









# A SLIGHT HYSTERICAL TENDENCY

Allison Baker



For all my beloved Sad Girls

# This Is Just To Say

BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold



# Contents

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Abstract .....                  | 1  |
| A Slight Hysterical Tendency... | 3  |
| Bibliography .....              | 71 |
| Acknowledgments.....            | 73 |
| Image List .....                | 75 |



## **Abstract**

[Sexuality, sculpture, and sadness as sites of female subversion]

A woman's internalized suffering and sadness is deployed as an act of resistance. Women have a long lineage of historically tragic female figures, particularly authors and artists that disrupt the status quo by relishing and thriving and they wallow in their sorrow. Women's collective and overwhelming sadness is both a singular and unified protest against cultural and social systems of oppression. Sad girls are bad girls.



I have witnessed and participated in a few differed reactions to violence and tragedy. When something terrible happens some people swear to never let it happen again and construct their whole lives and identity to carefully guard against another lapse of autonomy. These guarded, broken people are romanticized as fiercely intimidating and painfully sexy, smoldering women, with short fuses and an extra stomp or swagger in their step. With squared shoulders and firm handshakes, these are women that can sear your skin with a glance of narrowing eyes like the most potent of black magic. The bad girls. Unabashed and unashamed. And then there are those that inadvertently seek to recreate the same horrific set of circumstances over and over. Equally romanticized as bubblegum Lolitas and Glenda the Goodwitch with shiny, bouncy hair and big eyes that can look so sad and confused with welcoming smiles plastered on their perfectly framed faces. Author Elizabeth Wurtzel postulates that one reason “bad girls come to a nasty end is a lack of conviction: they recoil at their own badness and try to be the sweethearts they were raised to be. They revert to type, a tad bit embarrassed that they actually stood up and stood out and demanded and demolished at will – at Nietzschean will- and try to cover their steps, and back their tracks and be angelic. It is the mixed message, the ambiguity and ambivalence, that finally destroys them. The strong clear vision that is required to be a woman of heart and mind, of her own free will is really quite hard” (Wurtzel 18).

Estella in all her glamor and glory  
was still just a cunt wrapped in velvet and Victorian pretense.  
No one wants to be the heartless, frigid bitch all the time.











