light pink to make it appear raw from crying and her brown eyes have been glazed, making them brimming with tears. These techniques are used to represent this figure as still very much alive.¹⁴⁴ The fact that the figure is portrayed as living and full of emotion, it would appear that Boyle is making a statement about the sadness of having your mind

¹⁴⁴ Drouin-Brisebois also states that “the figure does not appear dead” and “this piece is not concerned with the sensationalizing of a violent act.” It is more about the symbolic.

disconnected from your body – resulting in not being able to communicate, or being silenced.

Moreover, Russo discusses the decapitated body and in describing early discoveries and reactions to the grotesque in art, she sites critic John Ruskin's reaction: "If we can draw the human head perfectly, and are masters of its expression and its beauty, we have no business to cut it off..."¹⁴⁵ In removing this sculpture's head, Boyle is going against the decorative norm. She has created a body that is beautiful, yet grotesque at the same time. By confronting the viewer with this elegant figure holding its severed head she draws attention to violence and oppressive attitudes in the hopes that this awareness will serve as impetus for change.

One last figure that depicts an element of physical harm is Figure 2, *Untitled*, (2004). This sculpture features a woman wearing a pink and black gown with layers of black and mint-green lace as an under skirt and a wide black sash around her waist tied in a bow in the back. The light pink of her dress is very glossy with a translucent gold leaf pattern. One foot steps forward to reveal an open-toed sandal peaking out from under her skirt. A black-lace ruffle around her shoulder sets off her creamy white skin and blonde curls. A matching pink hat with black ribbon sits on her head and is tilted too far forward. In a little basket slung over one arm lay her hands. Where her hands have been cut off are two bloody stumps. These are painted in detail to show the layers of skin, bright red flesh and bones of the forearm. The woman's red lips are turned down and her cheeks are painted to appear tearstained.

¹⁴⁵ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: risk, excess, and modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p.5.

This figure references the popular theme in porcelain figurines of carrying a little basket filled with flowers over one arm, however, her bloody stumps subvert this tradition. Storr discusses this grotesque strategy as the “ruin of perfection.”¹⁴⁶ While the brutality of figure’s severed hands visually wrecks the flawlessness associated with the traditional figurines and their baskets of flowers, it also is powerful in terms of its symbolism. As an artist Boyle expresses herself through her hands. In one interview she talks about her parent’s work in the glass and screen repair business. She explains that due to this “their hands are rough and calloused and dirty. That’s why I like tactile things.”¹⁴⁷ As well, in an exhibition catalogue focusing on a series of Boyle’s oil on panel paintings it is explained that “Shary sees with her hands. She traces shapes, admitting the light and dark of the world through her fingers.”¹⁴⁸ With this understanding of the importance of her hands, the symbolic meaning of this sculpture becomes clearer. The severed hands are more about being disconnected from your senses and life, being unable to communicate and the restrictions that go with this. This disconnect is highlighted in a few more of Boyle’s sculptures.

At this point I will move from her figures that display signs of physical pain to those that are more about the symbolic. In particular, this next group of Boyle’s figures represents an inner conflict or they focus on visual manifestations of the restrictions of patriarchal constructions of feminine beauty that are represented in traditional figurines.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Storr, *Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque* (Santa Fe: SITE, 2004), p.14.

¹⁴⁷ Goddard, “Ten People to Watch”

¹⁴⁸ *YYZ Newsletter*. YYZ Artists Outlet Publications, exhib. cat. (Toronto: YYZ Artists Run Centre, January 2002).

A figure that carries a similar meaning to having severed hands is Figure 19, *Untitled*, created in 2004. This figure is dressed in a slightly more contemporary outfit. Her skirt is made up of layers of black and pink porcelain that create the illusion of gathers of fabric. What is significant about this sculpture are the porcelain forms of giant pink bags on each hand, signifying a restriction in their use, and the pink lace veils across her forehead and face, covering her mouth. Once again the idea of not being able to use your hands or be able to communicate is returned to. Boyle describes this work as, “someone that is blocked from being able to speak, or have a voice, or be able to do anything with their hands, or be active in any way, yet incredibly, decoratively seductive and beautiful – but totally useless.”¹⁴⁹

The pink porcelain bags on the hands of this figure and the pink lace over her face are also tied to the adornment of the body. While they are not necessarily fashions that would be worn they highlight the idea of ornamentation. In this work, as well as her other figures, Boyle decorates the body of her porcelain sculpture. She is not concerned so much with dressing her figures in historically accurate costumes, like many of the hobbyists who make these figures; rather she dresses them in her creations. All of her figures feature coordinated outfits with layered skirts in different patterns of lace painted in a variety of colours. Through this specific style of dress she creates a figure that is recognizably feminine. Moreover, these elaborate styles of dress are tied to the performativity of gender. By dressing her figures in a “feminine” style of dress she highlights how femininity is constructed through appearance. Further, these are not the costumes worn by the lower or middle classes; rather these dresses reference the

¹⁴⁹ Boyle, Artists Talk

traditional fashions of female figurines as elegantly dressed upper-class women, highlighting fashion as a signifier of class.¹⁵⁰ These constructions of gender and class are then subverted when grotesque elements are brought in.

Another work that is thematically similar to Figure 19 (as well as Figure 2) is Figure 4, *Untitled*, (2005). This figure is attired in a layered cream and black dress with flowers, striped ribbons and a shawl outlined in gold. The form of her hair is depicted as perfectly styled and she wears long, black evening gloves. However, her head has been fastened backwards to signify that it would be impossible for her to communicate. This idea of being useless and not having a voice is traced back to the figurines in which she subverts. These traditional figurines symbolize woman as mere decorations – objects that are beautifully made up and placed in a room to be looked at. Through using the grotesque to comment on this notion of being silenced and objectified Boyle's figures challenge these representations of women within porcelain, as well as the history of art and other cultural forms that equate women as a symbol for beauty.

