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Own Your Cervix, Tangled Art Gallery

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Artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher on her exhibition, *Own Your Cervix*

(see images/listen to image descriptions of this exhibition included in this issue).

The work really started from thinking about the process of menstruation and working within performance, thinking about how we go about our everyday lives as a performative act. So, thinking about the ways that menstruation is performed. And mostly a lot about the ways that it's concealed.

I started making the work also because of the many negative feelings about personal experiences with menstruation and the narrative in my head was that I wanted to get better at it. Mostly, I didn't want to have stains in my clothes, my sheets, or my mattress. And I was feeling really bad about that. So, I thought to myself that I should get better, maybe buy some new products – like different brands of pads or tampons. I was using a diva cup at the time. I thought about tracking my period more, so I could avoid stains.

And then I had a moment in my head where I kind of reflected on both the emotions and the solutions I was coming up with, and I had a moment where I thought to myself: "Why am I putting so much effort into concealing and controlling something that is just a part of my body?" But I'm sure as lots of people know, we have somewhat limited control over our bodies. [laughs] So, just thinking about the control, the idea that I should be 'better' at it, I was kind of imposing some kind of moral judgements on myself. And then I started to question some of those thoughts and the first thing that I did was make some videos where I recorded the pouring of blood coming out of my diva cup that I collected it in onto paper and watching the blood soak into the paper. And so, I made these long videos where that happened, and I think the most important part of that – the first step – was the act of looking and appreciation of the

colours and what I found beautiful about it and putting it into an art context because it wasn't associated with my body – I was putting it on paper, and separated it out, making these kinds of abstract videos.

But that was the first step – the first reflection – of what does this material look like, what are some of the ways that it can be used, what does it look like when it's wet versus when it's dry, what are the different colours. And that was the first step in the journey and maybe not end, but the somewhat end result of the work was the exhibition *Own Your Cervix* that happened at Tangled. I did a fair amount of work in 2011-2013 and in 2014-2016, I was doing my MFA in the School of the Art Institute in Chicago and chose to really focus on developing the body of work as what could become a strong solo exhibition and use that opportunity in grad school to develop all the components.

One of the ways I wanted to approach the work was that it was clearly speaking from my experience, but hopefully in ways that were broad enough so that other people could relate to the work and share their own experiences. And hopefully have some dialogue and discussion about some of the topics.

Curating the body (and its contestations)

Working within the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, they have a lot of rules about what materials can and cannot be used in the studios as well as in the galleries. And bodily fluids are on the 'Do Not Use' list, so I had to advocate very strategically to have the work be able to be included, present in my studio, and in the exhibition. One option was lying and not telling anyone what the material was in terms of the use of menstrual blood on the couch and the chairs, but I really wanted people to know what it was, so I went through quite a lengthy process with myself, and my faculty negotiated on my behalf in terms of how to have it included. One of the stipulations that they made was that there had to be some kind of

warning, so people entering the space would know that the gallery "may contain human pathogens," I think was the phrase. So, I agreed to that as long as I could have the sign be in bright pink vinyl. I kind of turned it into a bit of an artistic expression of the work, which I felt fit in. But for a long time, they wanted to wrap everything in plastic [laughs] to kind of contain, control or sanitize it and I was completely against it. I just said, if the piece *Colonial Comfort* can't be in the gallery space as it is, and we can't figure that out, then I just won't include it and we'll show something else. But in the end, it did work out – I had the pink vinyl warning people [laughs] about the very "dangerous menstrual blood" and then I had the work displayed mostly as I would have wanted.

I think taking it to Tangled allowed for a little bit further development of the work – it allowed for a lot more space, in terms of the accessibility – it was really great to be able to work with the gallery, to learn more about accessibility practices and develop that piece. But it was also good because I had some conversations with Eliza early on in the process about the possibility of the show and she shared with me some accessibility features to keep in mind in terms of touch and audio versus visuals. So, while I was making the work, I was able to just kind of have that in the back of my mind and I think that all of the work I was making was already very interdisciplinary in terms of how people can experience it, but it was nice to have had that conversation and to be able to think not just about the way *I* might be experiencing and expressing my work, but the way other audiences might as well.

It was interesting, while I was making the work, my teachers were all aware that I had a learning disability, but I think they saw that as really separate from what I was making, and disability didn't really enter that much into the conversation. Some of the conversations often went that it was kind of a side of the work that can error of more – just like echoing a more second-wave feminist body practice, and I got some critiques that that was maybe a little outdated. But for me, the work was incredibly relevant. I think I experienced the intersections within myself in terms of being Indigenous, being a woman, being interested in Western feminism as well as Indigenous feminism. And then while I wasn't necessarily foregrounding my experience of disability, I like to think that it always enters into what I'm making. I

didn't set out to make an accessible self-exam table – I really just made one that I was comfortable sitting on. And while we were talking about some of the accessibility features, one of the things I brought up was that the legs of the table will screw in and out – they're kind of pre-made furniture legs – so I could have different sizes in case people wanted different heights, which was a great thing to think about.