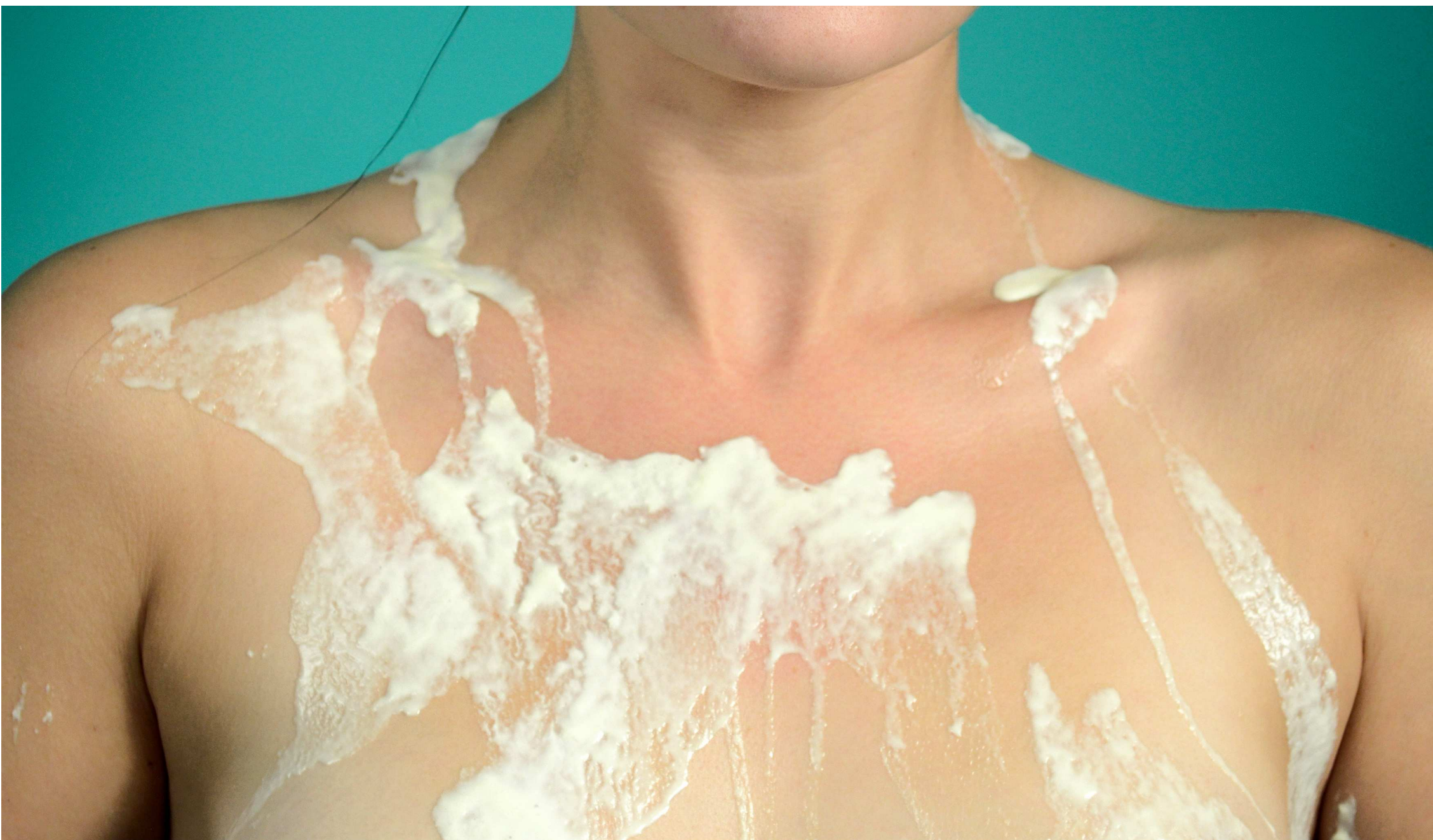


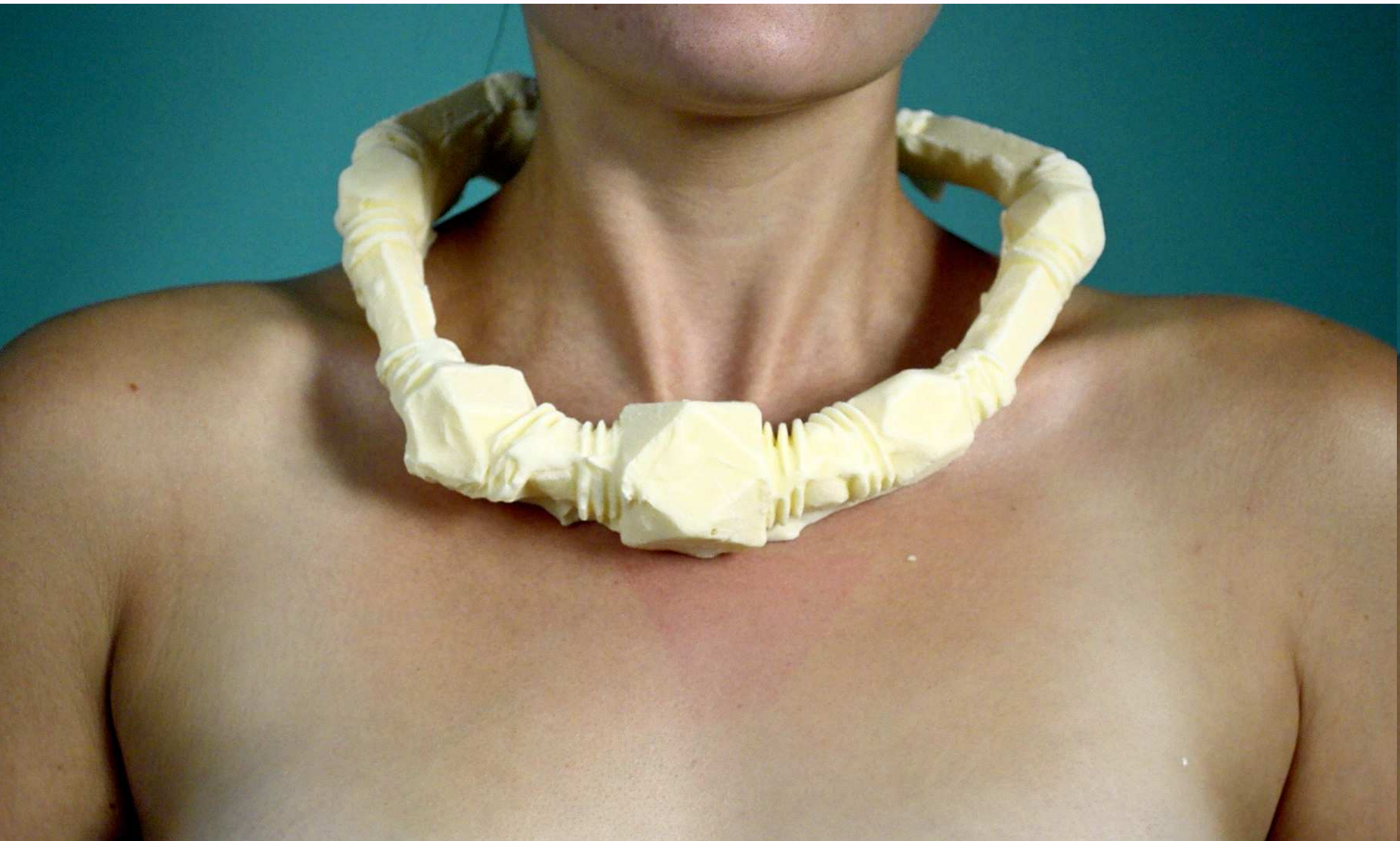
At the same time no one wants to be the girl with big, dumb, doe eyes with lips glossy and slack.

