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Stories from a Chair: A Life Exquisite

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STORIES FROM A CHAIR: A LIFE EXQUISITE

by

JESSICA ELAINE BLINKHORN

Under the Direction of Pam Longobardi

ABSTRACT

Exquisite is defined as carefully selected or sought out. I believe myself to be a selected soul placed in a body of circumstance. My work is self-explorative and telling of those circumstances in hopes of evoking empathy. Our bodies function and exist on many different levels. What I understand as normal for most differs vastly from what is normal for me. I aim to offer my perspective on the world, establish understanding, and blur the lines of normalcy.

Index Words: Jessica Elaine Blinkhorn, Graduate thesis, Drawing, Small scale, Graphite, Figurative, Creative writing, Performance art, Disability, Muscular Dystrophy, Spinal Muscular Atrophy

STORIES FROM A CHAIR: A LIFE EXQUISITE

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JESSICA ELAINE BLINKHORN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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Jessica Elaine Blinkhorn

2010

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

I did not choose what state my body would be born into this life, but you had a choice on raising me. Momma, Daddy, as a child you gave me hope, love, and will. You were there for every tear cried when the other kids laughed at me, every hospital visit, and every new wheelchair fitting. You stood up for my rights and the rights of Erica and J.B. when the powers that be said we were "special;" it was the both of you who made sure we knew special meant strong. The person and artist I have become are due to the strength and infallible belief of you both and I love you.

Alex, you brought my heart to life when I was certain that unconditional love did not move past the embrace of family. Because of you, I now know what it means to be accepted for all that you are. I love you.

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INTRODUCTION

I could begin this story using big words and art jargon pandering to others without focusing on my truths. My work is my truth. My drawings are vignettes that tell of a life not perfect, not pretty, not normal, but working within its means to come pretty damn close. My stories are performances voicing my thoughts, my circumstances, my world, and the many characters I play.

I did not ask for this life. I did not ask to die quickly and more noticeably than the average American female. I did not ask to be two-hundred and forty-eight pounds of pure piss and vinegar with a shit-eating grin and a mouth that could make a sailor blush. I did not ask for a sister who is beautifully bound the same as I but afraid to live and accept her difference. I did not ask for a brother who would be my best friend and rolling partner in crime only to watch him rot away because he, like my sister and I, lacked the SMN1 protein. I did not ask for a family who knew nothing of its default, its lack of perfection, and its hidden truth. I did not ask for this role and, at times, do resent my family, my society, and my God for a life where I have a false sense of control. But at least I have something grounding me to reality, something to say, a truth to be told, and a story to tell.

I never found my story or my life interesting and, for the most part, felt embarrassed, afraid, and hidden to the world. I always tried to be outrageous in my actions and abrasively comical with my words to make up for my physical shortcomings in hopes of achieving friends and normalcy. In secrecy, I hated myself, my life, my God.

I could not understand why I thought so creatively and wanted to achieve so much but was given an insufficient body. I had always drawn as a way to understand the world of “whys” that made up my existence and prayed for answers to come. They never did. So, I let go of trying to figure out my life and began recreating it.

My hands, in the beginning, had remained untouched by disease and were very much capable of drawing different existences. I would transcend. I began concentrating on portraiture. Through the visages of others, I would transport myself into them making their face the medium for my spirit. I always tried to find similarities between the model and me. It made me feel closer to them and, most importantly, closer to their being. Yet, even with their faces as my voice and existence, I continued to remain hidden and caged.

I began to cover the drawings of the model's faces with wet media and could not understand why. Initially when asked about the mixed media overlay, I would say that the fluidity of the mark, the toxic and acidic colors chosen, and the randomness of its pathways were symbolic of the lack of control I felt. I now feel my explanation was a lie and these "out of control" marks were arbitrary. The truth is I was covering myself. It was not until graduate school when I began researching contemporary artists and experimenting that I was able to come to grips with myself and speak with words and images unedited.

