

Beauty and the Expansion of Women's Identity

Vanessa D. Fisher

The history of women's beauty is written in bodily gestures that express both the constraints of their culture as well as the unfolding desire of their interiority. Embracing the power of beauty has always been problematic for feminism and for good reason. We have yet to create a language for our own yearning or find an expression for our own radiance that could also embrace other women rather than attempt to outshine them. We have yet to acknowledge that our expression of beauty itself has an evolution that continually expands our embodiment through a process of reclaiming gestures. This article offers an AQAL analysis of the current views that dominate feminist discourse on women's beauty. It is also a personal story of my own ongoing journey as a young woman trying to reclaim my beauty, for the benefit of all beings.

A Personal Search for Beauty

In eleventh century China, there lived a Taoist woman named Sun Pu-erh who sought the path of enlightenment. Sun Pu-erh's dedication to truth caused her to search out one of the great enlightened masters of her time in hopes that he would take her as his student. The enlightened master soon came to recognize the passion and perseverance in Sun Pu-erh and told her that if she truly wished to attain immortality she would need to travel to Loyang, where she could cultivate the Tao. But when Sun Pu-erh revealed her face to her master he was taken aback by her beauty and told her that her beauty would remain an obstacle to her enlightenment. He denied permission for Sun Pu-erh to travel to Loyang for he believed she would be the constant target of men wishing to overpower and take advantage of her.

Unwilling to let her appearance be an obstacle to her path, Sun Pu-erh immediately went home to her kitchen and heated a wok full of cooking oil. When the oil began to boil, Sun Pu-erh picked up the wok, closed her eyes, and poured the oil over her face. With scars etched across her skin, Sun Pu-erh returned to her master, who, amazed by her sacrifice, gave her permission to travel to Loyang.¹

When I came across this story and its powerful imagery, I remember it deeply resonating with my own struggle with beauty. As a young woman dedicated to the search for my Divine Identity, I had always considered my struggle with beauty to be the most superficial concern and ultimately the greatest obstacle on my spiritual path. Yet the more I attempted to deny my deepest yearning for beauty, the more beauty came to haunt me. I often had visions of blinding myself, a similar sacrifice to that of Sun Pu-erh, brought on by my own sense of desperation. Perhaps I felt that it was only in such a dramatic renunciation that I could finally unhook the pain of this unwanted desire. But deep within, I continued to wonder whether such an act would truly offer me the release that I was searching for.

It would take me many years before I realized that denying beauty only repressed it to the unconscious realms of my own shadow, along with the all the desires of my body and sexuality. And eventually my shadow would find its way back into consciousness, painfully forcing me to

see that it was in my very yearning for beauty that I would discover my unique channel to the Divine.

Feminism and the Beauty Question

Sifting through the feminist literature, I realized that my confusion surrounding beauty was also a collective struggle and a topic that has, in many ways, been left largely unreconciled for women. Looking back, we see the seeds of feminism being sown within the newly emerging Orange/modern worldview and its worldcentric awareness, which began to take root in the West during the late nineteenth century. For the first time, many women had growing access to domains that had previously been exclusive to men (e.g., jobs and intellectual inquiry). During this era, the majority of feminists agreed that in order to support their advancement and be seen as equal valued subjects to men, there was a need to reject societal ideals of beauty and the passive objectification of the female body. It was through this rejection of beauty that women felt they could redirect their energy and attention toward exploring the untapped potentials of their own minds. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the earliest feminists to articulate the imprisonment of women in their own bodies:

Taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round in its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.... If women do not resign the arbitrary power of beauty—they will prove that they have *less* mind than men.²

The challenge for women became one of stepping out of their natural tendency toward subservience to male desire, which meant detaching from the power they had gained from their dependence on their bodies and physical beauty, so that they might build the important foundation for asserting their minds.

As feminism and feminist values grew in strength during the 1950s and 1960s, modernism was slowly giving way to postmodernism and awareness of the influence of culture (LL quadrant) on shaping and constructing our reality was at the cutting edge of intellectual inquiry. Within this new paradigm, feminists became increasingly aware of how much socio-cultural systems (LL and LR) had and continued to shape women's understanding of their own beauty. In the West, this understanding brought with it intensified feelings of imprisonment and resentment toward the limits and dictates of what came to be viewed as a massively oppressive socio-cultural system (the patriarchy). Within the context of this growing awareness, beauty became increasingly problematic for the self-proclaimed feminist.