Hunting season is open year round.



So as women do we have another option? Can we try to fleece men before they fleece us and use sex as a weapon to “deceive and entrap?” (Dickens 386). We can try to dress up our power and autonomy in heels and red lacquered nails to dig into your back. But at the end of the day “sex is not a weapon...and if you try to use it as a weapon the only person you will wound in yourself” (Wurtzel 115-116).











Women attempt suicide at a frequency three times over their male counterparts- and fail at a staggeringly abysmal rate. As of 2012 women were still paid 78.3 cents on the man's dollar ([www.nwlc.org](http://www.nwlc.org)) and men accounted for 78.3% of national suicides in the United States ([www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)). We can't seem to achieve equality in life or death, but at least we are eerily consistent. We desperately want to die more often than men, but trained as the fairer sex our good breeding and lack of conviction leaves us, more often than not, a few capsules short. Opposed to our masculine brethren that don't worry about the mess they will leave when they blow their brains across the white carpet, that was lovingly shampooed and vacuumed with all the stripes aligning just so the night before.

We worry about

Who is going to find us?

Who is going to have to clean up the mess?

Who is going to do the goddamned dishes the next day?

So we collectively pull our heads out of the oven,  
put the cookies back in, close the door, set the  
timer, turn on a rerun of Thelma and Louise and  
wish we were brave enough to choose “death over  
drudgery.” (Wurtzel 2)





