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Feminist Theology and Visual Art
A Feminist Theological Perspective of the Female Divine through a Personal Narrative of the Body

This article is based on my personal experience and transitional journey as a woman into incarnation¹ and illustrates how my art and feminist theology have given me a voice and understanding of that experience. I am an artist and feminist theologian studying for a PhD at The University of Winchester in the UK. My art is based in my experience as a female child and woman within patriarchy, the encultured society I have been brought up and now live in. If I am to define what subject area my art sits in then it would be female subjectivity supported by a theological body narrative which is based in body theology. By this I mean using personal embodied experience for the revelation of the divine.² This methodology is one of the multiple strands of feminist liberation theologies. The two paintings that I have chosen to exhibit within this article are born out of my unfolding and ever evolving process of discovering the feminine language of my body that I call a body narrative. The language of art I have realised like poetry or any of the arts requires a witnessing audience³ to grow and to become fuller in their significance.

The issue for women as articulated by philosophers and theorists Kristeva and Irigaray⁴ is the dominance of the male signifier in language and art. This dominance fills space and makes it difficult for other ways to emerge.

¹ By incarnation I mean the embodied experience of the divine. See Lisa Isherwood, Liberating Christ Exploring the Christologies of Contemporary Liberation Movements (The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland Ohio 1999), 145.
³ Janet Adler, Offering From The conscious body: The Discipline of Authentic Movement (Inner Traditions, Bear & company: Rochester, Vermont 2002).
The articulation of the feminine *jouissance*\(^5\) within language is lost because the nature of what it is to be female and Divine\(^6\) has not been fully acknowledged in a way that is helpful to women within our heteropatriarchal society both in religious and secular worlds. Not only will I be telling my story but hopefully it is a story that many women can and will relate to. I will endeavour within this article to share my journey of discovery. The journey is a process of unpacking what has been written on my body and what my body has absorbed and embodied as just one definition of woman within a patriarchal society. My paintings illustrate and say what words cannot; they give access to a language that women have been denied.

I call this a body narrative because it is a story in part of my experience of transition from child to woman within a white western heteropatriarchal\(^7\) society. For a long time I was a voiceless woman and always a voiceless child. I felt as if I was fighting some sort of invisible enemy, which was trying to contain me within a foreign language, a foreign land and alien imagery\(^8\). It was as if I was a woman who was buried under the suffocating expectation of nurture and shelter from anyone who could convince me that they needed nurturing and in this my own needs were forgotten. I had begun to realise that my whole life experience was built around how I was groomed as a child, the child that I took with me, into an adult world. As an adult looking back I realised that my childhood world was full of dark corners, cubby holes and secrets and that in fact this still lay within as an adult and ensnared me in unsuspecting moments. This was the beginning of patterns and cycles of entrapment; this was the beginning of my life education as woman. It was through continual

\(^{5}\) Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 80.


\(^{7}\) Heteropatriarchal is the model of gender and sexual normativity under the hierarchy of male domination that we are expected to fit into and live by within a white westernised society. See Lisa Isherwood / Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics* (T&T Clark: London, New York 2004).

\(^{8}\) Luce Irigaray relates an experience she had of a discovery she made in a museum in Italy when she sees a wooden statue of what resembles Mary and Jesus, on a closer look, that makes her look twice, before she realises that the child is female. She expresses a feeling of elation on this discovery and it fills her with hope. Daphne Hampson, “The Sacred, The Feminine and French Theory,” in: Griselda Pollock / Victoria Turvey Sauron, *The Sacred and the Feminine: Imagination and Sexual Difference* (I.B. Tauris: London, New York 2007), 66.
anger and resistance to the pressure of this experience that I had a breakdown and breakthrough at the age of thirty three.

