Wrest, 2009
Mixed media with pigeon feathers

‘Boundary Creatures’: Kate MccGwire and Soft Sculpture

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> ‘Once again we are in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down.
> DONNA J. HARAWAY (2008)[1]

Practising since the late 1990s, Kate MccGwire (b.1964) has become internationally recognised for her distinctive aesthetic formula, a convulsive sculptural mode of multiplicity and repetition as the basis for composition, texture, pattern and form. Her chief medium of feathers is underpinned by a reflexive nod to the flocking behaviour of her avian source material – namely twilight murmurations, that colossal flocking or directional swarming that tends to occur in certain bird species around dusk, as if choreographed. Given her barge-studio lifestyle and commitment to open-water swimming, MccGwire has also come to understand intimately the flow, currents, tides and dangers of water, further daily rhythms that have come to shape her sculptural output. Her resulting artworks are deliberately slippery and unclassifiable, fudging traditional artistic taxonomies.[2]

The grotesque and the uncanny have sustained a significant hold over MccGwire’s creative imagination, with interlocking thought-forms and otherworldly beings dominating her oeuvre. Critical readings of MccGwire’s work have tended to interpret such preoccupations as proof of her aesthetic allegiance to the curiosities revival, appealing to those interested in reactivating seventeenth-century historical artifice for contemporary purposes.[3] Yet, given her shrewd attention to material and process coupled with an underlying conceptualism and emphasis on abstraction, MccGwire is clearly cognisant of much more historically recent art practices, an awareness which shifts any sense of artistic legacy elsewhere. I want to unshackle MccGwire’s sculptures from existing critical limitations, towards a more liberated and revised understanding of how her work responds to a modernist aesthetic project, or, more specifically, how her work functions within a history of soft sculpture. To do this, I reposition key examples of MccGwire’s artworks through avant-garde abstraction, international surrealism, and American postminimalism. Indeed, I propose we may even understand such artistic movements and provocations better through study of Kate MccGwire.[4]

Art historian Frances S. Connelly is useful to call upon here for her acknowledgement of the grotesque as a disrupting force throughout western art history. In characterising the grotesque, Connelly highlights its feminine associations,[5] and dovetails the idea of a feminine grotesque with Donna Haraway’s 1985 notion of a ‘boundary creature’, ‘something that creates meaning by prying open a gap’.[6] Haraway and Connelly’s examples of boundary creatures are hybrid, mythological monsters and sci-fi specimens, such as the cyborg and the mermaid. In the domain of modernist art history, I propose that soft sculpture is another boundary creature, an unruly challenge to the existing order of things. MccGwire is likewise a maker of boundary creatures, those that dwell on the exquisite nature of deviancy, channelling a feminine grotesque through the lessons of counter-modernism.[7]

The epic, soft sculptural environments of Dorothea Tanning (1970–73) and Louise Bourgeois (1974), made in the second half of the twentieth century, immediately spring to mind for their revisions of modernist artmaking and as exemplars of the surrealist afterlife. MccGwire’s practice could also be said to inherit Lucy Lippard’s 1966 curatorial

term 'eccentric abstraction', making a direct challenge to the hard-edged, self-referential minimalism by placing a more bodily and organic emphasis on advanced sculptural possibilities. Such an aesthetic field surely provides fertile ground for MccGwire's oeuvre in its cultivation of marvellous and anachronistic phenomena such as the grotesque. Moreover, while 'soft' sculptural aesthetics are hardly the sole preserve of the feminine, it is undeniable that many of postminimalism's leading figures and contemporaries, such as Yayoi Kusama (b.1929), Eva Hesse (1936–70), Lynda Benglis (b.1941), Bourgeois (1911–2010) and Tanning (1910–2012) are women.[8] This soft sculptural sensibility might be expanded to include the earlier twentieth-century abstract figuration of Barbara Hepworth (1903–75),[9] the surrealist objects of Meret Oppenheim (1913–85), and the more recent installation art of Mona Hatoum (b.1952, fig. 1) and monumental animal casts of Berlinde De Bruyckere (b.1964), among others. An international feminist framework becomes apparent, one that offers much-needed precedents for MccGwire's generation.[10] Indeed, as Hatoum points out in an interview with fellow contemporary artist, Janine Antoni (b.1964): 'Hesse was very much a model figure for my generation of women artists. She was around when Minimalism was happening, but her work was so much more organic and to do with the body.'[11] This essay, therefore, seeks to recontextualise MccGwire's sculptural practice within a feminist, intergenerational lineage or 'spiral',[12] one that is capable of combining morphological inquiries with fantastical possibilities.

