The Immediacy of Objects: Reassessing the Contribution of Art History to Feminist Medieval Studies
Jennifer Borland

When scholars examine medieval objects, we catch but a glimpse of what past viewers may have experienced, and yet such preserved material objects also link us physically with the past that we study. The immediacy of visual culture demands further inquiry, beseeching us to investigate more closely the relationship between our experiences of such objects today and the potential responses of past viewers. As scholars who often grapple with these issues, grounded as they are in the particularly physical material we study, art historians have much to contribute to the investigation of medieval experiences.

This essay engages the question of how art history can better permeate broader interdisciplinary discussions, in particular those of feminist and gender-oriented medieval studies. Indeed, I argue that the interdisciplinary arena of feminist medieval studies is precisely where interested art historians have the most to contribute. Art historians are in a unique position to mine the theoretical landscape of visual culture studies in order to rethink how medieval people saw and experienced, and to offer new insights into how gender norms were disseminated, reinforced, and more significantly, upset or overturned, through the agency that can be associated with audiences.

I begin this study by outlining some of the theoretical background to the art historical approaches advocated here, highlighting the ways in which these methodologies are particularly pertinent for the study of medieval visual culture. After laying out these discursive parameters, I consider the possibilities for such approaches using three different examples: a manuscript that displays defacement enacted by past users, a small church that seems to physically engage with (gendered) viewers, and a contemporary articulation of viewer experience that asserts a new artist-as-theorist model. The essay as a whole
proposes new ways in which we might come to understand the experiences of visual culture—experiences in the Middle Ages as well as experiences of our own—as viable material for feminist explorations of the past.

Theorizing Experience

In fields such as literature or history, the concept of a “feminist poetics” has prompted questions about how we might access the voices of medieval women, generating investigations that have focused on these women’s writings or performances. Even when the discourse’s parameters are expanded to “feminist aesthetics” rather than poetics the direct application of such questions to medieval visual culture is difficult. Most discussions of feminist aesthetics focus on twentieth- and twenty-first-century production, and on artists associated with second-wave feminism, because the questions of artistic voice and aesthetic decision-making are rather easily addressed in these contexts. Women artists may have been relatively abundant in the Middle Ages, but few documented instances of women’s artistic production exist before the very late medieval period. Meanwhile, the study of pictorial representations of women, although valuable and often compelling, reveals more about the systems in which the images were constructed than about the women portrayed. So what female “voice” can be accessed when it comes to medieval art? Re-conceptualizing the notion of “voice” to include aesthetic experience, both active seeing and reciprocal vision, offers new paths by which art history can become active in the feminist exchanges taking place in medieval studies. Specifically, the visual and material culture that medieval art historians study presents endless possibilities for investigating the exchange and the reciprocality that exists between objects or images and their viewers.

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Focusing attention on the aesthetic experiences of audiences and on the active nature of medieval viewing has the potential to provide a broader context in which to understand the relationship between gender and medieval visual culture. The concept of art as created for purely aesthetic purposes
“art for art’s sake”) does not productively apply to the Middle Ages; however, feminist aesthetics also interrogates the cultural constructs that inform and are informed by the experiences of seeing. Not unlike a poetic focus on the nature of reading, visual culture can be interpreted through the participation of the viewer, a participation that is fundamental to the creation of meaning. Viewers do have agency, however mediated by society and culture, to interpret an image as their experiences lead them to do.

In his recent book *Production of Presence*, theorist Hans Gumbrecht argues that “presence” is fundamental to today’s historical study of the humanities, which he sees as having become too distanced from the dimension of experience.6 He considers this dimension of presence to be one in which cultural phenomena and events have tangibility and make an impact on our senses and bodies. His argument acknowledges and even encourages the contribution of an historian’s experiences to his or her study of the past. The continual presence of the objects over time should be an essential part of historical analysis, and the tangible connection that a scholar has with such objects must be central to their investigation.

