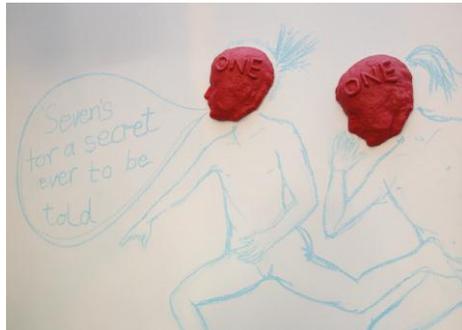


# Speaking Out: Women Healing from the Trauma of Violence

Nicole Fayard

'If we can bring in women's history, we can bring in women's future.'  
Judy Chicago, 1976.

Historian Joan Wallach Scott remarks in *Gender and the Politics of History* that our experience and understanding of 'reality' are mediated by multiple systems of interpretation. As a consequence of their marginalisation, women's diverse experiences of the world were until fairly recently conveyed via male viewpoints, and it is fair to say that these would not necessarily reflect women's sense of self. The women who had the immense courage to step out of the shadow of male artistic dominance proposed alternative explorations of



Annie Tappenden  
*Details – Seven is for a Secret*  
Plaster, paint and chalk

themes, media, colours and themes to challenge the objectification of women. Female artists have spoken out by blurring boundaries, forcing viewers and critics to challenge their expectations about gender identity and experiences. One primary example of the problematic definition of women through art is the representation of violence against women. Thanks to feminist mobilisations in the 1970s identifying rape and domestic violence as forms of social and political control used to keep women in a state of fear and dominate them, portrayals of violence against women in visual culture from high art to popular culture alike have changed radically over the years. Female artists in particular have mobilised to produce a dialogue between the portrayal of violence by the men of the past, and the critical re-evaluations of today.

Today in the UK, it is estimated that one in four young adults were seriously abused as children. There is an estimated 473,000 adults being victims of sexual offences (approximately 404,000 females and 72,000 males) on average per year. It is however estimated that only 0.5 per cent of females and 0.1% of males report being a victim of the most serious assaults. In the US, 83% of women disabled since childhood have been the victims of sexual assault, with half experiencing ten or more incidents. In one study, 40% of physically disabled women were estimated as having been sexually assaulted. Patients with a psychiatric illness are also twice as likely to be victims of sexual assault as in the general population, with 45% of female psychiatric outpatients reporting having been sexually abused during childhood.



Jenny Meehan,  
*Woman and Home*,  
Digital print

Therefore to produce *Speaking Out* seventeen modern-day visual and creative artists have created a diverse body of work that includes painting, watercolour, photography, sculpture, print, digital art, poetry, music, ceramics, multimedia and textile installations as well as performance art and creative writing. Each piece in the exhibition is premised on women gaining agency by transcending their silencing in ways that do not aim to victimise, blame or

hit back. By shifting the focus from the binaries that codify women and the vulnerable as victims and men as aggressors, the exhibition moves us away from representations of survivors of violence as eternal victims. In this process the survivor becomes the author and arbiter of her own recovery. *Speaking Out*, therefore, is about survivors shifting from serving as the objects of voyeuristic discourse to gaining agency and voicing their new autonomous selves.



Linda Shelton,  
*Don't hear. Don't see, Don't speak.*  
Video installation

The exhibition seeks to locate the specific ways in which art and the material image enable particular forms of agency in relation to traumas resulting from gender violence. This has nothing to do with a so-called power held by images, as though art

or images were active agents outside of their historical contexts of production and reception. Rather, the agency of the work of art is located within its ability to participate in the transformation of the historical world within the context of bearing witness. The act of bearing witness depends on the ability of the survivor-witness to find a listener when no one existed before. Being able to engage and establish a relationship with another has



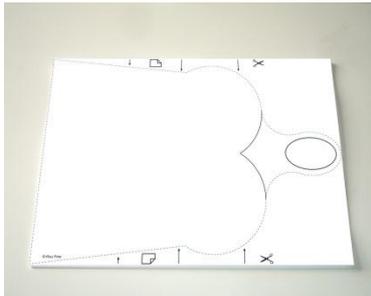
crucial consequences: it grounds the survivor's discourse within reality. It also restores the survivor's agency.