Another sculpture that symbolizes an inner conflict is Figure 5, *Untitled*, which features two figures, with separate heads and torsos, joined at the waist as Siamese twins. They share a skirt of pale green and white striped fabric alternating in layers and textures. One woman has dark brown hair and an arched eyebrow, while the other has red hair and freckles. They eye each other warily and pull back although trying to escape each other. Moreover, their expressions and gestures indicate a psychological conflict. Boyle has

¹⁵⁰ Fashion as a signifier for femininity and class as well as the ways in which dress is embodied is discussed in Paul Sweetman's article "Shop-Window Dummies? Fashion, the Body, and Emergent Socialities," in *Body Dressing*, ed. by Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001), pp.59-78.

stated that she is concerned with representing herself in her work.¹⁵¹ One figure has dark hair and thick eyebrows, like the artist, while the other has red hair, like many of the woman featured prominently across Boyle's work.¹⁵² This other figure, the redhead, could be interpreted as Boyle's alter ego and represent the artist's conflicting thoughts and personal challenges. By displaying this tension between the "twins" she shares her own experiences and politicizes them by representing an inner struggle that many woman face and brings it to the foreground. One of these conflicts could be the sense of inadequacy or self-worth brought on by the constructions of perfection that feminine stereotypes reiterate in society.

Three of Boyle's porcelain figures that represent the notion of restriction or suffocation are as follows. For example, Figure 18, *Untitled*, (2004) is completely wrapped in a layer of black mesh-like porcelain. Her hands are free, yet the rest of her body from head to toe is covered in this fine mesh. Vertical gold stripes are painted over the black mesh like prison bars. A pink and purple porcelain ribbon wraps around the figure's neck, across her chest and down her body. A small fringe of white lace poking out from under the black mesh, her painted nails and delicate features indicates the characteristics of the traditional figurines she subverts. However, the mesh, bar motif and ribbon all draw attention to the restrictive boundaries imposed on this figure and stand for limited movement, as she is held in place and imprisoned by these patriarchal "norms" that she has to represent. The restricted, almost smothering effect of this figure is echoed in another figure (Figure 6) made in 2005.

¹⁵¹ Both in Bigge's interview and a recent interview with author.

¹⁵² Women and girls with red hair and freckles has been a reoccurring motif in Boyle's work. For example, an oil painting from the front cover of *Witness My Shame* as well as *Ouroboros* both feature these physical attributes.

Figure 6, *Untitled*, is covered in lace to the extreme. Many different sizes and styles of lace are all brought together to create a fantastical dress that emphasizes Boyle's lace draping abilities. This figure's ensemble is painted in delicate pastel shades of pink, blue, yellow and green with copper and gold accents. While the gowns on most of Boyle's other figures are low-cut, this one features lace that wraps around her body to just below her chin. Each hand has six fingers instead of five. As well, the figure has two bundles of lace attached to her face. While they appear to be growing out of her cheeks, upon closer inspection they are actually attached to the corners of each of her watery-eyes, turning them into lace-tears. In the figure's left hand is a small ball of lace. This could be a knotting bag (a small silk purse with a drawstring top popular in the mid eighteenth-century) or perhaps smelling salts wrapped in cloth which were used when a woman was feeling faint due to the constrictive nature of her corset.¹⁵³ Or, alternately, due to the manner in which a tuft of blue lace has been attached to the back of her left hand, this could be an additional aspect to the ways in which the lace is taking over her body.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, with this figure, as well as the others, there is an element of suffocation represented. The excess of lace and decoration and the way in which her dress is creeping up towards her face suggests that this figure is about to be smothered in lace. This figure is portrayed as distressed and even her tears have turned to lace. The claustrophobic nature of her dress articulates the restrictive ideals of "classical beauty" that have been placed on women for centuries.

¹⁵³ Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe 1715-1789* (London: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹⁵⁴ Boyle has referred to these strange growths on her figures before as "skin conditions, allergic reactions, and growths suggesting cancer or mutation." Sengara, p.96.

One final sculpture that signifies an unwelcome mutation is Figure 14, *Untitled* (2004). This figure features elements of the hybrid grotesque in its combination of human with nature.¹⁵⁵ She is not just draped in decorative flowers and leaves, these elements appear as though they are part of her. Roses are depicted as bursting through her flesh and growing right from out of her arm. This figure is wearing a long, multilayered, sea foam green lace skirt with a silver cord wrapped tightly around her waist. She is naked from the waist up except for a cloak of vegetation. A variety of orange, pink, purple and red flowers appear to grow from her torso and completely cover her face. Her dark brown eyes peer out through green leaves and give the impression of her displeasure with this arrangement. As well, her left arm is outstretched and her gaze is directed at the four blood-red roses that appear as though they sprout from open wounds along her arm.

While Drouin-Brisebois argues that with this figure “There is no anguish suggested here; woman and nature exist in a symbiotic (although slightly unusual) relationship,” I maintain that there is great tension in this work.¹⁵⁶ The foliage, which is most prominent on her face, suggests suffocation. It covers her mouth and nose and all we see are her dark eyes. Woman is often equated with nature (as “mother nature / mother earth” or comparisons of women with flowers). Additionally, within the history of art the nude woman is often placed in a landscape. Since women have been connected

¹⁵⁵ The combination of the human body with plants and flowers is something that has a long history of association with the grotesque. These forms were discovered in the original grotesque cave illustrations and featured in Raphael’s creations. This hybrid was described as causing the “difference between animal and vegetable forms to be eliminated.” In Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. By Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 20-21.

¹⁵⁶ Drouin-Brisebois.

with flowers and nature, these elements that cover her face, and burst through her flesh, symbolize the feminine ideals of beauty placed on women. Here they are either about to asphyxiate her or trying to break free from her body. This figure emphasizes both the overwhelming and oppressive aspect of these ideals as well as symbolizing internal conflicts that are caused. Further, Boyle destabilizes the woman-nature equation and once again calls into question the construction of femininity as “natural.” In this figure, as well as the others previously discussed, she visually displays restrictive aspects such as dresses and flowers that cover the figures’ faces, which highlight the claustrophobic nature of these patriarchal impositions.