Furthermore, the physicality of seeing, and its manifestation in medieval experience of the world, finds a corollary in modern theories such as phenomenology, which pursues an affective character to experience and acknowledges that intellectual and visual stimuli can be felt throughout the body.7 The exploration of medieval images from the point of view of phenomenology seems especially pertinent because of the reciprocal and interactive nature of medieval visual theory. Medieval understandings of vision and perception involved the entire body of the viewer, engaged all of the senses at once, and conceived of an active exchange between the seer and the seen. Two theories regarding how sight worked were prevalent in the Middle Ages: extramission and intromission. Extramission involved “the idea that a beam of light radiates outward from the eye illuminating what it falls on,” while intromission was the notion “that all matter replicates its own image through intervening media until the image strikes the human eye.”8 Intromission further involved the idea of multiplication.

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of species, which referred to the perception that matter could reproduce or replicate itself in space. In intromission, species were generated “by matter strik[ing] the eye, and, following the optic nerve, enter[ing] the mind as images.”9 The thirteenth-century scholar Roger Bacon proposed a synthesis of intromission and extramission, through which he emphasized the physical contact of vision “so that looking becomes analogous to touching,”10 or what Carolyn Collette has described as a “two-part process involving both seer and seen.”11 Such ideas emphasize the concept of vision as an exchange in two directions that is reciprocal in nature.

Phenomenology also invokes a kind of intertwined world that presents lived experience as inherently integrated and interwoven with the environment and the objects it contains. Prompting investigations into the essence of what we experience, phenomenology provides a critical apparatus for investigating reception through the notion of a “lived-body” that engages with the world in spatial terms.

The usefulness of the work of theorists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty for the feminist investigation of medieval reception is limited, however. Feminist criticisms of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology have pointed out that his account of embodied subjectivity does not adequately negotiate the role of sexuality or gender.12 For instance, film scholar Vivian Sobchack asserts that he “has neglected any consideration of bodily existence as it is cultural and historically lived in certain forms of critical differentiation and discrimination.”13 Sobchack, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, and Iris Young are among the theorists who provide a gendered contextualization for phenomenological thinking. For example, Iris Young’s articulation of a “feminine spatiality” in the late twentieth century, in which she observes that many women exist in a kind of “enclosed” space and through limited motility, suggests a framework through which medieval spatial experiences may be considered.14 Feminist phenomenology provides a path for taking into account gender in medieval experience. It allows for the critical consideration of how the body plays a role in medieval perception and whether that body need be essentialized in terms of gender or any other category.
Experience can be accessed through a variety of interpretive methods that do not simply rely on the projection of our own subjective encounters, but look to the ways in which medieval people themselves thought about their corporeal experiences of the world in which they lived. The power of the senses is evident in recent scholarship that aims to resituate medieval icons in their original, highly sensory contexts. The critical interrogation of “the gaze” has also contributed to the perception that vision is never passive reception, and has been central for historians thinking about gender and images in the Middle Ages. Without question, vision possesses significant agency and power. This agency is a particularly compelling aspect of reception worthy of more extensive analysis and interrogation.

Handling the Past

In a particular twelfth-century Latin manuscript that includes an illustrated Passion of Saint Margaret there is evidence not only of how a medieval manuscript moved its viewers, but also of how the viewers’ touch affected the manuscript (Fig. 1). The Passion of Saint Margaret tells the story of an early Christian virgin martyr who was tortured and killed because she would not submit to the advances of a Roman prefect, Olibrius, and renounce her Christianity. In several of the illustrated scenes in this manuscript, depictions of the “evil” entities—the pagan prefect who demanded Margaret reject her faith, his guards, and the demons that visit Margaret—show evidence of defacement, to the point that some areas of the parchment are rubbed completely through. This version of Margaret’s story provided viewers with the opportunity for an act of eradication, a potential imbedded in the book’s physicality. The manipulated nature of manuscripts like this one provides a remarkably tangible link to the past, a link that requires us to consider how we, as twenty-first-century scholars, can access medieval experiences through the phenomenology of handling old books.