Chapter One: Fall 2007 – Summer 2008

My first semester of graduate school began with a dive into what I felt was the deep end of the creative pool. I had decided to take a chance with abstract expressionism, using artists like Jackson Pollack as inspiration. I began to utilize my wheelchair as a tool for mark making. I expected the outcome would be either successful or tragic. Needless to say, my first graduate critique's work was poorly executed and illogical. I had taken the dive into unknown waters and was beginning to drown. I quickly resurfaced and made the decision to stick to what I know – drawing.

By my second critique, I had created five new pieces in the style of my earlier body of work as well as a video piece. However, there was one solid difference. I had interjected myself. I

spoke about relationships I had established with people and parts of myself. The works were still covered with these “out of control” marks but I had begun the unveiling of me.

In combination with my seminar class, I took contemporary art history. I knew very little of contemporary art beyond abstract expressionism with the exception of Andy Warhol and Jean Michel Basquiat. There was a whole world of creative thought and process that intrigued me; I began to research and yearned to find artists who spoke in my same vernacular. I sought out my kindreds. Almost immediately, I found my first connection with the American artist Hannah Wilke.

Hannah Wilke was born in New York in 1940. Predominantly a sculptor, Wilke was also known for drawing, video, and performance art (Visual Artists and Galleries Association). She spent much of her earlier years making a satire out of the American cultural values of feminine beauty and fashion, going so far as to only hire male photographers with the knowledge that they would focus only on her body, not her feet, hands, or face (Toepfer 82). At first, I found Wilke’s concepts hurtful and hypocritical. Who was she to spoof beauty? She had no idea what it was like to be in a body deemed undesirable. Who was she to believe that merely putting on a costume or enacting a situation of another individual would permit her to speak in the language of the objectionable? My opinions quickly changed after seeing her *Intra-Venus* series.

Wilke passed away from lymphoma in 1993. Prior to her death, she began her *Intra-Venus* series (Tierney 44). The series was shot by husband Donald Goddard and emulates her photo series *Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother, Selma Butter*, which depicted her mother's struggles with cancer (Wacks 104). Wilke felt that clinical procedures hid patients as if dying were a "personal shame", and, in this series, took a stance against that idea. Wilke’s photographs were documentation of her body’s attrition. I believe she wanted women, doctors, and society as a whole to acknowledge and embrace the inevitable. Her ability to show her own circumstantial vulnerability made me want to concede to mine.

The passion of fearlessness ignited by Wilke was tested during my second semester of graduate school. I was taking seminar under Craig Dongoski, whose direction lead to the process of art-making and not the product. Dongoski gave several assignments meant to reprogram the artist's mind, transcending them into another level of thought. I took advantage of his recommended self-exploration and artist suggestions, which lead me down the path of self-acknowledgement.

Bob Flannagan was one artist mentioned to me by Dongoski. He said there were similarities between Flannagan and me, and he thought looking into his body of work would help me with mine. What were the similarities? Bob Flannagan had been a performance artist, video artist, installation artist, poet, and writer living with a terminal illness one that caused physical pain, deformity, constant medical necessity, and anger (Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flannagan, Supermasochist, Dick, 1997). But there were differences as well. Flannagan wrote and spoke about his life, the pain he endured, lifestyle choices he made, and had made peace with his own truths. Through his work, he was free.

Throughout the semester I was deliberate, unapologetic, and displayed a certain amount of vulnerability in my work. I went out into public taking photographs of my interactions with people, documented myself playing in spaces, created sound pieces that symbolized an ending either of my own or of another's, and lastly, I said goodbye to my embarrassment on the day of final critique by allowing other's to see my form in all its imperfection lying on the floor. The feeling of helplessness and sovereignty enveloped me and my need to apologize for my existence in a crude shell had left. Like Flannagan, I had made my peace with the uncontrollable circumstances that inhabit my life and discovered freedom in the helplessness of imperfection.