During this time my body was so sensitive to everything in whatever environment I found myself, I was literally in pain inside and out and the only way I could express this pain was through scribbled drawings with colour. I found myself drawing what I was afraid of, childhood memories of abuse and things in my immediate environment that forced me into myself in a claustrophobic way. Images would just appear in my head, I could feel the physicality of them as they rose up from trapped spaces within my body, and I would get them out on paper. I found relief and transformation through being able to express myself in this way. I realised I had found a language other than the word. This was the language of visual art that spoke from my innermost experience of the body and as my art evolved and unfolded me in stages, theseexpressed images became my liturgy and prayer. So in this action the flesh became word as the divine within the depth of me took form in both my body and in my art.9

The Church
The incarnational proclamation of “The Word” became flesh and dwelt amongst us…10 was Christ’s incarnation into the world. According to the early Church Fathers such as Origen, Ambrose, Tertullian and Chrysostom, Jesus was the only divine incarnation. He alone was the divine-filled flesh and it was this teaching that brought into existence the heteropatriarchal order under the body of Christ through misogynistic thought. The divine flesh was created in the image of man. The fathers understood this flesh to be free from human desires in every way, yet somehow able also to connect and have full access to knowledge of everything to do with the human experience, including the human experience of women. This was considered to be divinity in the flesh; that was actually a spirit filled, clinically sanitised body. It is hard to believe that this has been and is still accepted so readily as a teaching within the 2000 year old Christian tradition. This was such an opportunity for a new way of being which could celebrate the flesh as God incarnate, which in my view has been lost through the development of rational spiritualised doctrine that has caused the disconnection of lived experiences of bodies and God. This can be

9 Isherwood, Liberating Christ, 142.
clearly seen through the worship of a metaphysical\textsuperscript{11} Christ. The tradition has claimed that to emulate Christ we have to maintain our own bodies through continually dying to “sin” and eventually become perfect in his body through dying physically. This is the understanding of Christ that I was expected to hold when I entered the church at the age of thirty four, as a woman, bringing with me some really painful experiences. These were experiences that had not yet been fully acknowledged, even though I had awakened to a realisation that my life was not as abundant as it could be. It took me seven more years to process and un-ravel my body narrative in the only language I knew which was image and to understand that I too was an incarnational subject of the divine.

At the beginning of a very traditional Christian journey I felt an embodied empowerment that I had never felt before, but as I slowly journeyed onwards through another twelve years of the Church and my Christian faith, this began to turn into a sense of disempowerment as I realised this was a man’s world and I was not, as a single mother, the type of women who could fit the traditional Christian status quo. However this did not dampen the fire and passion that would drive me on my quest for love and justice in my own life as a woman and single mother. This was a quest that also connected me with the world of other marginalised people within my community. The unravelling of my body narrative began with an internal knowledge of divine subjectivity. By this I mean an awakening to a new consciousness in me, that was to become nurturing sustenance for my journey over quite difficult terrain and which I now realise will hold me through the rest of my life. The only language I knew, from the age of thirty three to fifty two years old was visual image. At this point I had only just started being able to articulate the images in words to gain any verbal meaning that I could articulate to others; I always knew what they meant to me but the language remained hidden and lost inside me. I needed to be able to see and write about these images in order to grow a sense of myself and be able to connect to others in the world. The visual became an important part of creating a language for the feminine that was evolving in me. (I see poetry, performance and any of the creative arts part of

\textsuperscript{11} I understanding “Metaphysical” to define something outside of, separate from the body. Metaphysics it has been argued arose out of Hellenistic culture bringing with it the gendered binary opposites of mind and spirit attributed to the higher realm of being, male and the female reduced to lower nature of animals, of matter and uncontrollable sexual urges see Babylonian Talmud: Yebamoth 62B, W. Slotki, trans., 139.
a possible evolving process of language for women). I think because my images are my body narrative finding a language to companion and carry that image is important to me as part of a liberative praxis as a woman. This is because language as it stands now does not express how it is for women because it is phallocentric; it holds phallic signifiers that disenfranchise the feminine.\(^\text{12}\) So it is important for women to create their own language through the divine revelatory language of their embodied experience; thus making it possible for them to move to a new space of knowing. Feminist theology provides the theoretical framework for the language of the feminine body to evolve; this is why body theology as a strand of feminist liberation theologies is so important because it is born out of the diverse contextual embodied experiences of women. The language that is created by the body’s narrative through image can become a moment of transformation as Christ opens up a new range of possibilities.