With the publication of books such as Naomi Wolff's *The Beauty Myth* in the early 1990s, beauty soon became regarded as a currency system (LR) built upon the values and discourses of the patriarchy (LL), which aimed to keep women separate from one another and subservient to male desire. The "beauty myth" was exposed and identified by many feminists as a creation of their socio-cultural surroundings with which they felt they had no part in defining for themselves. Some came to regard beauty as a male problem, arguing that since men had the most control over the public sphere, then it was men alone who had constructed and controlled this

elaborate deception called “beauty.” Thus feminists felt that the only proper response was to reject this construction for the purpose of freeing women’s autonomy.

Within this important postmodern awakening to the influence of the LL and LR quadrants in shaping our understanding of beauty, there was also an unfortunate turn toward reductionism. Beauty was deconstructed and reduced to a purely socio-cultural phenomenon (thus stripping the important influence of the UL and UR quadrants) and also flattened into the limits of one level of interpretation, namely the Green/postmodern worldview. To reiterate this point: postmodernism, with all its gifts, painfully curtailed beauty’s expansive expression by not only collapsing the UL and UR quadrants into the LL and LR, but also by simultaneously collapsing all levels of aesthetic development into a flatland view with its strictly Green interpretation (a crucial point that I will return to later).

Within this postmodern context, any woman who continued to enjoy exhibiting her beauty was easily regarded as a pawn in the patriarchal system, for there was no room in the Green worldview for a woman to assert independence in her choice to express beauty nor was there an interpretive structure available that could see important qualifying distinctions (e.g., that there are many levels of interpretation and motivation that exist for expressing beauty). It was in this postmodern deconstruction that all beauty soon came to be regarded as morally suspect, and it is here where the evolving feminist consciousness still largely finds itself today.

Amidst the haze clouds arising from the deconstructive dust of our postmodern era, there are a small number of feminists returning to the beauty question and struggling to address the issue of beauty as not merely a male or socio-cultural construction but also a deeply rooted female yearning (e.g., Wendy Steiner, Nancy Etcoff, Luce Irigaray, and Ellen Zetzel Lambert). These feminists are attempting to speak to the desire for beauty that women seem to naturally harbor and are working to try to sort out what beauty might mean for us as women in today’s world. Most of these women are doing so largely through the UL quadrant (namely zone #1) by attempting to bring back the important reality of the subject; a subject that is not merely a construction of cultural networks but also an independent self with an inherent desire for beauty. Some are even attempting to overcome this LL/LR reductionism by utilizing the cognitive sciences, as well as research in evolutionary biology, to help reshape our understanding of beauty (mainly through UR methodologies).³ But there have been no feminists, at least that I can find, who are addressing the issue of beauty in relation to interior aesthetic stage development (zone-#2 methodologies) and thus in my opinion the richest domain, namely the developmental aspect of beauty’s unfolding, is still being largely left in the dark (again, a topic I will return to later).

Women’s seeming lack of investigation into the issue of beauty could be seen as a residual side effect of the postmodern deconstruction that has often left us feeling uncomfortable to engage discussions about beauty that we have convinced ourselves are vain, self-indulgent, and ultimately unimportant. Ellen Zetzel Lambert, a feminist active throughout the 1960s who is only now returning to recognize the deeper issue of beauty in her book, *The Face of Love: Feminism and the Beauty Question*, admits that it is an uncomfortable topic for her to speak about. She states, “As a committed feminist, I’ve felt embarrassed that the beauty question should still matter to me.”⁴

There seems to be a common acknowledgement among the few feminists returning to the beauty question that beauty has oddly become one of the greatest taboos in feminist discourse. These feminists see beauty as a topic that needs to come to the forefront in the 21st century in order to address what Lambert describes as the divided feeling of today's young women, who are highly informed of the importance of their minds over their physical appearance and thus have become all the more ashamed of their concern for their appearance. This split and shame is due to women seeing their bodies as separate from their "real" identity, thus adding to the sense of confusion and embarrassment that "liberated" young women are feeling about the beauty question.⁵