For the duration of the summer following my first year of graduate school, I continued to push myself out of my comfort zone by picking up where my final critique left off. I had decided to

disregard the production of art and work from the perspective of the process of art-making. Two days a week, I ventured across campus with my assistant, Alex, and my Hoyer lift, a device used for transferring me from my wheelchair. Once I entered my studio, a five foot by five foot sheet of canvas was adhered to the floor, my extenders, paint brushes, and black acrylic paint were laid out, and I was put in my lift and lowered to the floor where I began mark-making. The intent behind the mark-making was to explore my range of motion when placed in both a susceptible and increasingly painful position as well as to document, through photographs, the process of transferring and art-making outside of the wheelchair. By the end of summer, I had reenacted my process in a public venue, produced several photographs, and created three five by seven inch self-portraits from the mark-making process. However, all that I had accomplished during the summer of 2008 seemed bitter-sweet.

On July 5th, 2008, my family and I suffered a tragedy. My younger brother, Gerald Blinkhorn III, J.B., passed away from complications due to Spinal Muscular Atrophy. The loss of my brother changed me in ways that are almost impossible to describe. I had lost several friends from Muscular Dystrophy and for some time, I thought of myself as insensitive from having been so unfazed by the loss of many. I had never invested much thought into my own death from SMA, and had allowed my anger, my resentment, and my questions to remain buried. In facing the death of my only brother, I was forced to acknowledge the certainty of witnessing the deterioration of my older sister, Erica, and the deterioration of myself.

Chapter Two: Fall 2008 – Summer 2009

After the death of my brother, I slipped into a profound depression and began my second year in graduate school lacking focus, lost in thought, and buried beneath vague purpose as to what my work should express. My life and world had changed in the most unwelcomed of ways.

Most of fall semester had been spent drawing Egon Shiele like images of my brother, reflecting on how emaciated and deformed his body looked at the end, and making plaster gauze hands modeled after my own. I was quietly existing, but it is always quite before the storm.

Through the break between fall and spring semester, I moved into my own apartment. For the first time, I was alone. I spent much of winter break crying over the death of my brother, wishing I could speak to my brother, and wanting my brother back. I hid away like an incestual family secret, not wanting anyone to acknowledge me but desperately needing someone to save me from myself. It was then that I began writing about my life, acknowledging my truths, and was able to establish a link between last year's work and the work of fall semester.

I recognized that the hands and drawings of my brother were symbolic of my vulnerability and records of my reality. In acknowledging this, I knew I was able to offer life from another vantage point. Through the drawings I create, the words I write, and the thoughts and truths I voice, I could educate the passerby, the classmate, the artist, the critic, the curious child, the embarrassed parent, and the world by being honest with myself, unapologetic as to who I know myself to be, and unafraid of the judgments I might face.

My Manifesto was the first of my writings. Having been told before that my writings were good, I remained humble. I was not a writer - that had always been my sister's niche. I admit, never would I have thought of pairing writing and performance; to me, that was acting. I consider myself a visual artist. After having read a small amount to my professor, Pam Longobardi, and my constituents in the graduate program, I was encouraged to continue writing. It was also during this time that Dongoski introduced me to Steven "Jesse" Bernstein, who he felt encompassed the same amount of validity, abrasiveness, and honesty in his work that I try to administer in mine.

Steven "Jesse" Bernstein was born in December 1950 as Steven Jay Bernstein. He was an American underground poet, performance artist, and punk rocker. Bernstein is known for

recording with Sub Pop Records and his close relationship with William S. Burroughs (Alden and Bernstein XVII). Bernstein suffered from substance abuse and mental illness. His outrageous antics and drug and alcohol use made him a confrontational local celebrity and ultimately led to his death from a self-inflicted wound to the neck at age forty (Larkin). We share insanity and depression, but it was not until I began reading his poetry that I found the most evident of commonalities.