The most prominent example of defacement in the manuscript appears in a verso folio scene of Olibrius on his throne, opposite a recto folio on which two guards escort
Margaret to him (Fig. 1). The prefect’s face and right hand and arm are rubbed completely through, as are parts of his throne including one of its bestial feet. In this case, the diligent defacer removed even the markers of Olibius’s authority. Across from this image, Margaret remains legible while the two guards appear as headless henchmen without hands or even feet to stand on. The figure on the right is especially dissolved with only his pelvis and the stumps of his legs remaining.

In important contrast to more common depictions of female saints, in which their bodies are often tortured and physically assaulted, Margaret’s body remains more intact than the erased and fragmented bodies of the wicked. A diligent handler succeeded in usurping from the latter the power that Margaret was denied by the prefect. The handler’s activity reveals the particular tactility and immediacy with which medieval viewers engaged with images, while a reciprocal understanding of viewing implicates the audience in Margaret’s authoritative position. By rubbing and defacing the demons and evil figures on these pages, the reader in a sense re-enacted the heroic, saintly acts of Margaret herself. In this manuscript of Margaret’s Life, the figures became present to the reader and thus vulnerable to attack. The defacement demonstrates that perhaps the greatest power of this book lay in the opportunity it provided for the physical eradication of evil.

The form of experiential exchange evident in this Life of Saint Margaret was not limited to objects; touching merged with the other senses when entire environments were involved in creating an experience of medieval art. Bissera Pentcheva has recently argued for the synesthetic effect of icons within the complex spaces of Byzantine churches, where all the senses were engaged to give the viewer access to the intangible divine. This multifaceted sensory experience reminds us that the space in which medieval objects were viewed is an important element of the reception of an image. In particular, spatiality provides a framework for understanding how viewers may have moved through spaces and for interpreting such motility as another form of (sometimes gendered) agency.
Spatial Experience

The work of theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Gillian Rose, who have grappled with how modern spaces can be gendered in terms of both construction and use, can be especially useful for thinking about how architectural spaces structured behavior in the Middle Ages.22 How were spaces created for women and did gender impact the construction or decoration of spaces? Did viewers respond to spaces differently depending on their social status and, reciprocally, how might spaces have been affected by their audiences? Obviously there is a relative abundance of preserved medieval buildings, presenting many opportunities for approaching spaces with these kinds of questions in mind. I will discuss briefly one example here: a small Irish church ostensibly built for nuns.

In the so-called Nuns’ Church at Clonmacnoise, a sculpture usually identified as a Sheela-na-gig appears on a voussoir of the inner chancel portal (Figs. 2-4). This type of medieval sculpture is typically characterized by the female figure’s monstrous physical attributes and overt gesture of holding open her large vulva.23 The Clonmacnoise figure is one of the less aggressive Sheela-na-gigs and she seems to grin as she reaches under her legs to grasp her vulva. The figure appears with other sculptural decoration common in Irish Romanesque architecture: saw-toothed chevron designs, interlaced patterns, and biting beast heads. According to the annals of Clonmacnoise, a prominent medieval monastery in central Ireland, the small church was commissioned in 1167 by a woman named Derbforgaill. She was the daughter of a local king and presumably commissioned the church for the use of the monastery’s female members.24 The Nuns’ Church was located at a significant distance from the rest of the monastic precinct, exposed and unprotected, some 500 meters away from the main group of buildings. This situation suggests the nuns’ isolation from the daily life of the main complex.