In this chapter I examined the majority of Boyle’s earlier porcelain figures created between 2002-2005 and offered one possible reading of these works. It is my interpretation that each of these figures communicates the anxieties and suffering that women face in oppressive societies, such as being silenced or keeping up with the facade of femininity. The sculptures that I analyzed featured grotesque signs of physical violence, such as cuts, bruises and dismembered body parts, as well as hybrid forms. These elements both visually confront the viewer and disrupt the perfections that these traditional figurines usually embody. As well, many of Boyle’s porcelain sculptures have symbolic implications. Bodies that are restricted or covered articulate themes of control, inner conflict or the stifling effects of patriarchal stereotypes of feminine beauty, specifically a beauty that is defined by the body of woman. Through displaying and drawing attention these restrictions, she makes an important contribution to feminist art practices. Boyle represents her own thoughts and experiences on the oppressive nature of gender “norms” and expresses them through these figures. While Boyle highlights their

restrictions in her earlier works she also offers strategies of resistance. In her later works she displays themes that go against the typical representations of women in porcelain figurines, specifically women as beautiful objects that are meant to be looked at. For the remainder of my analysis I will focus on these later images.

Chapter Four

Images of Female Agency

In April 2005, after creating the majority of the “Lace Figures Series,” Shary Boyle traveled to Germany to study eighteenth-century European porcelain. During her visit she was so inspired by the works that she was encountering, yet unable to create new works abroad as she did not have access to a kiln. The “Porcelain Fantasy Series” drawings were made during this period as fantastical ideas for future porcelains. As well, without the restrictions of the nature of working with porcelain she was able to create a two-dimensional version of a sculpture, no matter how complicated.¹⁵⁷

This chapter will examine three of these drawings and the porcelain figures made after her return, with the exception of one figure from 2004. These works focus more on empowering the subject, rather than highlighting their oppression. Within these works I will comment on their ability to resist boundaries and constructions of gender and class through a variety of factors. Some of these factors include their hybrid or metamorphic capabilities, the use of the gaze, and Boyle’s imperative to depict female desire from the perspective of a woman. I will conclude this chapter and my analysis of her work with a brief look at Boyle’s lone male figure, *La Bête*.

Two drawings in particular focus on a move away from images of oppression towards images of resistance. For example, one of these illustrations (Figure 9, *Untitled*, 2005) features a group of figures huddled together triumphantly holding a streamer in the air. This work depicts a lower class like her earlier porcelain sculpture (Figure 17,

¹⁵⁷ Interview with author, January 25, 2008.

Untitled, 2004). However, with this porcelain figure, through the realistic grotesque, Boyle draws attention to the oppression of women who are economically disenfranchised. In this illustration she frees the group from these oppressive portrayals by showing them as happy and content. The group is a mix of men, women and children. They are all dressed in patched clothing made up of the same earth tones. The similar colour scheme unifies the group. Their base is very similar to the kind that supported figural groups depicting the upper class. Her representation of economic disenfranchisement is not the “sad-eyed beggars” that have been romanticized for centuries in porcelain.¹⁵⁸ Not only does Boyle empower her subjects in this illustration, she encourages her audiences to consider the links between oppression based on both gender and class.

Another drawing from the “Porcelain Fantasy Series” that illustrates a resistance is Figure 10, *Untitled*, also created in 2005. In this work a young man and a horse occupy a gold scrollwork base. The young man’s coat, decorative breeches and hose are reminiscent of the type of dress worn by men in historical porcelains. His cheeks are flushed and eyebrows angrily arched as he holds the rope tightly around the horse’s neck. While this character has the strong body of a spotted horse, she has the face of a woman. She is angry and is rearing up. The movement of her mane of hair captures this motion. She is trying to free herself from the confines of this space and her owner. This is an image of resistance. Through her combination of animal and human characteristics she is able to subvert boundaries imposed on female figurines and offer new alternatives.

¹⁵⁸ Depictions of “sad-eyed beggars” have been represented in porcelain figurines from eighteenth-century Italian sculptures to recent Royal Doultonesque figurines. Boyle’s earlier figures (discussed in Chapter Three) also could fit into this “sad-eyed” genre. Although, with the exception of Figure 17, they are not beggars, rather the oppressive nature of constructions of feminine beauty is highlighted through the “sad-eyed” expressions that Boyle has created.

Moreover, as Connelly notes with respect to the combination of forms: “Images gathered under the grotesque rubric include those that combine unlike things in order to challenge established realities or construct new ones.”¹⁵⁹

Another sculpture that utilizes the combinatory grotesque is Figure 7, *Untitled*, (2004). While there have been various interpretations of this sculpture, I will focus on the ways in which its hybrid nature, combining woman and spider, serves to subvert preconceived notions about fragility and the feminine. This sculpture combines human and insect as it has both the features of a woman and a spider. She has six arms and two legs, making eight limbs in total (the same as a spider). This figure is wearing an exquisite dress with a black lace bodice (also known as a “merry widow”) and cream coloured short puffed sleeves accented by red trim. Her hands are delicately posed, with little red painted nails, and are depicted weaving a cats-cradle that takes the shape of a star or pentagram. A square pattern of four white dots is featured in the centre of her black pupil and six additional eyes, with the same spider-like pattern, take over her forehead. All of these extra sets of eyes serve to stare back at the viewer and reverse the gaze.¹⁶⁰ Traditional porcelain figurines are passive images that cater to the male gaze. They are meant to be looked at and admired for their beauty and grace. Usually their eyes are downcast and the submissive nature of these figures allows for the gaze. Through Boyle’s use of extra eyes she addresses the viewer and moves these figures out

¹⁵⁹ Connelly, p.2.