There is a distinct voice emerging from these few feminists that speaks to the need to reopen the forum and invite fresh perspectives on beauty. As Nancy Etcoff reiterates, "Beauty is not going anywhere. The idea that beauty is unimportant or a cultural construct is the real beauty myth. We have to understand beauty, or we will always be enslaved by it."⁶ Redefining beauty from an Integral standpoint—one that situates beauty in an AQAL matrix of quadrants, levels, lines, states, and types—can help feminism disentangle from its exclusive attachment to postmodernism and bring light and fresh air to an often painful and delicate subject for the emerging feminist to ponder.

Beauty As an Art Form

Perhaps the place to begin looking for an emerging language of beauty, one that can move us beyond the limits of our current postmodern discourse, resides in the realm of art making itself.

In the 1960s, postmodernism had been a breakthrough in opening the art world back into the realm of beauty as aesthetic pleasure, as artists reacted against much of the restriction of modernism that had dominated the art world for so long.⁷ At the same time, the second wave feminist movement had been coming to the fore, and women themselves were entering more into the male dominated art field. Because feminism championed that women assert their agency, there was resistance to return to old images of passive female subjects in art, thus keeping the door largely closed on the reconstitution of the female body as a symbol of beauty. As a woman artist during this era, the difficult issue revolved around how to represent the female body in a way that brought agency and dignity to the female subject and was in line with the current version of feminist values. Beauty and the representation of women in art became a highly controversial topic and opinions on women and beauty still remain divided among feminists and artists today.

The difficult challenge for female artists became how to integrate their still problematic female bodies with their recently freed minds without falling into old roles of passive sexualized objects. Wendy Steiner recognizes that the dawning of the 21st century is facing us with a turning point in which we realize that an aesthetic incompatible with femininity is impossible and yet we are not quite sure what the alternative will look like. She states, "Many are pointing us back to beauty as if it were the most compelling problem for anyone trying to make sense of twenty-first-century existence."⁸

Hannah Wilke: Reclaiming Female Objectivity

Through my investigation of feminists in the 1960s, I came across a less well-known artist, Hannah Wilke. What I found in the depths of Wilke's art and life was a courageous feminist who willingly worked on the edges of this emerging aesthetic struggle through her own artmaking in order to bridge this difficult integration of body and mind. At a time when there was great resistance against the provocative nature of her art and what others saw as an objectification of her "beautiful" female body, Wilke continued to struggle to reclaim her beauty and eroticism and bring its much needed transformative power back into feminist discourse.

Hannah Wilke has often been described as one of the most daring and versatile artists of the 1960s. Wilke started her art career trained in sculpture, using clay, gum, latex, and kneaded erasers to sculpt representations of female genitalia, manipulating all types of media into a variety of vulvic forms. Wilke realized that most women felt shame about their own sexuality and attempted to bring integrity to the flesh through her sculptural forms in order to develop love for that which many women hated most about themselves.⁹

Wilke was always deeply engaged with philosophy, politics, literature, art history, and religion as well as her own autobiography. In the 1970s, Wilke extended her art practice to include the exhibition of her own body as a social, political, and sexual statement.¹⁰ As a self-proclaimed feminist, Wilke was focused on a reclaiming of the erotic in all spheres of life, and her art challenges the viewer to question their understanding of feminism and its relationship to beauty.

Wilke once stated, "I am a victim of my own beauty."¹¹ This was her own recognition of the conflict that many women of her time faced surrounding the issue of their beauty: whether they had it or not, they always felt victimized by it and somehow always felt wrong. Wilke chose to display the inappropriateness of her beauty as a means of confronting its own wrongness.¹² She saw her art as a way to address the taboo of her own beauty and the conflicts and struggles she experienced with her body as a feminist. Her feminist contemporaries found Wilke's art to be vulgar and in contra-distinction to the feminist movement that was attempting to bring sexual dignity to women, and so Wilke was often criticized for confusing her roles as feminist and flirt.¹³ But Wilke was very aware of the positioning she was taking with her body and beauty, and was critical of politics and theories surrounding feminism that excluded the erotic.