I was really thinking about how anatomy interacts with our different social constructions of ourselves – so maybe how we imagine, define and express ourselves and how we are understood culturally. Sometimes those two things line up and sometimes they don't. I was really wanting to explore the ways that my physical body was understood in a political or cultural sphere and find out what that was like for other people, as well. The aspect of having people come to the show and invite them to look at their cervix, either physically using the speculum and mirror to look at their cervix or more of a metaphorical self-examination, in terms of asking the same questions, was really a way of inviting dialogue and trying to find out what other people thought. Because I think early on in the work – in terms of going back to some of the earlier work I made with menstrual blood – I started to find out that some of the assumptions I was making about how people were interpreting my body or the kind of cultural conversations that were happening wasn't always...that there was a lot more possibilities for the conversation than I was imagining. I was feeling a lot of pressure of a very narrow definition of that conversation. But I found that a lot of people were interested in other representations, other experiences, and making meaning in different ways.

Yeah, so I find kind of a mixed experience in terms of trying to include a conversation about accessibility with creators I'm working with. As we talk about framing and displaying and our contract, and all the other pieces that go along with exhibiting, I try and include at least asking about their accessibility practices and different galleries – everybody has had a response that is very open and willing to try and include more accessible practices, but it doesn't always work out the way you want it to [laughs] in terms of actually having ASL interpretation or having different accessibility features carried through. Hopefully that will come with more experience and continuing to foreground those

conversations and I think that the more accessibility becomes part of all the other features of setting up a show, then the more it will happen and the more kind of better or more exciting, more interesting ways to experience our work will come out of it.

Colonial Comfort

So, "Colonial Comfort." I read that phrase - I tried to go back and find the book, the quote, so I could actually cite it. But that's why I'm an artist and not a writer [laughs] I couldn't find it. But I read the phrase when I was doing some research about the Victorian Era and Victorian furniture, which the sattee is... I don't think it was actually made in the Victorian era, but it's the style. So, the style is that it has springs in the couch, in the sattee, so it's got springs and there's wood carvings on the frame and there are other visual elements that make it Victorian. So, I was doing a little bit of research and reading about these elements and a lot of Victorian furniture was actually influenced by Turkish furniture and when the Suez Canal was built it really increased the transportation of Turkish furniture to Europe. Further along, the building of the railroad in North America, again allowed for furniture to be built in factories in central locations and then distributed throughout the continent. The springs that are in the couch were an innovation that happened during the Victorian Era, so they talk about the furniture getting a lot more comfortable because it had these springs in it. And also, there were some other technological advances that made life more comfortable. So, I read this phrase that talked about the Victorian Era as being one of 'Colonial Comfort.' It just really resonated with me because those two words don't at all go together for me, as an Indigenous person. There is nothing comfortable about Colonialism. So, I thought about whose comfort we are speaking to and then I also thought about the ways that Indigenous peoples and disabled people continue to persist against these kinds of 'comfortable' norms. And I see the menstrual blood as a kind of representation of the possibility of fertility, and the possibility of future generations of Indigenous

children, as bleeding onto the couch, in a sense 'staining' it. That was the first alteration that I made to the sattee after I had it upholstered in the white fabric.

And then really about a year later, I was continuing to work porcupine quills and one day I started using the pointy end that would grow out of the porcupine and adding it as an additional outline to the blood-stained portions. I think I was wanting to emphasize the tension and what's at stake in terms of our comfort or our bodily integrity and adding that risk that you might poke and hurt yourself and the strength of the animal to make something that will protect itself and thinking about the strength of our cultural practices to protect ourselves. And so, I added that, so it looks like the quills are growing out of the couch and out of the blood stains on the couch.

The colonial comfort[able] way we know disability and the way certain cultural norms make certain segments of the population really comfortable. Disrupting those norms can be really liberating and exciting and can make for a lot of inclusion and comfort for people who have been excluded or made to feel uncomfortable or unsafe. But I guess there's also a disruption for the segment of the population that was operating within the space of 'limited comfort – if we could call it that, because they're still adjacent to everything around you, it's uncomfortable but you've kind of made your world limited enough so you don't see it.

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Thank you to artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher for your reflections on *Own Your Cervix*, disability and Indigenous art and cultural practices, and 'colonial comfort.'