¹⁶⁰ The theory of “the gaze” originates from Laura Mulvey’s 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” which offers a psychoanalytic analysis of the male gaze in relation to the woman as object of desire within film to function as the site of scopophilic pleasure. This concept has been referenced and adapted considerably since Mulvey’s original publication. It also has been critiqued for only considering the heterosexual male gaze. While Mulvey has responded to this criticism in more recent articles, the importance of this original article still stands.

from under the patriarchal gaze. Moreover, Butler highlights this notion as a reversal of power. She discusses the unanticipated agency of the female “object,” who “inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position.”¹⁶¹ Instead of being the spectacle for desire, this figure redirects the gaze with empowering results.

Further, this figure’s overskirt is light brown with a pattern of white diamonds and red keyhole shapes. This red keyhole shape could be a symbol for the female sex. It would further reinforce the reference to sexualized representation of woman that is displayed through her pose. Her overskirt is pushed to the sides by her splayed legs revealing the layered cream lace of her underskirt. She is placed sitting in a tree stump with one leg outstretched and her tiny pink and black pump positioned nearby as though it has been kicked off in a carefree manner. This is reminiscent an eighteenth-century Rococo painting by Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, in which an elaborately dressed young woman flirtatiously kicks off her shoe. While this porcelain figure has the sexualized feminine aspects of historical representations of upper class women, her spider-like manifestations subvert this tradition and warn the viewer. This notion is also reinforced by the manner in which the web is held as a shield in front of her body. Milroy interprets this figure as “both splendid and terrifying... here the decorative norm is overthrown and the figure seems more dangerous than delightful.”¹⁶² Through Boyle’s technique of blurring boundaries she resists making figures that adhere to the norm and revitalizes the porcelain figurine genre that embodies widely held stereotypes about

¹⁶¹ Butler, p.i.

¹⁶² Milroy

women. Moreover, through her use of the grotesque she has created an alternative form of beauty.

The grotesque features that Boyle employs are also known for their transgressive abilities as they exceed and liberate their boundaries.¹⁶³ Through her strange hybrid characters she is able to defy established modes. Another strategy that has similar results to the combinatory grotesque is the metamorphic grotesque. Rosi Braidotti's work in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* focuses on the transgressing of bodily boundaries, particularly those in the process of becoming woman / animal / insect. Braidotti explains that the overall goal of her book is "the quest for positive social and cultural representations of hybrid, monstrous, abject and alien others in such a way as to subvert the construction and consumption of pejorative differences."¹⁶⁴ Through Boyle's depiction of metamorphoses she challenges the construction of (and by extension the audiences' consumption of) an idealized femininity that is reiterated in both eighteenth-century and contemporary porcelain figurines.

Figure 12, *Snowball*, (2006) depicts a woman who is changing into a bird. This figure is nearly completely covered in a gown of tiny white flowers with a yellow centre. They are almost all the same except for a few which feature two tiers of petals, or are outlined in purple. As well, strange lumps protrude from certain parts of the gown. The manner in which the flowers creep up over the figure's face could symbolize a claustrophobic aspect, much like the figures already examined. However, when viewing this figure in the collections at the Musée des beaux-arts in Montréal this figure's calm

¹⁶³ Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: the offences of art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p.18.

¹⁶⁴ Braidotti, p.182.

brown eyes and the slight smile on her lips struck me. She does not appear upset or afraid like the emotional states represented in Boyle's previous works; rather she is embracing her transformation. By crossing boundaries and changing from woman to bird this figure can escape her current confines of an objectified porcelain figurine.

Furthermore, wrapped around the figure and the flowers is a green vine, as well as one orange-and-white bird positioned near her hip while another is resting toward her left shoulder. *Snowball* lovingly supports each bird with a delicate hand. In addition, a large, colourful butterfly rests on the flowers. In its transition from cocoon to insect, this butterfly serves as a symbol for her metamorphosis. The only part of her flesh that is visible is her hands, part of her face and one scaly foot that emerges from the bottom of her dress. Folds of green lace on either side, like a curtain, highlight this foot or claw. Most of the skin on her foot and ankle is soft, smooth and creamy white – similar to that of the majority of female porcelain figures. However, the toes are long and curled with a ribbed texture similar to a bird's foot. The disturbing element of her foot contrasts greatly with the lace and flowers that surround it. Furthermore, this foot does not lie flush against the rest of the sculpture. It protrudes forward at an odd angle.¹⁶⁵ The second bird-like quality present on this figure is her beak-like nose. The base of her nose is flesh coloured and normal in appearance. It is toward the tip of her nose that it becomes longer, yellow in colour and takes on the appearance of a bird's beak. Visually, both of these qualities further emphasize the boundaries that the figure is crossing and going beyond. Both the nose and foot stretch beyond their given spaces and borders.

¹⁶⁵ This touches on Julia Kristeva's theory of the "abject" body, as a protruding body and one that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: an essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.4.

Symbolically, these boundaries are the constructions of specific qualities of femininity that women are faced with within patriarchy, therefore by crossing them, or morphing across the margins she is able to transgress these oppressive categories. While *Snowball* has many “ladylike” qualities (dainty hands, a graceful posture and delicate features) her beak and foot serve to disrupt these inherited “norms” or constructions of feminine beauty. Additionally, this figure’s metamorphosis from woman to bird blurs divisions and challenges aesthetic conventions of an ideal womanhood.

Figure 8, *Ouroboros*, (2006), employs the metamorphic grotesque and also depicts female desire. Upon this base, in the space that would usually be occupied by a female figure in a dignified pose, is a woman lying on her back. Her legs are kicked apart, arms up by her face and her one visible eye rolls back in delight. She wears royal blue high-heeled shoes with gold trim and white ankle socks. Her dress is beautifully painted with a blue-on-white flowered chinoiserie pattern, once again reminiscent of historical porcelain. Her dress is outlined in gold, has a high lace collar and is thrown open to reveal layers of white lace underneath. A series of twisting and turning multiple heads, nine in total, connect at various angles and form an arch over the figure. One side bites down on the left side of her face, while the other is buried between her legs. The heads are duplicates of her own. They feature the same red hair and freckled complexion, although their eyes are painted brown or green, while the figure’s eyes are bright blue. The result is a stunning figure with erotic implications.