Face was written by Steven "Jesse" Bernstein in 1985. While reading *Face*, I noted his use of language; every word chosen painted a mental picture and, for a moment, it was as if I were a person involved in the story, not a spectator. The following excerpt is the most notable to me and better exemplifies audience interjection I try establishing in my work:

> *"In the fifth grade, I proposed to a girl named Denise Johnson, out on the lunch court. White blobs of seagull and pigeon shit rained from the sky. Denise said she wanted me to propose properly, between the gym and the cafeteria, after school. I combed my regular boy's, and wiped my modern glasses. At ten after three, I met Denise between the two buildings. I was shivering and my mouth was dry and tasted horrible. I got down on my knees on the shit-splotched blacktop in front of Ms. Johnson. My mouth was just level with her groin. I looked up at her pretty brown face and long, strait, black hair. She looked down at my damp cheeks and smiled benignly. "Denise, you are the prettiest, smartest girl in the whole school. Will you marry me?" My insides chattered against each other as I spoke the words. My face was livid and silly. I could feel my eyeballs bulging in their bone sockets, my knees ached. "Ha ha ha ha ha! You're too ugly! You look like you've been whooped with an ugly stick! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Her face had changed to a contemptuous snarl. Misty lavender donuts of shame appeared in front of my eyes. Suddenly a mob of*

snickering boys and girls jumped out from around the back corner of the cafeteria. They surrounded us, laughing and jeering. I stood up, wobbling, a lump in my throat, my asshole pinched tight. Denise joined the circle of snapping cruel children. She stood next to Rudy Stoltz, the handsomest most popular boy in the school. They held hands. "Fuck you, Jew-ass Bern-butt!," said Rudy. I put my huge, clumsy hands over my face. A cantaloupe skin hit me in the ear. I could hear the kids wandering away, giggling and guffawing. When I took my hands away from my face, I was alone. There was a thin white and green drool of seagull shit on my tan jacket. I walked home through a network of alleys." (Bernstein and Talbot)

Much like Bernstein, I approach personal narratives truthfully. I try to implement descriptive language which allows the wall dividing the audience and the artist to crumble but am removing the wall brick by brick, only letting the audience in inch by inch. Still, my aim is a Bernstein-like one hit demolition. He spoke and wrote unabashed. Bernstein was abrasive, drunk, on drugs, and unattractive, but he was who he was. In hearing his recordings and reading his works, I found in him exactly what I found in Flannagan – acceptance of self and independence from the lashing of idiotic tongues and gawking of blind eyes. By the end of spring semester, I had found my place in a writer's world where the book could be self-illustrated. Meaning, I was writing about what I know and drawing images from my world.

I continued through the summer to write of my experiences. Be they serious, disturbing, and/or sexual; I photographically documented my everyday routine – a life from the perspective of an artist living with a disability. From the photographs, I created drawings on a small scale using my techniques. Lastly, I looked for continuity in my work with the artist I had come to know and love.

Chapter Three: 2009 – Present

I began my third year of graduate school reflecting over the previous two years and asking myself a series of questions. The first of which being, what artists were truly influencing my body of work? And, how are they influencing my body of work?

Hannah Wilke and Bob Flannagan were my first exposures to artists documenting a ruthlessly unwarranted and irrepressible reality. I and Flannagan were born into our situations whereas Wilke was thrown into hers. Graciously accepting her fate, she fashioned a body of beautiful and telling images that spoke of her own decay. While Bob Flannagan did the same as Wilke in so far as to document the process of dying, he did so through film and written performances. In opposition to Wilke, Flannagan's work was not beautiful in its honesty, but rather, it was an honest monstrosity. Furthermore, the brutal and disturbing honesty and unapologetic nature displayed in Flannagan's writing can also be found in the writing of Steven "Jesse" Bernstein.

I believe aspects of Wilke, Flannagan, and Bernstein can be seen in several of the many layers my current body of work, *Stories from a Chair: a Life Exquisite*. I use a great deal of documentation in my work, photographing activities such as, showering, dressing, bath rooming, wiping of the female genitalia, and the process of a non-ambulatory transfer. In these photographs, I am allowing my physical imperfections and dependence on others to be seen. No longer ashamed by the uncontrollable, the photographs service as a visual reference when words fail to engage and properly educate the audience. By allowing these photographs to be seen, I am moreover disregarding the ideal female form, questioning normalcy, and, like Wilke, showing beauty in the breakdown of one's own form. I am still paying my respects to both Flannagan and Bernstein by voicing my frustrations and thoughts, abrasive as they may be. While Wilke,

Flannagan, and Bernstein are predominately seen within the documentation, performance, and literary facets of my current work, there are others with whom I share the compositional and the technical.