To understand the art history behind MccGwire's 'soft sculptures', we might begin with a consideration of her related media and object-making, her non-feathered sculptural output. *Brood* (2004, fig. 2) was an installation made on the occasion of MccGwire's degree show, and serves as a primary example of her use of accumulation. Comprising concentric circles of a staggering twenty-seven thousand wishbones, this ambitious artwork provided a crucial statement of intent for how she would proceed as an artist. The title has multiple meanings and is consistent with the analogies found in surrealist and postminimalist titling.[13] The wishbones themselves further hint at a poetics of magic and fulfilment; the sculpture is crammed with anticipation. The surprise choice of material continues the surrealist idea of the found object that might jolt the viewer out of a sense of the known reality of things when placed in an unexpected context. Meanwhile, the emphasis on seriality indicates a debt to mid-1960s' aesthetic thinking. Describing the appearance and materiality of postminimalism, Robert Pincus-Witten tells us that artists 'adopted a self-mocking stance… The limp, the pliable, the cheap were sought; the hard, the polished, the expensive became suspect. Unanticipated methods of seaming and joining were emphasized – sewing, lacing, grommeting.'[14] MccGwire has continued this pre-established practice of sourcing and collecting discarded materials, namely pigeon feathers from registered racers and fanciers from across the country, some of which bear inked serial numbers that would help return any lost birds, an aspect which MccGwire welcomed, and can be seen to follow Hesse's penchant for 'industrial' materials and found objects.

Fume (2007, fig. 3) offers another experimental use of process and materials in order to present a *mise en abyme* (a centre within a centre). Here, MccGwire has burned through the core of a hefty, leather-bound tome, conjuring a fluffy, layered series of forms that mimic a feathered nest or cavity. It is tempting to compare the artwork with Hesse's breast-like *Ringaround Aroise* (1965) and Tanning's cloth sculpture *Emma* (1970), the latter featuring a pregnant belly surrounded by an antique lace skirt.[15] Such protrusions and orifices are common features of soft sculpture, and it is often observed that there is a fertile and phallic bodily affect inherent to such objects, a playful anthropomorphism at one remove from the geometric purity of minimal aesthetics. Hepworth's many maternal sculptures in wood and marble pre-empt this 'soft', fleshy trope, with round bellies and oval forms often dominating her oeuvre (fig. 4). These sculptural inquiries reclaim the feminine bodily terrain, championing the erogenous zones and secretive spaces of the vulva, uterus and ovaries. In doing so, they often rethink gestation. However, as cultural theorist Mieke Bal reminds us, the navel provides a more gender-neutral metaphor, 'democratic in that both men and women have it'.[16] The loaded maternal organ of the placenta may also be useful to consider in this context, and its textures may feed into the next object I would like to touch upon.[17]