The multiple heads of this figure do not signify the “deformative” grotesque; rather, these heads are in the process of creating a new form and therefore are metamorphic. As well, since they are all presumably her own heads, not an arch of

various human heads, they should not be associated with horrific imagery. Ewa Kuryluk views this positive transformation as follows:

When several heads are shown growing out of the same body, the grotesque effect is of a different order; it is associated not with dismemberment but with uncontrolled spontaneous fertility as characteristic of the gemmation of lower organisms and suggests the uncontrolled procreative power of nature.¹⁶⁶

While *Ouroboros* is not in the process of giving birth to these heads, she is depicted as creating them in an impulsive and powerful way. Moreover, Boyle's construction of a changing body goes against the typical representations of women in porcelain. This way of using the metamorphic grotesque as a way to fracture borders has been theorized by Bakhtin. Robert Stam highlights this notion in his book, *Subversive Pleasures*, as he explains that Bakhtin counterposed the mutable body, or the passing of one form into another, as a move "against the static, classic, finished beauty of antique sculpture."¹⁶⁷ While the use of the metamorphic grotesque here is similar to its use in the other two categories, Boyle has provided extra meaning for this sculpture through the use of a title and its erotic subtext.

The word "Ouroboros" refers to a serpent or dragon that devours its own tail and forms a circle. This image has been used across a variety of cultures, religions and periods. Because of its unending circular movement it has been associated with unity and

¹⁶⁶ Kuryluk, p.302.

¹⁶⁷ Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p.159.

immortality. As well, representations of Ouroboros have been featured in early alchemical manuscripts to symbolize infinity or wholeness. In a Greek manuscript from the tenth or eleventh-century, Ouroboros is pictured wrapped around the words "One Is All."¹⁶⁸ Boyle's *Ouroboros* is also about the powerful state of being one. This concept could also be applied as a way to examine the sexual implications of this work. Braidotti has examined how sexual metamorphoses and mutations within the science fiction genre are used as a way to cross the boundaries between male and female and morph from one sex into another. She explains that these mutations are ways of exploring sexuality and desire, as the character determines their sexual characteristics depending on their sexual desires.¹⁶⁹ *Ouroboros* does focus on sexuality and desire, but the metamorphosis is not dependent on the determining factor of another character. This is significant in that the represented body is not dependant on a male figure to define a sexuality. Moreover, Boyle challenges her audience by representing the subject of female masturbation and pleasure. This is a subject that is rarely talked about, let alone depicted within the genre of female porcelain figurines.

Boyle has stressed her imperative "to illustrate female desire from a female perspective."¹⁷⁰ Here she has depicted female desire from *her* perspective. Depictions of female desire, from an exclusively female, not male, perspective, have generally been absent from the history of art. Through Boyle's bold depiction of female desire – a woman changing into a different form, with erotic connotations – she challenges this history and moves it in a new direction.

¹⁶⁸ Arturo Schwarz, "Alchemy, Androgyny and Visual Arts," *Leonardo*, vol. 13, 1980 pp.57-62, p.62.

¹⁶⁹ Braidotti, p.191.

¹⁷⁰ Boyle, *Subverting the Craft*

Griselda Pollock has explored representations of the female body and highlights feminist interventions in the history of art. Pollock's focus is to interrogate visual representations of women from the canon of art during the modern period in Europe. As well, she examines the construction of "Woman" and how this must be changed to incorporate a wider variety of "women."¹⁷¹ She argues: "Feminism does not speak for women; it politically challenges those constructions of 'women' by producing counter-constructions that are not based on a nature, a truth, an ontology."¹⁷² This connects to Boyle's work in that she is not speaking for other women; she highlights her own experiences and beliefs through her porcelain figures that, in turn, challenge constructions of the feminine embodied in porcelain. Additionally, through keeping the majority of her work "untitled" she goes against the individual and highlights issues of representations of gender, class, race and sexuality she includes not "Woman" but a variety of "women" in her work.

Another work that focuses on female desire is Figure 11, *Untitled*, (2005). This illustration is part of the "Porcelain Fantasy Series." It depicts a naked female engaged in a sexual threesome. The woman is sandwiched between two male hybrid creatures. One has the body of a man, although his skin is a bluish-grey. He wears black ankle boots, and pink striped breeches. He has the head of a tiger and gently bites the top of the woman's head with his large, pointed teeth. The other figure seems to be an adaptation of a centaur. He has hooves, the legs of an animal covered in brown fur, a green body with brown leopard spots, a man's face and short black hair. His tail wraps around the

¹⁷¹ Griselda Pollock *Differencing The Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp.98-99.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p.99.

woman's ankles. Her toes are curled in delight. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes rolled back, and her fingers dig into the flesh of both of her lovers. The three figures are leaning back on a tree stump surrounded by grass and flowers, with a voyeuristic bird perched on the top branch of the stump.

Female agency is illustrated as the woman takes on a powerful role and is featured prominently. She is in control of the situation. Like *Ouroboros*, this work is erotic and depicts female desire from the position of the woman - challenging the belief that sexual desire is something that men have, to which women merely respond. Her role is not passive and she is actively engaged in this sexual activity. This goes against the norm in porcelain figurines where female desire is portrayed only as heterosexual romantic love between one man and one woman, suppressing female agency. Moreover, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard state that for centuries women have been socially cast as "the passive counterpart to the active male, whether as silent and obedient wife, exemplum of beauty, or sexual object."¹⁷³ By going against the usual (i.e. patriarchal) representations of women, as well as desire, in porcelain sculptures, and visual culture at large, Boyle offers a feminist critique of representations in which female desire takes on a passive and/or non-existent role.