The artists explore themes ranging from beauty and glamour, gender identities, the female body and female roles, mother-daughter relationships, violence against Asian and ethnic minority women, mental illness as well as the sexual exploitation of women. As such their work is inscribed within contemporary representations of gender violence. In their challenge to traditional myths about gender violence, their particular focus on personal experiences of violence must however, be noted. They draw attention to the intimate relationship between victim and aggressor that is usually the pre-requisite for gender violence to occur: inside the home, between friends or family members, within institutions charged with a duty of care. For the most part, domestic and sexual violence occur within the home and behind closed doors, with perpetrators being well-known to the victim: close family members or friends, partners, carers, employer or pimp. This partly explains why, for many survivors, reporting is



Carole Cluer,  
Detail – *Unbroken*,  
Ceramic and kintsugi techniques

also a traumatic event. For many women and children, 'home' is a dangerous place. Much of the artwork in *Speaking Out* bears witness to this history by referring to the spaces where gender violence takes place. In their great majority the artists expose the reality of the domestic sphere as a space where domestic abuse is frequent but also displace the notion of responsibility and shame arising from violence away from the victim.



Klaus Pinter,  
Detail – *Project*,  
Paper print



The body plays a central role in the phenomenon of gender violence and subsequent efforts to overcome it. Trauma is capable of inflicting such devastation on the human body and psyche that it can cause total annihilation. Whether of a physical or psychological nature, it will leave marks, wounds and scars. The embodiment of trauma is also what leads the survivor to acknowledge trauma as, paradoxically, her body frequently provides a language which attempts to communicate the break-up of the self via a range

of medical complaints. In addition, the act of bearing witness to these wounds and to the survivor's ability to recover from them requires the presence of a body. For example, the law requires evidence for the survivor to be able to press charges. It also requires material evidence such as cuts, bruises, blood, images or witnesses. The survivor is also required to voice her testimony for it to be listened to and heard. Trauma therefore has to be physically embodied in order to be recognised – made collectively real. The artwork in *Speaking Out* explores the body of the survivor and the body as witness. In so doing, it also illustrates the tension between the corporeal inscription of the survivor-witness and the audience's role as spectator and socially responsible witness. The artists' recycling of culturally significant objects and body parts asks meaningful questions regarding the individual and social ownership of the female body and serves to critique the social and cultural control mechanisms that contribute to gender violence.



Kezia Merrick,  
Detail – *It's flesh can heal*,  
Photographic print

The sharing of the experience of trauma and the emphasis in the act of



Fi Oberon,  
*Triple Goddess*,  
Paper pulp scrimshaw

bearing witness in *Speaking Out* is also on repairing damage and providing alternative scripts for survivors. This is a strong artistic position to take as many of the artists and their subjects are able to propose transformative alternative scripts to help restore the survivor's sense of self. This suggests the recognition of women supporting other women and of potential alliances on the basis of shared abuse. The appeal to an imagined sisterhood signals both political engagement and solidarity, ultimately transforming the artworks into powerful political document.

In *Speaking Out*, artists propose a wide range of personal answers to the difficult question of confronting the trauma of gender violence. The significance of the work lies in its acknowledgement that instead of just accepting it, there is

now an *urgent* need to understand this violence from the perspective of the traumatised survivor for it to stop. The contributions of artists and viewers also mean that a multiplicity of connected bodies from the past and in the future will keep the memory and the act of witnessing alive. By enabling artists, survivors and viewers to speak out for social justice against gender violence, this artwork is therefore future-oriented and profoundly political in tone.