This first image I call “In the Depths of the Divine,” represents the beginning of a journey, a journey whose beginnings lay deep within me. This was the divine spark that had been awakened within and was looking to be seen, to be witnessed, nurtured and sustained. This is what I brought with me as I entered into the Christian faith, the beginning of my faith as a Christian woman. It was here, in retrospect, that I thought I could find community, a place to belong to and in which to grow. I was in a place of awe and wonder, a place of new beginnings; my eyes were well and truly opened and I wanted to see. However it wasn’t long after, through this revelatory process, that I began to experience what it was like to be a women; seen within the Church as the passively objectified other having to please by being obedient to this hierarchical regime, where the only empowerment for women lay in following the example of the highly favoured lady, Mary mother of God. (This of course is within the Catholic Church which was my first encounter with traditional faith as an adult woman). It was here that I first witnessed how men lead the services; their ministerial role was obvious as was the exclusion of women. This left me with many unanswered questions about the place of women in the greater scheme of things in the Church and the world, which I later discovered was very much a patriarchal world. I felt invisible to others, yet

intensely visible to myself; empowered yet with no means of channelling this power that energised and filled every part of my body.

I was thirty eight when I painted my first acrylic and did not name it until two thousand and four, twelve years later. It was then that I began to find the words for the language of my body narrative; this is the narrative that describes my life and my experience with all that I have met, embraced and learned on

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“In The Depths Of The Divine”¹³

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my journey so far. “In the Depths of the Divine” is an internalised image of divine subjectivity as woman being in the presence of God, offering herself as a servant to be part of the web of life. This is my experience of entering into relationship as a co-creator14, having been touched by the divine resonance of the cosmos and of feeling internally empowered. This was my moment of meeting Christ; he was in me and I was in him and in that moment we were in the body of God15 and the body of God was in us, and by this I mean the body of God as the whole of the Cosmos. We were in the house of God full of infinite possibilities. This empowerment made me consciously aware of the interconnectedness of everything; I could feel this physically in my body, with people, with nature, when I looked into the sky day or night with my limited vision, I could feel the pull of being drawn into something bigger than myself. My imagination and desire to understand more was fed by this real internal play of a sensuous nature, which for me was an embodied experience; this was a conscious awakening to another way of being in the world. I became aware of hearing and seeing people differently and when they spoke, the resonance of what they were saying had a powerful visceral effect on me. The feeling that my life would never be the same again was repeated daily as my life began to unfold. It was here that an unfolding began, awakening me to more questions about life, future living and what had been such a contained, limited and painful existence to that point.

Therapeutic Counselling
My images within my art began to evolve as did my body narrative. My journey took me to counselling and therapy out of which six paintings were brought to birth in relation to my story. I felt I was being unfolded and revealed and was beginning to see what was written on and inside my body from my experience as a female child through to becoming a woman. However I still didn’t have the words to describe or narrate verbally either the experience of my past, or my experience within the Church community (which by

14 Taking responsibility as part of a co-redemptive praxis in community with the body of Christ and being mindful of mutuality in relationship with others and the rest of creation on the earth. Carter Heyward, The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relationship (University Press: Lanham, Md. 1982).