One final porcelain sculpture that I must mention is *La Bête* (Figure 15, made in 2006). While this porcelain figure is the only male, and does not quite fit my focus on the feminine grotesque, it still should be discussed. *La Bête* stands on a base with flowers and grass, a little tree stump and some gold scrollwork. He is dressed all in black with gold details painted on his coat, shirt and gloves. He has a high white lace collar and

¹⁷³ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, ed.s, *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p.4.

carries a black hat with a soft, grey feather attached to it. Light brown fur covers his face with a little white fang poking out from each corner of his mouth. He is part man, part beast. As Boyle explained in an artists talk, this figure was created after a friend lent her a book on Jean Cocteau's 1946 film, *La Belle et la bête*.¹⁷⁴ This particular work has had mixed reactions. Drouin-Brisebois sees the beast as a "celebratory portrait of man as animal."¹⁷⁵ This differs from Sandra Firmin's reaction. She viewed the figure as part of the *Lace Figures* exhibition and concludes: "Unfortunately, the inclusion of even a single male figurine – a direct quote of Disney's Beast – immediately installs a prince in this Amazonian queendom, momentarily breaking the spell of the self-contained realms each miniature seems to inhabit."¹⁷⁶ In a review of the same exhibition, David Jager weighs in on his opinion of the inclusion of the male figure, and concludes that he is a "fitting mascot for this unnerving storybook landscape of gender and desire."¹⁷⁷ Through Boyle's decision to exhibit this figure alongside her other fifteen female figures (whether intentionally or not) *La Bête* becomes the Other. He is made the outsider and is viewed as different from the rest, against the norm – a role that is usually reserved for women. Or, alternately, *La Bête* could also be interpreted as subverting the ideals of a masculine beauty. He is depicted as having broad shoulders and a muscular chest, yet has the face of a beast. This combination could also serve to highlight the oppressive nature of stereotypes of masculinity. However, this figure is inspired by, and references, a fairytale and subsequent film. It does not tie into the same porcelain history as the rest of the

¹⁷⁴ "I was so amazed by the costume piece, which was so incredible, that I made this porcelain." Boyle, Artists Talk.

¹⁷⁵ Drouin-Brisebois.

¹⁷⁶ Firmin, p.72.

¹⁷⁷ Jager

figures with their references to Meissen and Royal Doulton. As well, the female figures are creations that are inspired from other genres, but are solely created from Boyle's imagination.

This chapter served to analyze Boyle's later figures and drawings from 2005-2006 (with exception to one created in 2004) that featured images of female agency. All of these works offer ways to subvert and challenge patriarchal "norms" as well as providing alternative images that demonstrate strategies of resistance. Here Boyle taps into alternative forms of femininity thereby destabilizing societal definitions of gender and creates conditions that lead to empowerment.¹⁷⁸ This ranged from depictions of the economically disenfranchised that went against established conventions, hybrid or metamorphic forms that allowed boundaries to be crossed and broken down, as well as new images of female desire that empower the female subject. Through these works Boyle challenges artistic traditions and reclaims representations of femininity and class in porcelain figures.

¹⁷⁸ Maud Lavin, "The New Woman in Hannah Höch's Photomontages: Issues of Androgyny, Bisexuality, and Oscillation" in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp.325-341, p.339.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have argued that Shary Boyle's use of the grotesque in her porcelain figures and drawings acts to disrupt both patriarchal notions of femininity and constructions of feminine beauty that have been reiterated through the history of art. While gender was the main focus, issues of class and race were also referred to as constructions of a particular beauty associated with white, upper class femininity was subverted. Boyle's sculptures from the "Lace Figures Series" and drawings from the "Porcelain Fantasy Series" are inspired by traditional porcelain figurines yet break down these constructions and stereotypes. Boyle creates new images that both critique these patriarchal cultural forms and offer strategies of resistance within an art practice. Further, she uses the traditional porcelain medium, which has its own varied gender and class-based history, and brings it into the realm of contemporary feminist art.

Constructions of women embodied in porcelain have a long history. They feature stereotypical images of women as graceful, delicate, submissive, elegant beauties with perfect hair, figures and white complexions. They were originally created (within the Western part of the world) in the eighteenth-century. During this period, porcelain figures were designed by men, such as the Meissen factory's chief modeler, J.J. Kändler, and owned by royalty and the privileged classes. Over the centuries these figurines have been mass-produced by companies such as Royal Doulton and are now viewed by most as "low art" or kitsch. Additionally, since the mid twentieth-century, groups of female hobbyists have created these figures in craft-rooms and at workshops. Boyle appropriates this craft and her technique is anti mass-production as she carefully drapes lace, sculpts

additional features, and paints each of her works. While she samples and references the craft she also subverts it and creates a new porcelain figure genre for a contemporary art audience.

Through appropriating these porcelain traditions her work offers a sense of the familiar. It is through Boyle's many visual references to these figurines that she creates images that are immediately recognizable to most viewers. Her audiences are reminded of European porcelain traditions or the Royal Doultonesque figures that she has refreshed. This sense of the familiar is created through various motifs that were examined such as similar bases, with gold scrollwork and elements of nature, as well as the delicate features achieved through her use of vintage moulds and references to traditional costumes. As I have outlined, Boyle is inspired by traditional porcelain figurines, but seeks to confront these images of idealized beauty. Through her juxtaposition of the familiar and the grotesque she challenges her viewers as well as confronts patriarchal constructions of femininity.

In her works, Boyle has added cuts and bruises, new body parts, taken them away or attached them backwards, and created hybrid forms by combining human with plant, animal or insect. The use of the grotesque in visual art has an established history although its meaning can vary. The definition that I have drawn on is one that highlights the grotesque as a strategy to break down established norms, rather than shock or disgust audiences. To further emphasize these elements in Boyle's figures and drawings I examined them through various categories of the grotesque: the deformative or exaggerated, the hybrid, the metamorphic and the realistic grotesque. While the grotesque is visually subversive it also has larger ideological implications. Through her

figures, she forces her audiences to consider the psychological effects that these ideals of perfection have placed on women in society. These effects were focused on in Chapter Three, which looked at manifestations of these oppressions. In Chapter Four the emancipatory qualities of the grotesque were emphasized, particularly when used as a strategy of resistance.