An emphasis on the ambivalent bodily object continues in MccGwire's *Pelt* (2015, p. xx), a tongue-like hanging sculpture in kid leather with a quill-lined core suspended on a gleaming hook. *Pelt* is a rebellious and 'disobedient object' which prises open art historical conventions and turns them inside out. Knowing the more iridescent wing of MccGwire's output, this monochromatic sculpture surprises for its more conceptual statement. It licks and mouths at aesthetic language. The effect is at once both sensual and forensic, brittle and skeletal. The sheer ambiguity of animal matter is closely connected to the skins and carcasses of MccGwire's direct contemporary, De Bruyckere, especially works such as *It Almost Seemed a Lily IV* (2018). Moreover, *Pelt* presents the inverse of Bourgeois's dangling objects, *Fée couturière* (1963) and *Fillette* (1968), and again, harks back to some of Hesse's material investigations, whether in the spatial ambiguity of *Hang Up* (1966) or the complex layering of latex, fibreglass and cheesecloth in *Contingent* (1968–69). *Pelt* can be further positioned alongside Hesse's five versions of *Accession* (1967–69, fig. 5) which, according to Lippard,

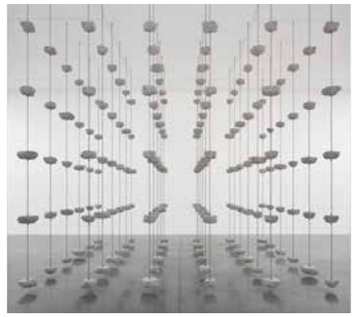

Fig. 1 Mona Hatoum, *Remains to be Seen*, 2019

Fig. 2 *Brood*, 2004

Fig. 3 *Fume*, 2007

Fig. 4 *Barbara Hepworth, Oval Sculpture (No. 2)*, 1943

Fig. 5 Eva Hesse, *Accession*, 1967–68

each contained approximately 30,670 holes.[18] Such astonishing scale and labour-intensity are equivalent to MccGwire's aforementioned *Brood*. While Hesse's fabricated cubes (or inverted 'primary structures') and manufactured rubber tubes can be directly contrasted with MccGwire's more organic assemblage and raw leather support in *Pelt*, the sheer multiplicity of tubes and quills in the lining of each insinuates a marine-like, uterine dimension in both, a space where boundary creatures might be conceived.

MccGwire's feather technique and conceptual underpinnings find further precursors or models in miniature in the complex history of the surrealist object, especially Meret Oppenheim's ubiquitous assisted readymade, *Object* (1936), and Eileen Agar's assemblage, *Angel of Anarchy* (1936–40, fig. 6). Writing on such 'dream objects', art historian Dawn Adès reminds us of their role in 'erasing aesthetic hierarchies and encouraging a radical mixture of western and non-western cultures'.[19] Agar's *Angel* is a head-shaped sculpture wrapped in a number of silk blindfolds and a beaded, feather headdress, described by feminist artist, Kate Davis, as 'an object rife with contradictions'.[20] Meanwhile, Oppenheim was producing fashion designs for Elsa Schiaparelli including an ocelot fur bangle (1935). This was seen by Dora Maar and Pablo Picasso in Café de Flore, Paris, and they famously mused that anything could be covered with fur to produce a surreal effect. Oppenheim's *Object* (fig. 7), also known as *Le Déjeuner en fourrure* (*Breakfast in Fur*), emerged from this conversation, a teacup, dish and spoon smoothly covered in Chinese gazelle hide. The emphasis on the animal is not necessarily taxidermic but rather a surrealist reconfiguration of that tradition – Bourgeois's spider, Tanning's hounds, and De Bruyckere's horses follow such thinking, as do MccGwire's feathers – a displacement of expectations through the troubling of boundaries, material and cultural associations. Marina Warner notes perceptively that Oppenheim's *Object* 'makes visible, with quite remarkable economy, the problematic presence of the wild in the civilised'.[21] The suggestion is something carnal and untameable, a feminist reappropriation of the fetish narrative.[22]

MccGwire's *Cleave* (2012, p. xx) continues this investigation into the legacies of surrealist eroticism. Curator Kathleen Soriano gives an evocative description:

> '…the white feathers hint at purity and innocence, emphasized by the sweet heart shape sitting atop the solid thighs, but the reeling, swooping form of the sculpture reveals itself as you move around it. The work bulges and thrusts around and inside itself, the swells emanating from the 'centre'; the clitoris, which is tucked away and marked by a cluster of nerve-ending quills.'[23]

Fig. 6 Eileen Agar, *Angel of Anarchy*, 1936–40

Fig. 7 Meret Oppenheim, *Object*, 1936

Here, the sculpture's 'thighs' press together, erotically enfolding, while the heart-shaped belly is pregnant with meaning. Again, Tanning's soft sculptural domains come to mind, especially the relief sculpture from *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970–73, fig. 8) whose belly and thighs burst through the wallpaper as an architectural Caesarean. Meanwhile, the emphasis on the female pelvis is further reminiscent of Bourgeois's *Janus Fleuri* (1968, fig. 9), a radical reinterpretation of self-portraiture.[24] Such artworks present an alternative take on the bust, one that privileges the ovaries and intestines in the tradition of Georges Bataille's acephalic motif, all guts and no head.[25] That said, I would maintain that these boundary creatures are deeply contemplative, what Bal might term an 'art that thinks.'[26] *Cleave* provides commentary on the pressing need for feminist liberation, a call for women to luxuriate in their own sense of embodiment and sensuality while remaining critical of definition by reproductive capacity alone.

One might dwell further on MccGwire's use of the antique cabinet in *Cleave* or her extensive use of glass bells. Her boundary creatures often fill their framing devices and appear to writhe within them, emphasising the instability of such boundaries.[27] Tanning similarly revised the display mechanisms in exhibitions of her soft sculptures, from recognisably spare, modernist conditions, isolated on plinths, to more anachronistic possibilities where the sculptures were mounted on decisively unmodern furniture and appear to inhabit the space. Indeed, curatorial sensibilities have significantly expanded and recontextualised the history of soft sculpture, for example two recent exhibitions curated by fashion designers: Duro Olowu's *Making & Unmaking* at Camden Art Centre, London (2016) and J. W. Anderson's *Disobedient Bodies* at The Hepworth Wakefield (2017). Interestingly, both included exhibits by Tanning, and sought to push the boundaries of soft sculpture into a more multimedia consideration, from knitwear to ceramics. 'I'll show them haute couture!' Tanning once said of her soft sculptures.[28]

In an innovative curatorial twist by Jennifer Mundy, the 'soft' sculptures of both Tanning and Bourgeois were used to conclude *Desire Unbound* (2001) at Tate Modern, placing them in a belated visual and thematic dialogue. Tanning's *Emma* was listed as an 'erotic object' alongside Bourgeois's *Fillette*, an interesting reading given that both sculptures have also been 'cradled' by their makers, Tanning in a film for Peter Schamoni (1978) and Bourgeois in an impish photographic portrait by Robert Mapplethorpe (1982). The morphology and materiality of these sculptures redressed the notion of a pure modernism impregnated by surrealist narrativity and infiltrated by bodily analogies; abstract remnants reinhabited by representational content, ambiguities that continue in MccGwire's sculptures. Moreover,

Fig. 8 Dorothea Tanning, *Wall Figure*, 1973

Fig. 9 Louise Bourgeois, *Janus Fleuri*, 1968

in dwelling on their ghostly anthropomorphism, surrealist scholar Katharine Conley has noted the plush qualities of Tanning's sculptures.[29] The sensual coiling of fabric limbs and furry embrace that occurs in Tanning's *Étreinte* (fig. 10) recurs frequently in the metamorphosing boas of MccGwire's feather sculptures, one of the most rapturous examples being *Viscera* (2018, fig. 11).[30]