now was an Anglican Church community) that I so desperately wanted to be part of. I knew what I had experienced well in my own body. It was a very clear script and I could articulate that but making sense of why and how was difficult. I felt trapped in a place where my own experience of self did not fit with the rhetoric of the Church Community I was in. This gave me no comfort. The only resolution offered was forgiveness through the offering of my-self and all that was wrong with me to a supernatural man, through his body and blood, in which context it was assumed that everything would be ok if I handed my suffering and sins over to him. This made me feel so bad about myself, in hindsight I realise that these projections really did begin to physically burden me and made me look deep within myself and trawl for all the bad parts of me. This just compounded my earlier experiences of abuse, making me feel like an outsider unworthy and unclean. I thought if I really did confess everything about myself then I would feel better and be more acceptable within this Church community. It was almost as if I was a child trying to please everyone so as to be accepted. Where was I to begin?

In this way of looking at my life from the perspective of the Church, I was the victim and the other person involved was the perpetrator with no spaces in between to say why or how. This feeling of loss and woundedness that circulated and coursed through my body to the very core of my being needed to be relieved. Going to the altar and asking for forgiveness did not help; what did I need forgiving for and what did I need to forgive? No-one could answer the deep questions I had. Meanwhile I was still part of the Church searching for my place and my part in the body of Christ in this community. The teaching of the Church was that we were all part of the body of Christ but I didn’t understand what this meant. On the one hand we were told as a community that we were all functioning parts of this body yet there were so many conditions and prejudices in the practice of this teaching with regard to women and in particular to women who didn’t have “normal” lives.

**Education**

As an undergraduate in Theology/Philosophy I was given an opportunity to exhibit the six paintings that had been borne out of the therapeutic process, within the theology department where I was studying. The response of male students and lecturers alike was extraordinarily angry and denigrating. This response echoed my recent experience of Church and how I had experienced the world about me as a child and now as a woman. The response of most of the female students and lecturers was very different in that they wanted to explore, talk and listen to
what I had to say about my work and most important of all they could relate to the images. I realised at this point that my paintings were speaking to people both male and female, in very diverse ways according to experience. The negative responses affected me both emotionally and physically, which left me feeling overwhelmed, because of the very nature of my subjectivity being exhibited within the paintings. I can remember feeling very vulnerable, but at the same time I appreciated that my images were emotionally moving to this mixed audience. The fact that the spectator was moved and responded was important to me.

At this stage of my journey, through feminist theology the seeds for a verbal language for my images were being planted. Lisa Isherwood’s multifaceted Christology and her discourse on the dangers of the “impotency of metaphysics… to Christian theology”\(^{16}\) were helpful as was her suggestion that

> “It seems entirely possible that what the early Christian writers were conveying about incarnation was not a once-and-for-all-event but the knowledge that unless we are fully in our bodies, we will never be able to explore our divinity”\(^{17}\).

It was here that I started making theological connections placing them in conversations with my art in a way that I had been blind to previously. A narrative of understanding was being released and realised and I started seeing the language of my own containment within the images of my six therapeutic paintings. Isherwood’s words of “spiralling incarnation” being the diverse experience of women within feminist liberation theological discourse that involves itself with “the many and diverse struggles for women’s dignity, equality and humanity”\(^{18}\) made a huge impact on me. This enabled me to realise that my paintings were celebratory and transformative, giving expression in their form to both the pain of my experience and to movement and release. It showed me that our bodies are “fearfully and wonderfully made”\(^{19}\) however diverse our bodies and experiences are.

Carter Heyward’s mutuality in relationship along with her thoughts and writings on “Dunamis”\(^{20}\) as being the raw erotic energy of the Divine that

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\(^{16}\) Isherwood, *Liberating Christ*, 145.

\(^{17}\) Isherwood, *Liberating Christ*, 145.


\(^{19}\) (NRSV) Psalm 139: 14.

enables us “to God the earth” as co-creators, helped me understand that I was part of the body of Christ within the cosmos. When I talk about the cosmos I am talking about the interconnection and inter-relationality of everything within creation on the earth and throughout the Universe. This expanded the picture by showing me that the Church was only a small part of a much bigger picture. Heyward suggested as a way forward was that we can in fact be more inclusive by re-imaging Jesus

“Re-imaging may mean letting go of tradition one such letting go is realising that Jesus only really matters if he was human and if we view his Incarnation as a ‘relational experience’.”