The Nuns’ Church at Clonmacnoise seems to be a space that was intended to enclose women. Although there is little evidence that the nuns would have been literally cloistered in that space, the church’s main entrance displays decoration that
could have been perceived as warding off evil and possibly as discouraging the presence of members of the monastery’s male population. Inside of this small church, however, the Sheela-na-gig and other images invoke something other than containment or immobility: it is as if the inside of the church became a privileged interior for freedom of movement. Because of their isolation, the nuns would have been relatively free to move about the space of the church, unencumbered by any potential societal limitations made on their movement or their vision. While the Sheela-na-gig may have been thought to act apotropaically to immobilize evil entities or inappropriate visitors, she also enabled the sight of female viewers. The sculpture’s somewhat gleeful actions seem to embrace female physicality, encouraging rather than discouraging looking on the part of a female viewer. Both her location in a charged space of passage and her active gesture of guarded openness speak to the idea of vision as active, corporeal, and fundamentally involved with the body’s movement in space.

The space of the Nuns’ Church chancel has the potential to become, in the words of cinema scholar Vivian Sobchack, an “inhabited space” that accommodates both the Sheela-na-gig and her female viewers. In such a privileged space, neither the viewer’s motility nor her vision is restrained by social, cultural, and even architectural boundaries. The female viewer is enabled to embrace vision in all its transgressive capacities. The corporeality of sight, evident in the materiality of species, can be seen as an extension of the body, which leads to the notion that medieval “vision...exceeds the boundaries of the body.” In the space of this church, the Sheela-na-gig’s ocular body suggests to viewers not only the physicality of seeing, or the embodied nature of the senses, but also the specific tangibility of moving and being moved within an architectural environment. At Clonmacnoise a literal edifice seems to have been created both to contain women and to facilitate their visual activity and corporeal experiences once inside.

Towards a New Theory: Visual Criticism

Contemporary artists and filmmakers offer theoretical constructs in the form of visual media that may have even greater
relevance for how we think about medieval audiences than does traditional textual theory. Contemporary artworks engage their viewers—in exchanges that demand a rethinking of how medieval viewers were likewise enlisted to create meaning and significance in the art they considered. For example, Kiki Smith’s work resonates with medieval representations of the bodies of women, offering a commentary not unlike contemporary feminist theory, but expressed through a physical and artistic language instead of the written word. Smith’s position on the phenomenological nature of human experience is embodied in her works. As she prompts her viewers to confront issues raised by the (usually female) body and its materiality, her method of conveying these ideas literally forces those viewers to experience that of which she speaks.

In Smith’s 1986 sculpture *Womb*, an empty and open bronze vessel evokes the isolated uteruses contained within medieval gynecological manuscripts, creating the imaginary three-dimensional space that is only suggested by the medieval drawings (Figs. 5 and 6). Among the rather small group of extant illustrated gynecological manuscripts, several copies of the *Genecia*, an abbreviated sixth-century Latin compendium by Muscio of earlier Greek texts by Soranus, contain a series of *fetus-in-utero* images, that is, simply drawn, flask-shaped wombs within which a small human being is depicted in various positions. *Womb*’s vessel-like shape and hard material also suggest the casings created to house medieval relics, while its hinge reminds us that this is also an object that can be closed, its inside spaces hidden. Opened like a medieval codex and displayed on a horizontal surface, it seems to invite handling by or interaction with the viewer— but there is nothing but absence to be found inside. The heaviness of the material, the larger-than-life size (15 x 22 x 7 inches), the double effect of both halves of the vessel, all emphasize the vacancy within. *Womb* generates ideas of emptiness and isolation, but also openness and mobility (no child to weigh one down; the ovarian handles offer transportability), suggesting narrative ambiguities similar to those we sometimes find in medieval imagery.
Fragments that appear to be the result of dismemberment and violence, quite prevalent in medieval images of the female body, also make appearances in Smith’s work. For instance, *Untitled (Heart)* (Fig. 7) consists of a naturalistic human heart (of plaster) covered in silver. Referencing at once both relic and reliquary (and especially body-part reliquaries), Smith’s heart plays with the detached, objectified nature of medieval reliquaries; here, the container has been taken away, leaving the body part itself to be coated with a shiny and luxurious surface. She conflates exterior and interior, collapsing the usual distance between nasty inside and bejeweled outside, and invoking as well the internal corporeal space from which this heart once came.