Again, there is a close association between material experimentation and sculptural behaviour, the pivotal point at which MccGwire's practice thrives: 'It comes from a natural experimentation with my materials … and a muscular kind of strength.'[31] Significantly, soft sculpture's intrinsic properties are often precarious and unstable, suggesting a built-in lifespan or vulnerability to external factors.[32] However, the challenge to durability and the manipulation of media can be seen as empowering, motivating forces. Tanning claims that 'One day I got fed up with the turpentine, really fed up! And starting making stuffed figures all on the sewing machine. I set myself terrible goals, terrible challenges.'[33] Benglis similarly experimented with new materials, shifting her preferred medium from floor-based pours of wax, pigmented latex and polyurethane foam of the 1960s, such as *Bounce* (1969), to cotton bunting, glitter and sculpt-metal relief 'knots' by the 1970s, such as *Zita* (1972). A sense of characterisation or animation of the boundary creature becomes apparent in many of these pieces, a narrative content which again challenges the self-referential abstraction of modernist artworks.[34]

In sum, there is an intellectual aesthetic knot manifest in Kate MccGwire's work, a disrupting force stemming not only from counter-modernist sculptural inquiries but from a distinctly soft sculptural practice which can be understood as profoundly feminist in attitude and revisionary pursuit. Indeed, one might engage with avant-garde histories and sculptural lessons better through study of MccGwire. In the realm of the contemporary, recent exhibitions like *Entangled: Threads and Making* at Turner Contemporary (2017) reveal that, alongside MccGwire, a diverse array of artists are working through, and responding to, the soft sculptural concerns of their forebears.[35] Moreover, MccGwire and the medium of soft sculpture are now experiencing feminist effects on new generations of artists, curators and scholars.[36] Some are questioning the viability and continuity of the term 'soft sculpture', while others are queering the medium in new critical directions.[37] In each case, the boundary creature is at work, fusing material experimentation with anthropomorphic presence. The grotesque and the uncanny infiltrated the counter-modernism of the second half of the twentieth century and continue to play across the generations and through feminist artistic practices today.

Fig. 10 Dorothea Tanning, *Étreinte*, 1969

Fig. 11 *Viscera*, 2018

Notes

1 Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 42.

2 Some of these thoughts first appeared in Catriona McAra, 'Kate MccGwire: Menagerie', *Corridor* 8 (31 July 2020).

3 In a cultural history of taxidermy, in which artwork by Kate MccGwire features, Alexis Turner notes a change of attitude to interior display, from nineteenth-century 'clutter' towards twentieth-century minimalism, *Taxidermy* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2013), 27.

4 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (London and Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1999), 7.

5 Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 116.

6 Connelly, 1–2; Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 2. Grateful thanks to Kim L. Pace for introducing me to this idea.

7 Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), xii.

8 Ann Coxon, 'Making Something from Something: Toward a Re-definition of Women's Textile Art,' *Entangled: Threads and Making*, ed. Karen Wright (Margate: Turner Contemporary, 2017), 33. Judith Collins also makes the point that 'Contemporary artists who have produced "beings" of this kind … are … all women,' 'Kate MccGwire: Layer, Peel, Burn, Reveal,' *Kate MccGwire: Lure* (London: All Visual Arts, 2013), 31; Claes Oldenburg and Joseph Beuys are two examples of male artists making soft sculptures in the 1960s, from commercial critique to environmental awareness.

9 With reference to feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, Claire Doherty points out that Barbara Hepworth 'was a Modernist, the tradition against which feminist art practice has set itself', 'The Essential Barbara Hepworth? Re-reading the Work of Barbara Hepworth in the Light of Recent Debates on "the Feminine"', *Barbara Hepworth Reconsidered*, ed. David Thistlewood (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool and Liverpool University Press, 1996), 164.