It was this that made me realise my humanity as a woman and that along a broader spectrum I was very much part of a Christological community and, in Rita Brocks words, I was part of a community of wounded healers. This community, I discovered, maintained an even larger body that included women and others on the margins of many different societies and traditions globally. It enabled me to bring my past experience into the present in a revelatory way, bringing me to consciousness and connecting me to that first acrylic painting of “The Divine Within.” This awareness came in the form of voice and sensory perception. The language of my colonised body was changing. I had begun a process of being set free because I had begun to find my voice. This was because I had gained a new understanding of how my body had been contained, speaking in a way, that others could hopefully understand and in this way my art was becoming part of a feminist libera-tional theological discourse through this experience, my experience.


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I found Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s hermeneutics of suspicion\(^\text{26}\) useful for my images. Her scrutiny of biblical texts for the androcentric language of patriarchy, which had made women invisible historically, highlighted my own history. Once located, she expands spaces to be filled with women’s presence and discourse making them visible in order to re-create and re-image their narrative and presence. In this theoretical practice Schüssler Fiorenza says it is important to reclaim Christian heritage for women because of their divine power. Creator of “The Dinner Party,” artist Judy Chicago also tells us that “…women’s heritage is their power.”\(^\text{27}\) I see the correlation between this and the narrative of my body realising the effect patriarchal restraints have had on my development and place as woman. I had realised my absence, and how I seemed not to be present to myself, let alone to others. Now I see that my paintings made me very present; in fact they were screaming out to be noticed because of their content and this was very clear during that exhibition at the University where I had studied. I later discovered that this is what Schüssler Fiorenza would call creative actualisation.\(^\text{28}\) Her intention is to put women literally back into the picture in a creative way by the use of imagination and through various art forms and ritual. This was indeed a liturgical space that told my story and actually brought to life what had for me been lost in translation through the word. This was a co-redemptive liturgical process. I had put myself back into the picture; this was the beginning of re-imaging and re-creating of my life. The meeting of the artist and spectator in this space is the ritual. I think that art or indeed any creative art form is needed to express what is intrinsically important to women’s subjectivity because it translates what Julia Kristeva and Irigaray call \textit{jouissance}; the sexuality of woman is lost in translation within phallocentric language and monotheism.\(^\text{29}\)

The Feminist theologians I was reading were not just striking out against the silencing of women, although this was without any doubt an important objective of their cause. There was a bigger quest; they were also striking out for other marginalised voices to be heard and these included men, children and even the discourse of environmental issues. Feminist liberation theologies


\(^{28}\) Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Bread Not Stone}, xx.

\(^{29}\) Hampson, “The Sacred, The feminine and French theory,” 63.
enable the language of visual art because both hear women who are artists into speech which gives them a voice. The foundations of this valuable methodological praxis have been built on the voices and action of these women. Not only have feminist liberation theologies enabled and empowered me to interweave my art with the language of experience, I continue to fill my flesh by feasting on their words of wisdom.

What I am so mindful of now through engaging with feminist theologies is that what happens to our bodies is important in terms of what we take in through what is said to us, how we are treated and what is done to us.

As my education continues in the shape of a Doctoral thesis I have found that writing is not enough and that I need to paint in conjunction with what I am thinking theologically. I cannot separate the writing and the painting and I realise that they are both an integral part of my work and life. In Easter 2004 I did a water colour painting which I named “She is Risen”. This is an embodied Christological image of woman rising out of her body constrained within patriarchy and realising her incarnational value in the world as co-creator, prophetess, minister, teacher, healer and Sophia Wisdom. The feeling that “She is Risen” arose out of was invoked by a previous image I had painted. This was volcanic in its resonance and was entitled “Awaiting Resurrection.” This image was of a female form with a fiery furnace in her solar plexus and the genital area of her body. The feeling was one of imminent explosion of infinite possibilities and needing to break out into life and be free to live life abundantly. There was a sense of death and resurrection, another new beginning. The body as a revelatory space for such paradoxes is not new to the Christian journey. This image marked another beginning, a new way for my art to be seen as part of a feminist theological discourse because it is located in my embodied experience.