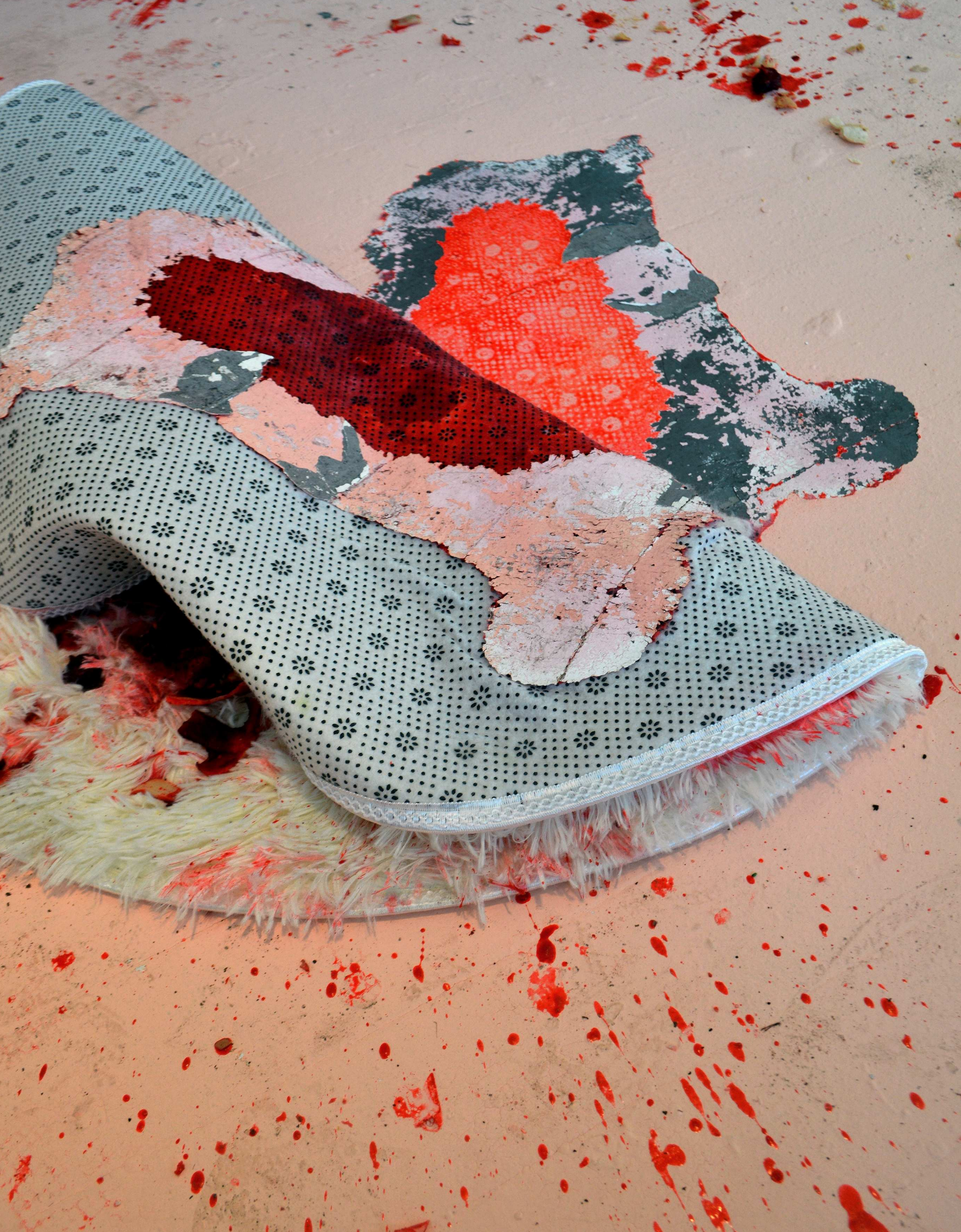
































Women's sadness manifests on such a vastly different frequency that we get our own terminology, hysteria: "a temporary nervous depression- a slight hysterical tendency" (Perkins-Gilman 2). Authors and artists seem to be particularly prone to 'hysteria' and untimely deaths, which are valorized in sexy, glossy spreads in Vice magazines 2013 Fiction issue. What is it about being born and more so *growing up* as a *woman* (Note: that the semantics are imperative here- woman, as opposed to female. It is the guise, the performance, the drag that is woman not the mess between our dimpled thighs) that leads to such overwhelming fits of hysterical insanity?



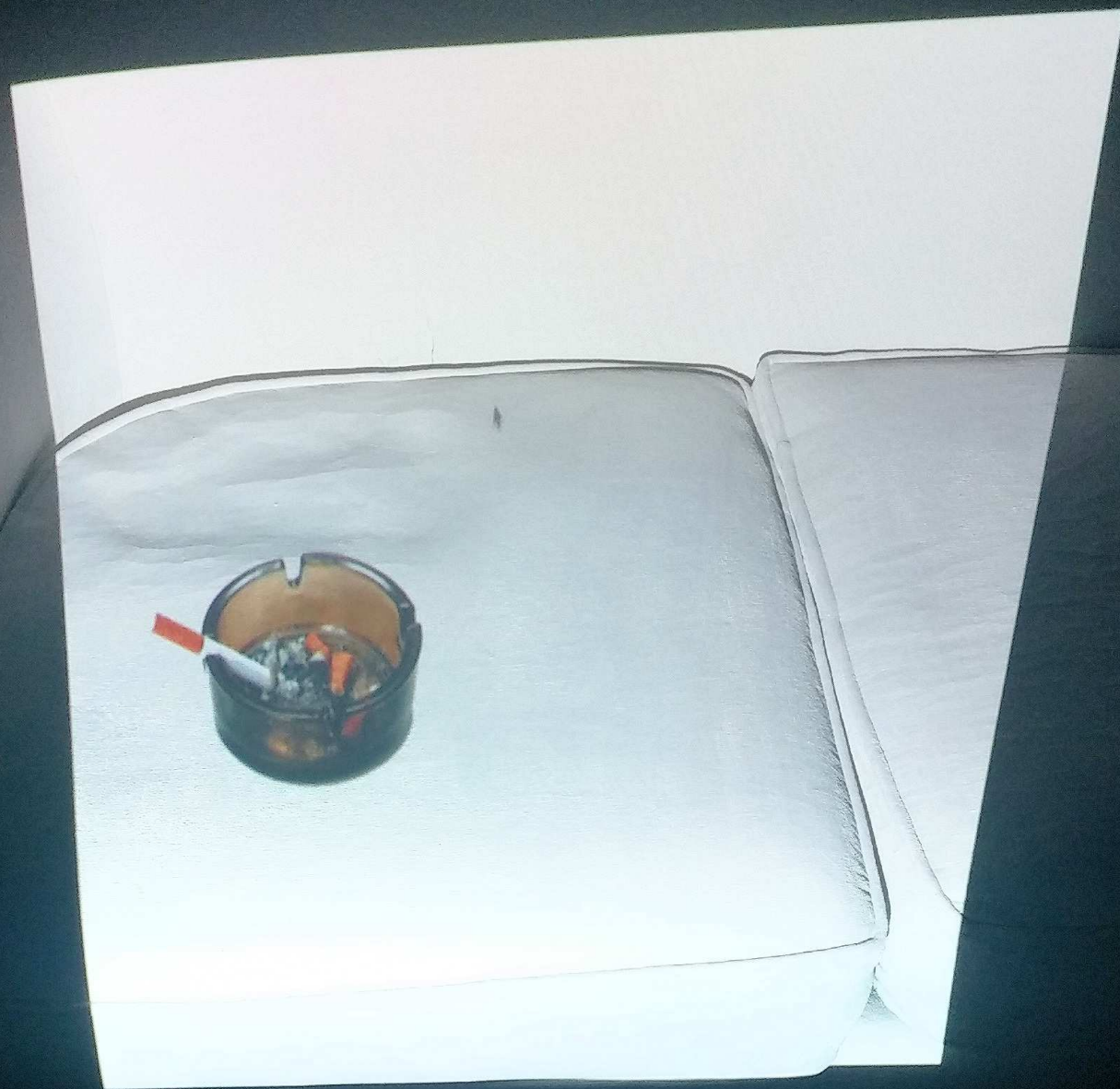
Medicine historically served as a means to fundamentally prove the unquestionable inferiority of women, people of color, lower classes, and other marginalized groups under the guise of objectivity. In the mid-nineteenth century upper/upper-middle class white women began to fall ill at record rates and so began “a morbid cult of hypochondria-‘female invalidism’” (Ehrenreich and English 17). This perceived sickness, however, did not weaken a woman’s social standing but served as a means to solidify it and highlight the admirable feminine qualities desirable in upper-class aspirations. That is until it female invalidism gave way to hysteria- the more disruptive and problematic of the rebellious female illnesses. Hysteria gave women newfound, albeit limited power within their familial structure. This medicalization of women’s discontent afforded women an acceptable avenue to express their despair, rage, anger, and frustration in a very conservative culture. Ehrenreich and English argue that hysteria offered a fleeting moment of “psychological advantage over a husband or doctor, but ultimately it played into the hands of the doctors by confirming their notion of women as irrational, unpredictable and diseased” (Ehrenreich and English 41).