As previously stated, my drawings are small visual documentations rendered true to life through graphite on a drawing surface, typically illustration board. They are additive and subtractive building layers to create depth and texture. The scenes, scenarios, objects, forms, and use of surrogates stem from my life. For instance, *Grasp* (see fig. 3.1), is a graphite drawing with micron pen detail rendered true to life on a five by seven inch scale. It is a depiction of me at age three walking. From a birds-eye view, the viewer sees a small child grasping the edge of a door she is about to walk through. *Grasp's* sibling piece is *Tumbled Present* (see fig. 3.2). Rendered in the same fashion as *Grasp, Tumbled Present* is an image of my form in its current state. Bottom left justified, the form consists only of the head, shoulders, and back in chiaroscuro. The foreground image dissipates into the background formulating the edge of three cement stairs. *Grasp* is a scene or memory from my childhood. When walking down the three cement stairs that led to the family den, my legs gave way causing me to tumble; it is the first recognition I have of loosing the ability to walk. This, in turn, lead to the scenario presented in *Tumbled Present* where my form now resides in its current state of physical dependency and the stairs function as objects symbolizing inability and acknowledgment of disability and identity. Additionally, in my work, I draw comparisons to the work of Jenny Saville, by finding appreciation and aesthetic value in figures deemed undesirable and giving them social relevance.

Jenny Saville was born in Cambridge, England, 1970 (Gagosian Gallery). An English painter and a leading Young British Artist, Saville is widely known for her epic images of woman (**Metro Art Work**). She is a traditional figurative oil painter whose technique is reminiscent of

Lucian Freud and subject matter blurs the lines of social normalcy (Gagosian Gallery). Saville's subjects have consisted of transsexuals, transvestites, the grotesquely obese, and the nude female form. Although Saville's work is traditional figurative oil painting on a larger than life scale, I feel my work parallels her work in figure selection, technique, and social commentary (**Metro Art Work**).

The images I create, in contrast to Saville, are small scale and drawn in graphite. However, my layering technique with additive and subtractive drawing gives my work a luscious quality similar to Saville's painterly practice. The form used in my work is my own form - that of an obese, physically deformed, and surgically scarred female – a form not often thought of as appealing but interesting and in need of being acknowledged and understood. Saville's figure selection gives way to subject matter and induces social commentary. Both Saville and I are taking a figure typically not seen as beautiful, normal, and/or regarded but grotesque, abnormal, and/or disregarded and putting them on public display. In *Branded, Self-portrait* (see fig. 3.3), Saville is depicted in an almost fish-eye perspective where the focal point is the fat surrounding her abdomen as she clutches it with much condescension. She is grabbing at the surface and acknowledging the superficial imperfection and asked the audience to do the same. In comparison to my piece, *Past Recollection* (see fig. 3.4), I, too, have put myself on display. Positioned in the foreground, I am the focal point of the viewer and own my own deficiency. Through our expressions, we convey thought and cause the audience to question what we are thinking. Our forms bring acknowledgement of social superficialities. Another artist whose work I can draw a similar comparison to is Gottfried Helnwein.

Gottfried Helnwein was born in Vienna, October of 1948 (Maher). An Australian-irish painter, photographer, installation, and performance artist, Heinwein is concerned with

psychological and sociological anxiety, historical issues, and political topics (Saatchi Gallery). I find myself rooted with Helnwein's psychological anxiety. Like Helnwein, psychological anxiety can be revealed in the composition, the environment of the composition, and the roles the characters play in the composition. An amount of sterility is seen through the handling of medium and how the focal point developed in the composition.