While this thesis is the first in-depth scholarly study of Shary Boyle's artwork and adds to the body of scholarship that focuses on feminist art practices and the disruptive powers of the grotesque in modern art, there is still a pressing need for further research. For example, there is a lack of scholarship that focuses on historical representations of gender, race and class within porcelain figurines. Moreover, while numerous authors have explored the various areas of Boyle's practice through brief articles and exhibition reviews there still are many aspects that need to be developed. Further, this thesis focused on only one area of Boyle's artwork and offered one possible interpretation of her porcelain sculptures. She is currently creating a new series of porcelain figures – a possible topic for further research.

To conclude, Boyle's "Lace Figures Series" and "Porcelain Fantasy Series" is a compelling body of work that addresses the restrictive nature of constructions of femininity. It is through her use of the grotesque that this subversion is possible. Upon viewing her sculptures one may be initially attracted to their beauty. Once the viewer is pulled in for a closer look the grotesque additions become apparent. Through her creation of a powerful visual vocabulary that juxtaposes an unexpected repertoire of unsettling historical and contemporary imagery she succeeds in challenging established norms in traditional porcelain figurines.

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Vida, Sandra, 'Super Modern World of Beauty', *Artichoke*, Spring 2004, pp.26-27.

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Wilson, Carl, 'A harmonious duet for both eye and ear', *The Globe and Mail*, June 14, 2004.

YYZ Newsletter. YYZ Artists Outlet Publications, exhib. cat. (Toronto: YYZ Artists Run Centre, January 2002).



Figure 1. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2002, porcelain and enamel, h. 20 cm. The Rooms, Newfoundland.



Figure 2. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2004, porcelain and china paint, h. 24 cm.



Figure 3. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2005, porcelain and china paint, h. 20 cm. The National Gallery of Canada.



Figure 4. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2005, porcelain, enamel and gold luster, h. 24 cm.



Figure 5. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2004, porcelain and china paint, h. 18 cm. The National Gallery of Canada.



Figure 6. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2005, porcelain and china paint, h. 20 cm. The National Gallery of Canada.



Figure 7. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2004, porcelain and china paint, h. 26 cm. The National Gallery of Canada.



Figure 8. Shary Boyle, *Ouroboros*, 2006, porcelain, china paint and gilt, h. 16 cm.



Figure 9. Shary Boyle, *Untitled* (The Porcelain Fantasy Series), 2005, graphite, watercolour, gouache, pen and black ink on wove paper, 29.6 x 20.9 cm. The National Gallery of Canada.



Figure 10. Shary Boyle, *Untitled* (The Porcelain Fantasy Series), 2005, graphite, watercolour, gouache, pen and black ink on wove paper, 29.6 x 20.9 cm. The National Gallery of Canada.



Figure 11. Shary Boyle, *Untitled* (The Porcelain Fantasy Series), 2005, graphite, watercolour, gouache, pen and black ink on wove paper, 29.6 x 20.9 cm. The National Gallery of Canada.



Figure 12. Shary Boyle, *Snowball*, 2006, porcelain and china paint, h. 24 cm.
Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.



Figure 13. Shary Boyle, *Haunt*, 2004, porcelain, china paint and gilt, h. 24 cm. The Paisley Museum, Scotland.



Figure 14. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2004, porcelain, china paint and gilt, h. 22 cm.
The National Gallery of Canada.



Figure 15. Shary Boyle, *La Bête*, 2006, porcelain, china paint, gilt, feather, h. 22 cm.
The Paisley Museum, Scotland.



Figure 16. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2004, porcelain, china paint and gilt, h. 22 cm.
The Art Gallery of Ontario.



Figure 17. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2004, porcelain, china paint, silver and gold leaf, h. 20 cm.



Figure 18. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2004, porcelain, china paint and gold leaf, h. 20 cm.



Figure 19. Shary Boyle, *Untitled*, 2004, porcelain, china paint and gilt, h. 24 cm.

Appendix

Selected Exhibitions¹⁷⁹

Solo

September 2007. *The Clearances*. Space Gallery. London, UK.

February 2007. *Wonderlust*. Jessica Bradley Art + Projects. Toronto, Ontario.

January 2007. *Aspects and Excess*. Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery. Waterloo, Ontario.

March 2006. *Lace Figures*. The Power Plant. Toronto, Ontario.

November 2004. *Witness My Shame*. Gallery F52. Montreal, Quebec.

June 2004. *Companions*. Or Gallery. Vancouver, British Columbia.

October 2003. *The Story of Jane Doe*. International Festival Of Authors, Harbourfront Centre. Toronto, Ontario.

July 2003. *Otherworld Uprising*. Whitewater Gallery. North Bay, Ontario.

March 2003. *Travels to the Realm Between*. Katharine Mulherin Gallery. Toronto, Ontario.

January 2002. YYZ Artist Run Centre. Toronto, Ontario.

December 2001. *The Omitted Tales*. Katharine Mulherin Gallery. Toronto, Ontario.

September 2001. *Lit From Within*. VonRot GmbH. Berlin, Germany.

October 2000. *Estuary*. Paul Petro Contemporary Art. Toronto, Ontario.

November 1999. *Boo Hoo*. Odd Gallery. Dawson City, Yukon.

May 1999. Khyber Art Centre. Halifax, Nova Scotia.

¹⁷⁹ Data obtained from Shary Boyle's curriculum vitae (exhibitions that she has selected).

Group

September 2007. *The Sobey Award*. Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Halifax, Nova Scotia.

June 2006. *Darkness Ascends*. Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art. Toronto, Ontario.

April 2006. *Fantasia*. Jessica Bradley Art + Projects. Toronto, Ontario.

