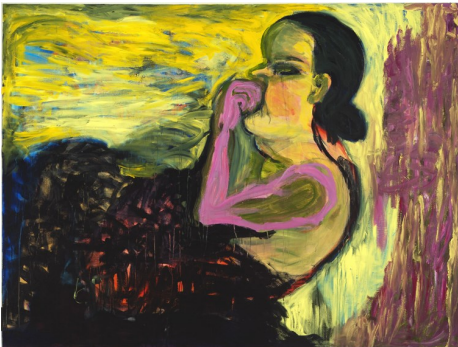


Green Desire, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
48" x 36"



Primal, 2011
Acrylic on canvas



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This publication accompanies the exhibition *Embodied*, presented at the Estevan Art Gallery & Museum, from March 14th –April 25th, 2014.

List of works

- Bond*, 2011, acrylic on canvas
- Fairytale*, 2013, acrylic on canvas
- Green Desire*, 2011, acrylic on canvas
- Ingrained*, 2011, acrylic on canvas
- Layers*, 2012, acrylic on canvas
- Manwoman*, 2013-14, acrylic on canvas
- Mother*, 2011-12, acrylic on canvas
- Primal*, 2011, acrylic on canvas
- Priorities: Cycle of Fragility*, 2012, acrylic on canvas
- Priorities: Vanity and Bodily Preservation*, 2012, acrylic on canvas
- Priorities: Vulnerability and Fear of Dissolution*, 2012, acrylic on canvas
- The Weight of Responsibility*, 2011, oil on canvas

Director: Amber Andersen
 Curator: Alex King
 Educator: Karly Garnier
 Essay and design: Alex King

Cover: *Priorities: Vanity and Bodily Preservation*, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 54", 2012
 All images courtesy of the artist.

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Leesa Streifler
 March 14th –April 25th, 2014



EMBODIED: LEESA STREIFLER

By Alex King

It is fitting that Leesa Streifler's work finds a home amongst the sensibilities of Expressionist and Neo-Expressionist practitioners. During the years she lived in New York (1980–86), she attended Hunter College, and found herself influenced by the city's gallery walls: the work of Willem de Kooning and Helen Frankenthaler; the contemporary makings of Julian Schnabel and Susan Rothenberg. From an intuitive basis, Expressionism inscribes in the very act of painting and mark-making the translation of feeling onto canvas. It is a soulful, raw and rough art practice that asserts honesty. It ensures the relationship between the material qualities of the painting and the expression of emotion is a close one.

Streifler's combination of representation and performativity results in paintings that have the power to resonate deeply with a viewer. It would be essentialist to claim a collective female experience, given the variety of factors that form our understanding of and treatment in the world. But in her work is the hope to articulate "some insight into human relationships, especially those which are heavily charged with history and emotion" (Streifler 2013).

To discuss Streifler's practice it is necessary to consider her activity on and off the canvas. Preceding those affecting New York days, her interest in the human form was established during the hours she spent as a child in her uncle's photography studio. Her work has since remained curious about female bodies. She is empathetic with the norm-defying frames she identifies with herself, a result of her own body-conscious experiences. If Expressionism lays an artist bare, it is apt that Streifler uses the language of bodies – the site of her own personal anxieties.

Bodies and bodily motifs proliferate her canvases, referring to and reworking a number of encounters experienced by both the artist and her observations of others. The psychological nature of Streifler's work and its examination of the more recessed aspects of experience are recurring themes. Often, her figures' skins seem to creep with discomfort, as psychological and physical concerns endlessly knit together. Hands, eyes, lips and mouths reappear in fragments; bodily sites where sensations are felt and emotions expressed.

The woman in *Primal* (2011) cuts a disturbing figure amidst a background of oppressive painterly strokes. As she cannibalises her own balled fist, her lower body is consumed by a blanket. The image speaks of tension inherent in the primal, our most base impulses. Those desires are just that, primary, the things to which we can be reduced, but they must be tempered with control lest they lead to self-destruction. It is also the hand-to-mouth gesture and its many cultural and physical iterations that Streifler references here. She connects the stuffing of the hand in a

drooling mouth to (a later) performance by Lee Su-Feh; reminiscent of both a violent sexual gesture and of savouring flavor, a disturbing performance of primal consumption. The action also relates to the shock of a dramatic moment, to eating and bingeing and fingernail-chewing; a strange and desperate action to somehow feed the soul. In this painting, such a gesture is fraught with anxiety, highlighting the tension inherent in trying to control the impulsive. The figure's sleek, pulled-back hair, a signifier of feminine control, is an incongruous, static emblem in the turbulence.