10 Some of the intergenerational overlaps are striking; for example: Oppenheim sent Hesse a collage, see Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 46; Benglis knew work by Hesse and Bourgeois from Lippard's *Eccentric Abstraction* show, Susan Richmond, *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 50; during the millennial noughts, Bourgeois would receive younger sculptors, such as Paloma Varga Weisz, in her home in Chelsea, New York, Marianna Vecellio, 'The Knife Woman', *Paloma Varga Weisz: Root of a Dream* (Rivoli: Castello di Rivoli Museo, 2017), 27.

11 Mona Hatoum cited in *Domestic Disturbances*, ed. Laura Steward (Massachusetts and Santa Fe: MOCA, 2001), 31.

12 Rozsika Parker uses this word in a reissue of *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), xxi.

13 Jessica Hemmings also notes the importance of this title, 'Unexpected Beauty: Kate MccGwire', *Surface Design Journal* (Spring 2014): 9. Lippard explains that Hesse's esoteric titles came from 'a large thesaurus', 65.

14 Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism* (New York: Out of London Press, 1977), 46.

15 See my 'Emma's Navel: Dorothea Tanning's Narrative Sculpture', *Intersections: Women/Surrealism/Modernism*, ed. Patricia Allmer (Manchester University Press, 2016), 91–111.

16 Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19–23.

17 Grateful thanks to John Sears for suggesting the theoretical potential of the placenta.

18 Lippard, 103.

19 Dawn Adès cited in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 96.

20 Kate Davis, 'MicroTate 9: Angel of Anarchy,' *Tate Etc* (2007).

21 Marina Warner, From the *Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd., Random House, 1994), 385.

22 In 'Fetishism' (1927), Sigmund Freud nominated fur and shoes as common fetishes – substitute objects for a son to treasure against the mother's supposed lack of penis. See Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2005), 66.

23 Kathleen Soriano, *Madam and Eve: Women Portraying Women* (London, Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2018), 69.

24 See Mundy (ed.), *Desire Unbound*, 313.

25 Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1989), 64; 74.

26 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 9–10; Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5.

27 On another level, one could also compare MccGwire's use of antique vitrines to Hesse's use of glass pastry cases, see Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse: Studiowork* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009), 98.

28 Dorothea Tanning cited in Eloise Napier, 'Her Infinite Variety', *Harpers and Queen* (September 2004), 230. MccGwire herself has collaborated with fashion designers such as Ann Demeulemeester on clothing worn by the iconic Icelandic singer-songwriter Björk, see James Merry, *AnOther Magazine*, 2:3 (Spring/Summer 2016), 420-434. For more on this idea, see Jin Young Baek and Ju Hee Park, 'A Study on the Fashion Design Using Soft Sculpture Centered on Kate MccGwire's Works', *Journal of the Korean Society of Clothing and Textiles*, 42:2 (2018): 251–268.

29 Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 144.

30 Kate Bernheimer deploys the terms 'rapture' and 'flushed secrets' in a discussion of work by Tanning and Kiki Smith, 'This Rapturous Form', *Marvels and Tales: A Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, 20:1 (2006): 67–83.

31 Kate MccGwire interviewed by Rachael Polquin, 'When Feathers Come to Life', *Antennae*, issue 20 (Spring 2012), 82.

32 Hesse's latex sculptures have patinaed over time, while Tanning mock-lamented that her sculptures would probably last only one 'human lifetime', *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2001), 282–283.

33 Dorothea Tanning cited in Peter Schamoni, *Insomnia*, VHS transferred to MP4 (1978).

34 According to Lippard, Hesse tried to resist such anthropomorphism, 187.

35 Beyond this exhibition, one might also cite Annette Messager (b.1943), Rebecca Horn (b.1944), Alannah Currie (b.1957), Sheila Pepe (b.1959) and Sarah Lucas (b.1962) as part of MccGwire's generation of feminist artists interested in soft sculpture.

36 For example, artist Kat Howard (b.1984) and recent graduate Sonia Moran (b.1995).

37 Grateful thanks to artist Phoebe Corker-Marin for this thought. See also recent research-practice by Daniel Fountain (2020).