In conclusion then, the language of feminist theology has enabled me to give voice to my images in an embodied way and I have been able to incorporate this into my Doctoral thesis as part of the feminist liberation theology methodological process. I am still unfolding the language for the previous images I have painted and the language for the ones I continue to paint out of

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30 This is one of the foundations on which feminist theologies are built see Nellie Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Beacon Press: Boston 1986).

this ongoing experiential process of life as woman. So the body narrative continues along with this discourse and others that evolve from it as we move to new depths of understanding the divine incarnation for all human beings including women. Charlene Spretnak tells us that all too often…it is said that everything in life is “just made up” a social convention, a discourse, a mere “narrative” but actually the reality is that our narratives or ways of thinking are grounded in our bodily experiences, in nature and society.

33 Spretnak, The Resurgence of the Real, 4.
34 “She is Risen”. Watercolour, Megan Clay 2004. This image was used for an academic book cover for Feminist Theology: Anita Monro, Resurrecting Erotic Transgression: Subjecting Ambiguity in Theology (Equinox Pub: London, Oakville CT 2006).

Este artículo está basado en un viaje reflexivo mediante una narración personal del cuerpo en relación con mi arte. Las dos partes sobre las que voy a reflexionar, marcan el espacio y el tiempo en mi vida de la transformación y los nuevos comienzos en sentido teológico como mujer cristiana. La interrelación entre el arte y la teología, además del modo en que se comunican el uno con la otra, me ha ayudado a crear un diálogo continuo. Fue por la teología feminista de la liberación y el arte
por los que mi experiencia de la vida despertó y se aclaró. Me di cuenta de que había más mujeres que habían tenido iguales y similares experiencias a las mías en las narraciones creadas por la teología feminista. Las artistas feministas habían comenzado a surgirme a la vista y veía imágenes festivas relacionadas con el femenino. Estas imágenes mostraban de forma simbólica que todos tenemos el potencial de ser divino en forma de la encarnación, abriendo una ventana para reivindicar por ella la humanidad íntegra de la mujer. Este proceso fue la combinación de las dos disciplinas que venían a ser un vehículo para llevar significado a mi vida y expresarlo como práctica libertadora (pensamiento y acción reflexiva). No me había dado cuenta del efecto del dualismo y del poder en relación con la autoridad de la Iglesia y en otras organizaciones institucionales. Es decir: que las estructuras patriarcales estaban claramente definidas de manera que los hombres siempre parecían asumir el papel ejecutivo y llevaban las riendas de todo el mundo, incluidas las mujeres. Siendo mujer en relación íntima con mi marido, siendo madre en relación con mis hijos, siendo hija y hermana, no entendía que no tuviera importancia aparte de lo que podía dar de mí misma. Descubrí que fallaba y me sentí impotente. Me llevó mucho tiempo ver que las mujeres carecían de poder dentro de la iglesia como persona importante aunque sea como un encarnacional sujeto femenino divino. De modo que voy a narrar la historia de mi viaje basado en mis experiencias dentro de la Iglesia y cómo me llevó a la educación institucional. Aquí, intentaré mostrar el valor sumado de los dos de una manera influyente y erudita en relación con el arte y el lenguaje de la teología feminista de la liberación que va desarrollándose continuamente y que nació de la historia de mi narración del cuerpo. En este viaje continuo de revelaciones sigo descubriendo el lenguaje y lo que significa en una vida encarnada como mujer en un mundo teológico.