Hysteria was not only a means to rebel against the prescriptive and repressive roles of Victorian America it was a means to bodily autonomy. Quiet sexual undertones coursed through the nineteenth century in western culture. Furniture was painstakingly crafted with seductive female proportions, legs that curled so immodestly that tablecloths must be placed over the object to preserve its dignity and not illicit any impure thoughts of people in its presence. In this atmosphere women grappled with two diametrically opposed beliefs regarding their sexuality: that they were sexless and possessed no natural sexual urges and conversely an “insatiable lust’ that once awakened might be totally uncontrollable” (Ehrenreich and English 31). Women lacked any access to reproductive rights, their bodies were the sole property of their husbands, sex was a duty to be performed without hesitation. That is unless diagnosed as hysterical or otherwise invalid. Sickness, real or imagined, becomes a means to curtail reproduction and also served as a greatly needed outlet for expressing deep, systemic unhappiness.

Artist and theorist Audrey Wollen's aptly named 'Sad Girl Theory' asserts that the "internalized suffering women's experience should be categorized as an act of resistance," ([www.cultistzine.com](http://www.cultistzine.com)) that our collective and overwhelming sadness is both a singular and unified protest against cultural and social systems of oppression. Sadness becomes a proportional response to the hegemonic systems that subjugate women en masse. Women have a long lineage of historically tragic female figures, particularly authors and artists that disrupt the status quo by relishing and thriving and they wallow (albeit glamorously) in their sadness. Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, Ana Mendieta, Sylvia Plath, Marylyn Monroe, Frida Khalo, Sanmao. These women built an empire and a cult following on the questionable sand and silt foundation of their sadness.

In hindsight their misery feels political, forceful, and directed. Where in actuality it was probably self indulgent, paralyzing, terrifying, and lacked any organization and calculation to move into a pointed political power play. However, if we don't valorize their sorrow then they become poor lost souls, dainty, fragile, feminine flowers that wilted and soured from the potency of their brilliance. Crushed under the weight of success. If we don't retroactively give agency to their depression and untimely demise then the chauvinism masquerading as medical paternalism wins. Then they were right. These brilliant, talented women simply couldn't handle the intensity of their genius coupled with the unfortunate fact that they had fucking vaginas.





Sad girl theory gives intention and meaning to the historical interpretation of female sadness and hysteria. A reclamation of sadness. Women buck notions of traditional femininity with a subverted re-appropriation of femaleness. We are using the very thing that oppresses us to make a statement: our prescriptive gender roles, our weakness, our plight, and our fits of fancy.



We sad girls are bad girls.



Blatantly refusing to act properly, show decorum, and be the well-mannered darlings we were raised to be. And sad can be sexy. Or more importantly make us feel sexy- art school chic. Waterproof makeup was invented for a reason but some days it feels better to walk around with mascara tinted tears behind painfully trendy, knock off sunglasses, spending the whole day insisting, “I’m fine!”