When referring back to *Grasp* (see fig. 3.1), and balancing it against *The Song I* (see fig. 3.5), notable similarities are the use of lighting and form in a barren environment demonstrate psychological anxiety. In *The Song I*, a child wearing only a shirt and underwear stands in a corner facing out with the mouth gaping and the gender unknown. The title, *The Song I* (see fig. 3.5), alludes to a child singing; however, the expression on the child's face is that of a scream. Furthermore, the use of chiaroscuro adds a tinge of dramatics that play on one's psyche. This too can be seen in *Grasp* (see fig. 3.1).

In my piece, *Grasp* (see fig. 1), I am the child depicted and I am female, though the viewer would be unable to tell. I do not hint at gender in either the form or title. The child is lit dramatically and approaching the viewer with a look that is both inquisitive and maniacal. Like what is being vocalized in *The Song I* is (see fig. 5) unknown, the same can be said for what action, if any, is about to take place in *Grasp* (see fig. 1). While my concept is vastly different from Helnwein's as I am not indicating punishment, or fear to a certain extent, a sense of wickedness illuminates both works. Yet, even as psychological anxiety plays out in several of my pieces, it is one chair of the many that I have sat in.

Chapter Four: A Life Exquisite

Originally, I denied myself the chance to accept my obesity, my insanity, my dependency, my bad thoughts, my resentment, and my disability. I overshadowed acceptance with tears,

avoidances, and blame. I cried because my situation was unfair. I avoided seeing myself for whom and what I am. I blamed my family, my society, and my God for the above mentioned atrocities. Within the past two years, my work has been building toward a greater understanding, and appreciation of my life as well as the evocation of social empathy.

In documenting my life and how I exist in this world, I found artists Hannah Wilke and Bob Flannagan who accepted their situations and found their own piece of exquisite life. Steven "Jesse" Bernstein voiced his thoughts disregarding the psychotic nature innately contained within them and allowed other's to hear, despite the primary reaction to the unmentionables. He spoke of his exquisite. The body is beautiful and varying. Variation is deviation from what is normal, but we all exist in a world where nothing is normal but subjective. Our bodies are art, and art is subjective - valued by some and devalued by others. Jenny Saville reveals the exquisite in the subjective, and I became my own subject subsisting in the many layers; I am defined. Nonetheless, answers are not always easily given, the picture is not always easily seen, and further investigation is required by the skeptic who picks away at the surface to the depths of truth calling to mind their own turmoil. The song they hear rides on harsh and out of key vocals sung by a mad man who delivers despair, but gives you your truth. Helnwein opens the door to a stark white room with a singular image leaving plenty of room to unveil your exquisite.

I have found my 'exquisite' in stories from a chair. What oftentimes feels like a burden is the very object that grounds me to reality. I am not perfect and will never be, but I no longer yearn for perfection as I once did. I am defined by the throne I keep and revel in the scenarios it ignites. My folded, out of kilter, and meaty structure coated with symbolism, memory, and scars creates wonderment and when drawn, allows lights and darks to skip across the surface or hide in the caverns – I am interestingly imperfect but exquisite nonetheless. I was born with a secret. For

nineteen months the secret remained undiscovered. After nineteen months a tragedy was uncovered and the truth was out – my life is exquisite. From this exquisiteness, acknowledgement and acceptance were earned. I have the proof in pictures and writing. I believe the world should see.

Figure 3.1, Jessica Elaine Blinkhorn, Grasp, 2008

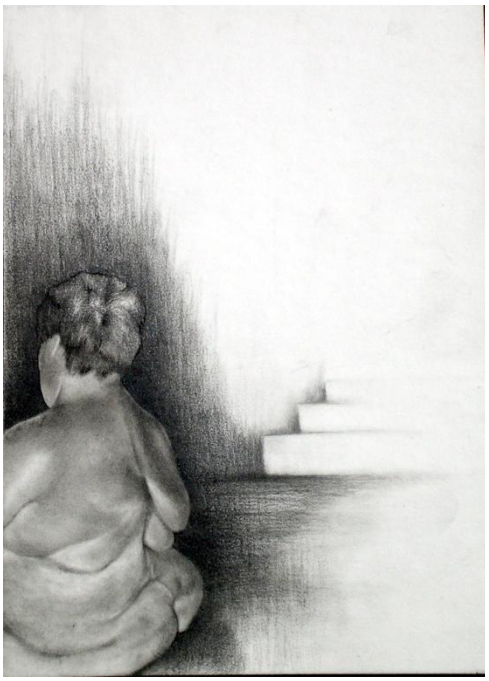

Figure 3.2, Jessica Elaine Blinkhorn, Tumbled Present, 2008

Figure 3.3, Jenny Saville, Branded, Self-portrait, 1992.