Several of Smith’s large-scale, life-sized sculptures press further the interconnections between gender, violence, and corporeality that also permeate images of the body from the Middle Ages. These themes constitute the core of Smith’s piece, *Virgin Mary* (Fig. 8), in which a female figure stands in a position of humility and offering. Resembling the full-figure anatomical drawings that become more common in the centuries following the Middle Ages, this figure displays the flesh and muscles that lie underneath our outer layer of skin. Flayed like a martyred saint, the Virgin’s body is reduced to blood and tendons, no longer the impossibly unreal figure who transcends the physical world but instead corporeal to the extreme. Smith forces that which is hidden and denied out into the open, upsetting the equilibrium between inner and outer realms, creating a body that Smith has described as “violating the edge, being unruly, uncontainable.”

Unlike the often graphic medieval depictions of saints like St. Bartholomew being flayed, Smith depicts a flayed figure after the torture has been enacted and the skin is nowhere to be seen. Although we are exempt from seeing the gory act of flaying, its results are no less abject. The capacity of wax to mimic the texture and surface qualities of muscles and organs reinforces the viscerality of the sculpture and forces us to deal with the immediacy and close proximity of the interior that exists within every viewer.
Such imagery engages with abjection as it has been articulated by the theorist Julia Kristeva. Abjection, according to Kristeva, is caused by what “does not respect borders, positions, rules,” by what “disturbs identity, system, order.”

This definition of abjection reflects modern cultural anxieties about such breakdowns of boundaries, something also reflected in medieval culture. Bodies like Smith’s Virgin Mary or medieval depictions of violated saints seem to resist the medieval ideal of integrity for they are clearly bodies that cannot be contained or controlled. The medieval notion of integritas, through which the unblemished and unbroken body was put forth as the ideal, highlights the paradox of medieval corporeal experience—the contradiction that existed between the ideal uncorrupted body and the accessible, lived body. Kristeva’s discussion of abjection illuminates this medieval notion while Smith’s sculpture literally shows it.

The perspectives offered by artists like Smith are especially relevant precisely because the tactility and immediacy of her images and objects resonate not simply with medieval subject matter but with the very nature of visuality as it functioned in the Middle Ages. Affected myself by the viscerality of her works, I am struck by the powerful resonances between my own experiences and those I have tried to reconstruct from another historical moment. This phenomenon demonstrates how art objects can do their own theoretical work.

In thinking about the reception of medieval imagery or material culture, scholars ought to consider that viewers were not only “seeing” works of art. They were also experiencing visual culture in a way that could be potentially transgressive and subversive. Medieval viewing involved the body, the senses as well as the intellect, in a synesthetic conflation. Was this experience gendered? Probably, at least to a degree or some of the time. But more to the point, it was individual and personal, rather than based on fundamental dichotomies or essentializations. Although individuals may carry with them social constructs that affect their responses, those responses are nevertheless within their intellectual control. Aesthetic experience is malleable and
sometimes challenges traditional aesthetic values. This challenge in the Middle Ages was not necessarily made by artists, but more likely by viewers, especially female viewers who may have been in a position to make covert challenges to the cultural norms through the agency of their receptive positions. Visual culture’s immediacy for viewers in both the past and the present, and the agency imbedded in those moments of reception, can and should facilitate historical study in feminist terms.

**End Notes**

1. I thank the editors of this volume, Marian Blecke and Felice Lifshitz, for their careful editing and thoughtful feedback.
2. Some of these thoughts come out of my participation in a roundtable entitled “Poetics, Aesthetics and Feminist Criticism,” held at the International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds in July 2008 (and sponsored by the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship). The session involved a call for a return to a “feminist poetic,” and aimed to address issues surrounding feminist poetics, aesthetics and the desirability—or otherwise—of the erasure of a specifically female body within feminist criticism, queer and/or postmodern contexts. This roundtable’s fundamental concern grew out of the discussion in a related roundtable the previous year.