Strict regulation of the body's caloric intake serves as a tertiary site of unconscious collective female resistance that is inextricably linked to both sexuality and sadness. Modern philosopher Susan Bordo argues that starvation is a vengeful response towards "the limitations of the traditional female role, rejection of values associated with it, and a fierce rebellion against allowing [women's] futures to develop in the same direction as their mother's lives" (Bordo 156). In the same vein as hysteria, starvation as an outlet to exact control over one's body grew out of a time where women were/are experiencing conflicting societal demands.



We are stuck between a slut and a hard place.

Starvation 'defeminizes the body,' typically female fat deposits disappear, breasts shrink, hips deflate, and menstruation eventually stops and women consciously forfeit the ability to procreate. A disturbingly thin body hyper reflects societal ideals and emphasizes problems with female representation. The starving women merely by existing, silently calls into question the way women are depicted, viewed, and valued. The denial of food and slow, public death becomes a singular act with larger implied significance.

Starvation similarly is only a political act when one has the choice to eat. For many people starvation is not political, it is merely a reality of existence. Sadness is a privilege afforded mostly to affluent, white women. The problem with both Sad Girl Theory and hysteria is the lack of universal experience.

Working class women weren't treated for hysteria, they simply didn't have time to weep and wallow.

#whitegirlproblems





The ultimate breakdown of Sad Girl Theory and hysteria as sites of uniquely feminine resistance occurs at our lack of conviction and self-deprecation. “It is the mixed message, the ambiguity and ambivalence, that finally destroys [us]” (Wurtzel 18). Sadness and sexuality as a movement fail because we give up. It becomes just too much, we become so immersed in the archetypal character of the poetically depressed woman that we forget what made us like this in the first place. We revert to type and try to be the good girls.