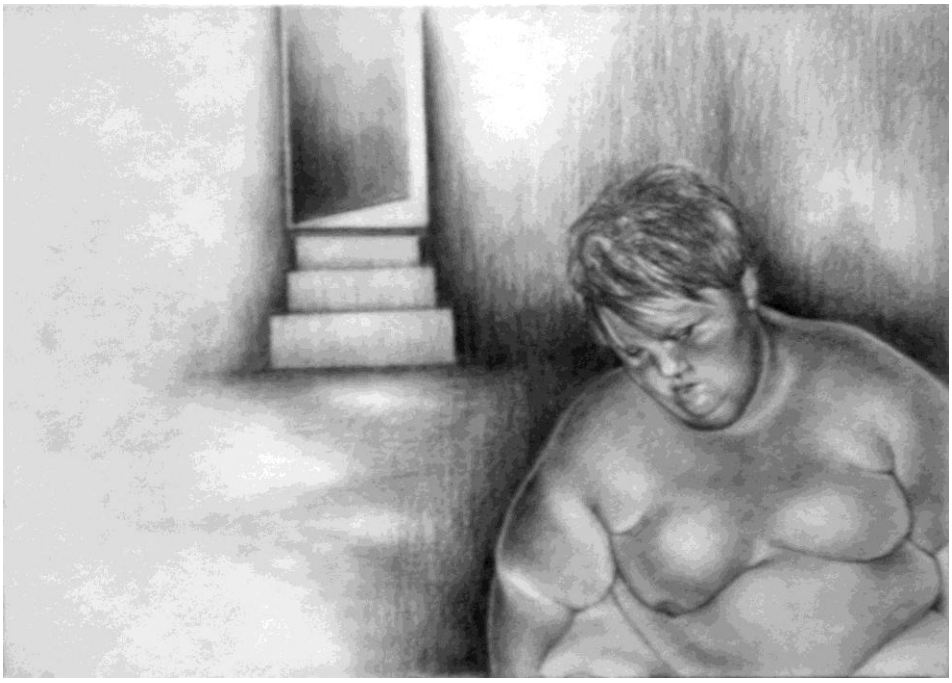

Figure 3.4, Jessica Elaine Blinkhorn, Past Recollection, 2008

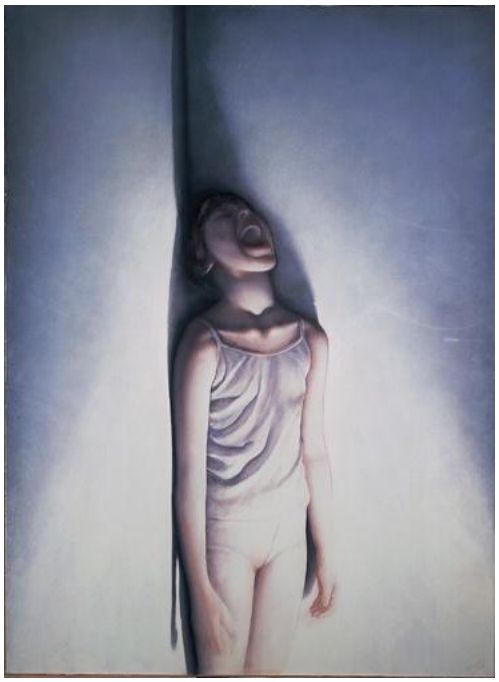

Figure 3.5, Gottfried Helnwein, The Song I, 1981

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