The twisted and conjoined bodies in *Green Desire* delve into more sexual tensions. Similar vulval views have appeared in painting, notably in Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866). Courbet's beautiful, but objectivizing, eroticism has proved subvertive fodder for subsequent feminist artists, who have woven their own narratives into depictions of the spread-eagled woman¹. In Streifler's re-appropriation, desire exists, but it is frustrated. A male figure in the background seems only intangibly present, and the sickly green denotes a coolness at odds with a fulfilling erotic experience. This is not sensuality, but a lonely sexuality that mourns the loss of a deeply desired experience.

Body and mind appear on the same plane in works such as *The Weight of Responsibility and Ingrained* (both 2011). In the former, Streifler employs a visual pun that is anything but lighthearted. Pressing down on the central figure's broad shoulders are unrelenting weights, and her brow is heavily furrowed with thick purple brushmarks. This body is a resilient site able to endure mental and physical toil, but a stormcloud-like heart and the suggestion of blood trickles (or tears) indicates strain. *Ingrained's* nightmarish fragmentation is suggestive of memory and dream. The fleshy body on the right, occupied by a childlike face, is dissected by a pointed finger. The blackened figure that points and leers out of the frame is an older woman in negative, returning to Streifler's long-time interest in photography.

However, there are moments of calm amongst the disquiet, as well as shifts in tone. The glowing *Mother* (2011-12) returns to the maternal theme that has appeared in Streifler's work. Here, the central figure looms solid and large, powerfully protective of her young son. In *Bond* (2011), a gentle moment between woman and beast is depicted, reminiscent of Streifler's previous self-portraits as animals.

Much historical portraiture of women positions men as watchers and women as the watched. Representations of the self allow for the subject to control the way they're represented, and thus are important tools in the feminist artist's kit. In Streifler's work, the effects of the male gaze are sometimes present, creeping under her figures' skins, distorting their own views of themselves and generating discomfort. They offer a reminder of how, too often, we see ourselves in relation to others, how the insidiousness of the male gaze informs our relationship to visual culture at large.

Amidst the celebrations of female experience contemporary feminism applauds, Streifler's more sombre paintings set a different tone. Her previous work employed a wry sense of humour, with painted-over photographs paired with texts². Layers of white correction fluid and Sharpie'd anatomical manipulations were scrawled with phrases like: *I am a fat woman, get used to it*. Wretched caricatures, this time victims of Streifler's slimming pen, add: *If I had the energy I'd try to seduce you* and *Am I thin enough now?* Of these works' display at the 1997 exhibition *Normal* at the Dunlop Art Gallery, curator Vera Lemecha wrote: "Streifler's unruly women play at, deny, curse, mock and laugh at the feminine as a rigid construct, as normal" (Lemecha 1998). The works from this period are characterized by a tone of defiance and sass.

The experiences in *Embodied* are not viewed through rose-tinted lenses, nor do they ridicule patriarchy. They exist during a period where the consciousness-raising of feminism is a timely reminder that patriarchy *still* affects us, and still marginalizes many female bodies. It is a consciousness that motivates action and rebellion, but within it are the experiences of the individual; the effects of such a world on the psyche. That is not to say these paintings forgo a sense of empowerment. In expressing these feelings to canvas, Streifler notes, she experiences a feeling of catharsis (Streifler, interview). And in exploring what it means to inhabit a female body, viewers have described a sense of identification and the comfort of shared experience. By translating the relationship between the body, looking at oneself and being looked at, Streifler's work provides a touchstone for its viewers, giving the darker, solitary moments of female experience a louder voice.

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¹ For example, in the work of Jenny Saville and Tracy Emin.

² From the *Adaptations* and *Giants* series (1997)