14. Young, “Throwing Like a Girl.”
18. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 1133, fol. 69v–70r. The *Passion of Saint Margaret* is accompanied by twenty-five other texts. Of the twenty-six texts, eighteen deal with saints – their lives and/or their martyrdoms. Saint Margaret’s Life is fourth in the book, and is one of the longer texts, extending
over thirty-seven folios. The items included in the manuscript range from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries.

19. Although the rubbing was probably done initially by one person, each subsequent reader was nevertheless reminded of this somewhat iconoclastic behavior, and may have been inclined to repeat it.

20. I have two forthcoming articles that explore this manuscript further, tentatively titled “Violence on Vellum: Saint Margaret’s Transgressive Body and Its Audience,” in a volume edited by Elizabeth L’Estrange and Alison More, and “Unruly Reading: The Consuming Role of Touch in the Experiences of a Medieval Manuscript,” in a collection to be edited by Jonathan Wilcox.


25. Anne Friedberg, Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) pp. 44, 58, 184. Friedberg suggests that in the mid nineteenth century, department stores provided such a space to women—a public space that was also private interior.


27. Biernoff, Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages, p. 56.

28. An important example of this approach is Caviness, Visualizing Women. Caviness also uses Kiki Smith, but she draws on different works of art than those discussed here.


30. Caviness, Visualizing Women, pp. 138–53. Here Caviness explores the fragmented body parts of another work by Smith, linking them to both relics and ex-votos and suggesting that fragmentation is here a way of resisting the gaze.


34. Twelfth-century concerns about bodily integritas are especially well discussed in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books; Cambridge, MA: Distributed by the MIT Press, 2001). For a discussion of medieval notions of abjection, see Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*. In one example cited by Biernoff (pp. 54, 129-30), Bernard of Clairvaux wrote of the consequences of leaving open one’s mind to uncontrolled thoughts: the memory becomes an “overflowing sewer” in which the pollution of sense-impressions floods the body, making “the whole house” contaminated “with intolerable filth.” Such descriptions not only attest to medieval understandings of the repulsive effect of such imagery (that sewers are unpleasant), but also suggest that such representations in texts and images were offered because of their abject qualities, which in turn sent higher, more philosophical messages about the dangers of sinfulness and immorality. In other words, if the content of sewers was not understood as disgusting, messages like Bernard’s would not have made much of an impact. For Bernard’s text, see Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist, 1987) pp. 72-73.
1. The Passion of St. Margaret, 12th c.
Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek MS Clm 1133, fol. 69v-70r

2. Sheela-na-gig
Nuns' Church
Clonmacnoise, Ireland, c. 1167
Photograph courtesy the author
3. Nuns' Church
Clonmacnoise, Ireland, c. 1167
Photograph courtesy the author

4. Chancel Arch
Nuns' Church
Clonmacnoise, Ireland, c. 1167
Photograph courtesy the author
5. Kiki Smith
*Womb*, 1986
bronze
open: 22” x 15” x 7” (55.9 cm x 38.1 cm x 17.8 cm)
© Kiki Smith, courtesy PaceWildenstein
Photo courtesy: Cameron Wittig

6. Muschio, *Genecia* (c. 1292)
University of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 399, fol. 14r
7. Kiki Smith
*Virgin Mary*, 1992
wax, cheesecloth and wood with steel base
67-1/2 x 26 x 14-1/2” (171.5 x 66 x 36.8 cm)
© Kiki Smith, courtesy PaceWildenstein
Photo by: Ellen Page Wilson/Courtesy PaceWildenstein

8. Kiki Smith
*Untitled (Heart)*, 1986
plaster and silver leaf
5” x 4” x 3” (12.7 cm x 10.2 cm x 7.6 cm)
© Kiki Smith, courtesy PaceWildenstein
Photo courtesy the artist

8. Kiki Smith
*Virgin Mary*, 1992
wax, cheesecloth and wood with steel base
67-1/2 x 26 x 14-1/2” (171.5 x 66 x 36.8 cm)
© Kiki Smith, courtesy PaceWildenstein
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