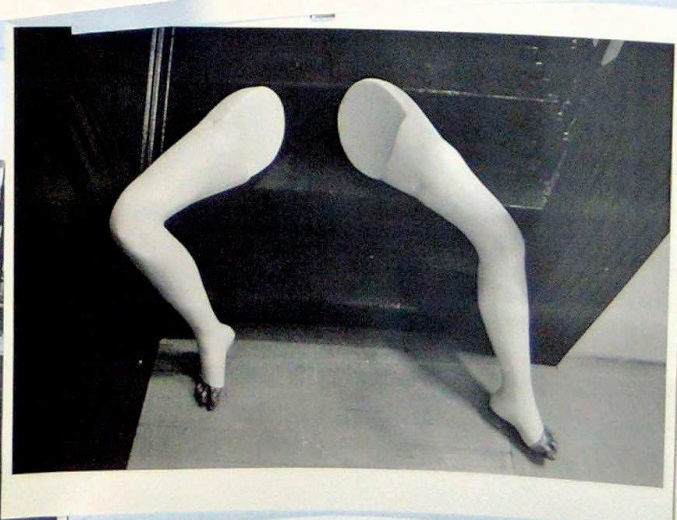
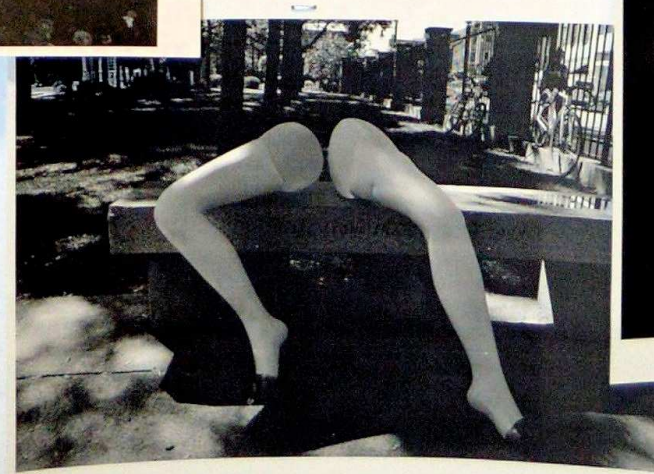
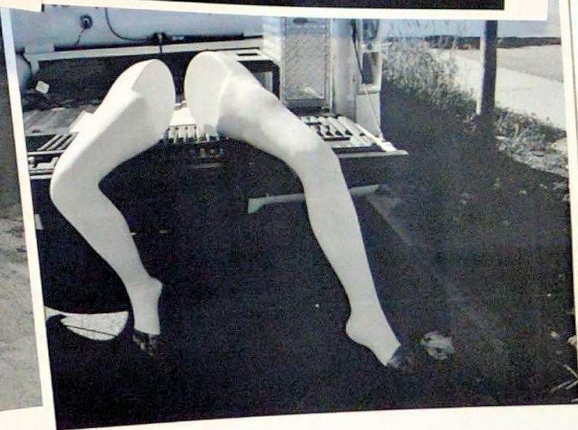
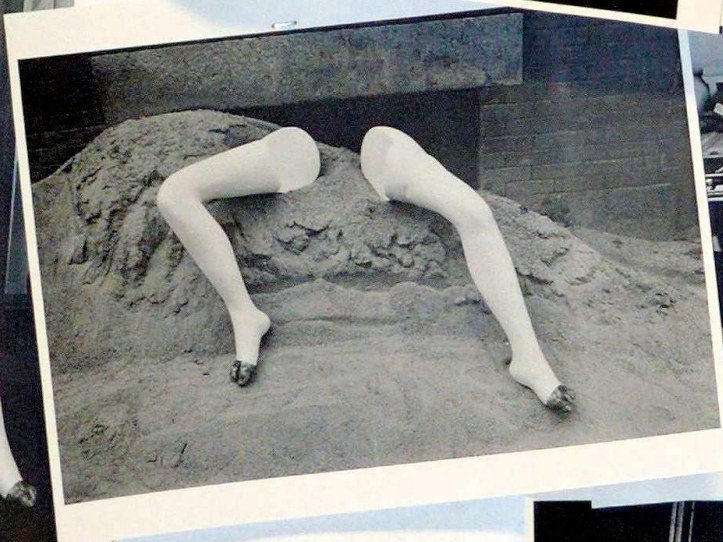
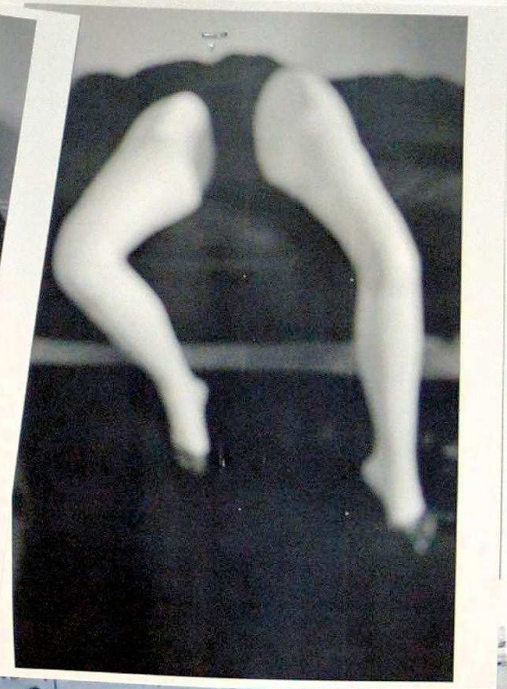
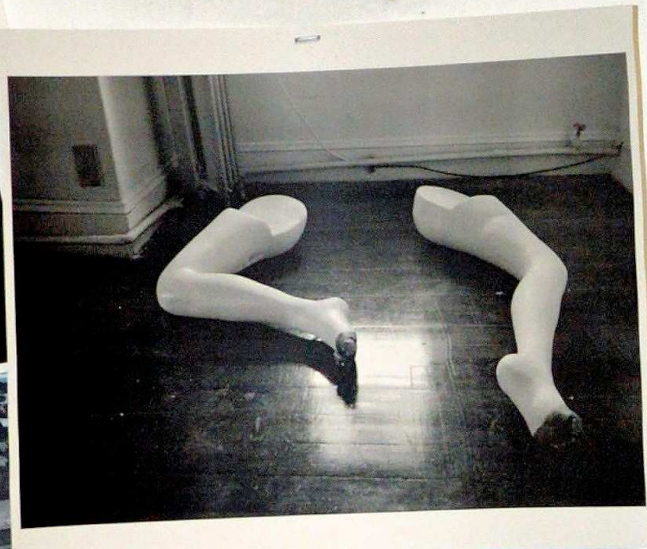
Giggling pop princess blondes don't have more fun, but they certainly cry a lot less.















Our seemingly animalistic drive to seek out sex where we are calling the shots and leaving before the sun comes up coupled with intentionally wallowing in our sadness, hiding in our hovel listening to Lana DeRay all day becomes too all encompassing. We forgot what started all this. We lost our rage, our passion.

We forgot that consciously or not  
we are sad for a really good fucking reason.





## **Bibliography:**

Barron, Benjamin. "Richard Prince, Audrey Wollen, and the Sad Girl Theory | Read | I-D." *ID RSS*. Vice, 12 Nov. 2014. Web. 05 Dec. 2014.

Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: U of California, 1993. Print.

Dickens, Charles, and Charlotte Mitchell. *Great Expectations*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Deirdre English. *Complaints and Disorders; the Sexual Politics of Sickness*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist, 1973. Print.