February 2006. *Drawing Restraint*. S.A.W. Gallery. Ottawa, Ontario.

January 2006. *Alternative Girlhood: Diaristic Indulgence and Contemporary Female Artists*. State University of New York, Tower Fine Arts. Brockport, New York.

May 2004. *Important Canadian Art*. ZieherSmith Gallery. New York, New York.

March 2004. *Republic of Love*. The Power Plant. Toronto, Ontario.

August 2003. *Dislocated*. Edward Day Gallery. Toronto, Ontario.

February 2003. *Super Modern World of Beauty*. Walter Phillips Gallery. Banff, Alberta.

November 2002. *Shary Boyle, Gayle Gorman, Suzanne Proulx*. Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center. Buffalo, New York.

March 2000. *Taboos, Titillation's & Thrills*. MSVU Art Gallery. Halifax, Nova Scotia.

January 2000. *Low-Tech Time Capsules: Book Art for the Millennium* Sea-Tac Airport Gallery. Seattle, Washington.

November 1999. *Nasty Grrrls*. S.A.W. Gallery. Ottawa, Ontario.

October 1996. Veemvloer Arts Center. Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Drawing Performances/Live Projection

October 2007. *Magic Shadows*. Southern Alberta Art Gallery. Lethbridge, Alberta.

October 2006. *Dark Hand and Lamplight*. Ten-date tour across California, opening by

invitation of American musician Will Oldham (*Bonnie 'Prince' Billy*).

July 2006. *Shadow Songs*. Live drawing projections in collaboration with Winnipeg musician Christine Fellows. Ten-date tour across Canada.

April 2006. *Massive Party*. The Art Gallery of Ontario. Toronto, Ontario.

March 2006. *Kramer's Ergot*. Hammer Museum of Art. Los Angeles, California.

November 2005. *Songs of Childhood*. Khyber Art Centre. Halifax, Nova Scotia.

June 2005. Live projected drawing for Fonal Musician Showcase. Sonar Festival. Barcelona, Spain.

June 2005. *Songs of Childhood*. Fonal Festival, Yo Talo. Tampere, Finland.

February 2005. Live drawing projections, with musician Feist. The Olympia Theatre. Paris, France.

December 3-12, 2004. 6-date tour across the eastern United States collaborating with musicians Es, Black Forest/Black Sea and Fursaxa. Live drawing projections and installations.

October 2004. *Wood Witch Rising and Channeling Grimm*. Live drawing projections. Art Gallery of Ontario. Toronto, Ontario.

October 2004. . Live drawing/ animated projections, collaboration with musician Feist. La Cigale Theatre. Paris, France.

March 2004. *Les Festins D'Aden*. Live drawing projections, with musician Feist. Bataclan Theatre. Paris, France.

October 2002. *In the Beginning*. Live animated projections on drawing mural, with audio. Struts Artist Run Centre. Sackville, New Brunswick.

October 2002. *Honkitonki*. Live drawing and singing to old-country karioke. As part of the *Uno-a-Go-Go* Festival of one-man bands. The Hideout, Chicago, Illinois.

August 2002. *The Tale of the Cats*. Live animated projections to narrated Italian folk tale. The Palace Theatre. Los Angeles, California.

March 2002. *All Tomorrow's Parties*. Live drawing / animated projections, collaboration with musician Peaches. UCLA. Los Angeles, California.

August 2001. Collaboration with musician Peaches. Ost Gut. Berlin, Germany.

July 2001. *Honkitonki*. St. Pauli Tanzehall. Hamburg, Germany.

Publications

Otherworld Uprising. Conundrum Press. Montreal, Quebec. April 2008.

*Zoetrope *all-story**. Francis Ford Coppola, AZX Publications. San Francisco, US. Spring 2007.

Objects. Die Gestalten. Berlin, Germany. Spring 2007.

Kramers Ergot #6. Buenaventura Press. Los Angeles, US. March 2006.

The Portable Conundrum. Conundrum Press. Montreal, Quebec. Summer 2006.

Songs of Childhood. Khyber Publications. Halifax, Nova Scotia. November 2005.

Walrus Magazine. Toronto, Ontario. December 2004.

Witness My Shame. Conundrum Press. Montreal, Quebec. October 2004.

Important Canadian Art. ZieherSmith Publications. New York, New York. May 2004.

Girls Who Bite Back. Sumach Press. Toronto, Ontario. April 2004.

The Story of Jane Doe. Random House of Canada. Toronto, Ontario. Spring 2003.

Shary Boyle, Gayle Gorman, Suzanne Proulx. Hallwalls Publications Buffalo, New York. November 2002.

Half Man, Half Beast. J & L Publications #2. Atlanta, Georgia. Spring 2002.

Starship Magazine. Berlin, Germany. Spring 2002.

YYZ Newsletter. YYZ Artists Outlet Publications. Toronto. January 2002.

And Some Stories. Khyber Arts Publications. Halifax. September 2001.

Landscape With Shipwreck. Insomniac Press. Toronto. April 2001.

MIX Independent Art & Culture Magazine. Toronto. Vol. 26 No. 4, Spring 2001.

Taboos, Titillation's & Thrills. MSVU Art Gallery Publications. Halifax. June 2000.

Flower Magazine, Art Metropole Publications. Toronto. February 1995.

Collections

Paisley Museum of Art, Scotland.

The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Ydessa Hendeles Foundation, Toronto.

Art Gallery of Ontario.

Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba.

The Rooms, Newfoundland.

Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.

The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia.

Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Ontario.

Awards

2007. Sobey Art Award short list.

2007. Canada Council International Studios.

2004. Chalmers Foundation Award.

2003. Canada Council of the Arts.

2003. Ontario Arts Council.

2001. Canada Council for the Arts.

2000. K.M. Hunter Artist Award.

1999. Toronto Arts Council.

1999. Canada Council Travel.

1998. Ontario Arts Council.

1996. Ontario Arts Council.