"Equal Pay and the Wage Gap." *National Women's Law Center*. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 Dec. 2014.

"Facts and Figures." *American Foundation for Suicide Prevention*. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 Dec. 2014.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *"The Yellow Wallpaper" and Other Stories*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997. Print.

Johnson, Merri Lisa. *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002. Print.

"Intimate Partner Violence." [Http://www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org). N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Dec. 2014.

Salek, Yasi. "[CULT TALK] Audrey Wollen on Sad Girl Theory." *CULTIST ZINE*. Cultist, 19 June 2014. Web. 05 Dec. 2014.

Sheaffer, Abby. "Why The Vice "Last Words" Fashion Spread Is Wrong." *Vice Last Words Is Wrong*. N.p., 18 June 2013. Web. 05 Dec. 2014.



## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Taylor Baldwin, Chris Sancomb, and Jane South for the poking, prodding, hard questions, and steadfast support.

Thank you to Todd Frahm for getting me into this awful mess and teaching me basically everything I know. Thank you for the years of support, tearful phone calls and studio visits, for your kindness and generosity. Thank you for being a good man when I was sure that none existed. Thank you for giving me a voice. Thank you for building a stoop kid family and bringing me into yours. Thank you for everything. I am grateful beyond words.

To my mother. You are one brassy, sassy broad. Thank you for teaching me how to love as hard as I fight. For teaching me to stand up for myself and for what I believe in without fear. *For letting me run wild* and for knowing it would all turn out ok. Thank you for letting me cry hysterically over the phone with you, for tolerating me when I am mad at the whole world and lash out at you because I know you love me and will accept my apology. I don't know how you always made ends meet. Thank you for all your sacrifices. For teaching me how to be a woman and a feminist, but never a stupid woman. I fucking love you. So much.

Thank you to my late Grandparents, Bill and Senta Garrison for being consistent sources of love, teaching me integrity and values, for showing me what true steadfast love looks and feels like, for giving me something to aspire to. I miss you and my heart aches for you every day.

Thank you to my Grandparents, Doc and Alana Baker, for giving me hope and showing me love when I thought it was lost forever. For bolstering me, believing in me, and for letting me make you proud.

Thank you to Will. For putting up with me, for holding me while I scream and cry and sometimes break things. For moving to this god forsaken hell hole and to the next and the next and the next. For understanding what a nightmare I am, for giving me space and unyielding support. For seeing through all my bullshit, posturing, overcompensating machismo and teaching me how to act like a confident man. For showing me deep, true, and honest love. For being the interesting, brilliant, strong, genuine man that you are.

To my Stoop Family, for teaching me and being my forever family. Stoop Kids coast to coast.

To my Sad Girls, I love you. Thank you for going through this terrible and wonderful experience with me. For all the beer and shitty pizza. For all the hugs and tears and magic.

To Gail, for keeping me here. Thank you.



## Image list

- Pg 5 "Upskirt" (detail) 2014
- Pg 6 "Upskirt" (detail) 2014
- Pg 8-9 "Sweet Nothings" performance still 2014
- Pg 11 "Doe" 2014
- Pg 13 "Tiffany's" Video Still 2014
- Pg 14-15 "Tiffany's" Video Stills 2014
- Pg 16 "Mrs Peacock" installation detail 2014
- Pg 20-21 "Smother" performance still 2015
- Pg 22-23 "Smother" video still 2015
- Pg 24 "Unforgettable Moments" 2011
- Pg 25 "Smother" performance still 2015
- Pg 26 "Smother" performance ephemera 2015
- Pg 28-29 "Unbearable Weight" (detail) 2015 and "Unbearable Weight" 2015
- Pg 30 "Untitled" 2015
- Pg 31 "Untitled" (detail) 2015
- Pg 32 "She Was Soft Like Butter I" 2014
- Pg 33 "She Was Soft Like Butter II" 2014
- Pg 34-35 "She Was Soft Like Butter III" 2014
- Pg 37 Sheaffer, Abby. "Why The Vice "Last Words" Fashion Spread Is Wrong."  
Vice Last Words Is Wrong. N.p., 18 June 2013. Web. 05 Dec. 2014.
- Pg 42 "Astral Projection" (detail) 2015
- Pg 43 "Astra Projection" 2015
- Pg 45 "Upskirt" 2014
- Pg 48-49 "Mudgirl" 2014
- Pg 51 "Siblings" 2014
- Pg 52-53 "Sister: Mudgirl" 2014
- Pg 58 "Grovel" 2014
- Pg 59 "Grovel" (detail) 2014
- Pg 62-63 "Breaking my Back" 2014
- Pg 65 "Collector" 2013
- Pg 66-67 "Anti-Chastity Belt" Performance Still 2011