Intrigued by the art of word play and linguistics, Wilke continually used humor and puns in the titles of her exhibitions. She loved how meaning could transform through subtle shifts in language, allowing two or more interpretations to be present and never feeling the need to settle on one. She felt that this "ethics of ambiguity" conveyed the paradox she felt within herself as a female and the roles she was supposed to play in society, and felt the incorporation of paradox to be central to her artistic expression.¹⁴

One such example comes out of Wilke's 1977 photographic series where she has laid herself naked across the grass with the title, "I Object: Memoirs of a Sugar Giver" written over her head. Depending on where one puts the emphasis and whether "Object" is read as a noun or verb, it could either mean "I am an Object" or "I Object to being objectified."¹⁵ Through this play on words Wilke was attempting to acknowledge the double bind of being an American woman in the late 20th century. Despite a heightened feminist consciousness, Wilke still saw that women

continued to be concerned with their appearance and desirability and her work attempted to expose the deepening split between feminism and femininity.

Wilke used her art as a space to explore the outside/inside dichotomy addressing the need for women to reclaim their objectness. “Why not be an object?” she asks, one who is aware of her I-ness, an “I-Object.”¹⁶ Wilke saw the asserting of oneself as an object to be an equally essential act of female agency and was aware of the need for both assertions if one was to attempt to live freely and fully integrated as an embodied feminist. Joanna Frueh comments on this importance for women to claim their objectness when she says,

In contemporary usage, the word object applied to a woman is considered negative. She is solely a sex object, a thing perceived without empathy or compassion. However, an object, defined as something that is or is capable of being seen, touched, or otherwise sensed, exists; thus, respecting object hood can be an assertion of existence. Wilke knows that women are ashamed of nudity. To be female and sexual is forbidden. If you show your body and are proud of it, it frightens people, for then a woman exists, intensely.¹⁷

Wilke also saw the power latent in female beauty and its ability to engage and allure others, so she used her own body as an artistic canvas to evoke questions and discussion about gender roles, social structures, sex, economics, and religion. In a series she entitled *SOS Starification Object Series: An Adult Game of Mastication*,¹⁸ Wilke studied the poses and gestures out of top fashion and advertising magazines and mimicked the stylization of gender in the media by embodying similar poses. She scarred herself with vulvic shaped gums in an attempt to show the scarification of women through media as well as a way to laugh and make fun of it, for Wilke was well known for her sense of humor.

Wilke was diagnosed with lymphoma in June 1987. As her cancer progressed, she would continue to document her autobiography through drawings and photographs. Wilke posed her body as art well into the late stages of her disfiguring illness, often copying gestures that she had used in the ‘70s, humorously emphasizing the myth of eternal youth and conveying the need for reclaiming the body and beauty in all stages of life. For Wilke, life had always been impelled by the beauty and erotic power of the human gesture to create, which she articulated and embodied with grace until her death in 1993. Wilke truly stands out as an exemplar for an evolving feminist consciousness that is continually struggling to work through, discover, break out, and emerge into new levels of understanding in relation to beauty.

The Aesthetics of the Masculine and Feminine

In order to bridge a few important trends in aesthetic philosophy, as well as tie together some important concerns of feminist theory, I thought it would be useful to look at the issue of beauty through the lens of the masculine/feminine dynamic.¹⁹ Asking how the masculine/feminine dance can be incorporated into our emerging Integral aesthetic can perhaps offer insight into the many different ways in which we experience, express, and respond to beauty. It also seems to bring clarity to some important distinctions that, when put together, complement one another and create a more expansive picture of the rich dimensions beauty has to offer.

There were two main figures that stood out during my research as representatives for what could be called masculine and feminine aesthetic orientations. The first was the well known German philosopher Immanuel Kant and the second was Luce Irigaray, a contemporary French feminist philosopher who both critiques and draws from the unique ethical philosophy of Immanuel Levinas, a 20th century philosopher and Talmudic commentator. These theorists seemed to hold a rich resource for beginning to honor the unique expressions of the masculine and feminine typologies and to help us form the beginnings of an Integral aesthetic that could include them both.

One of the central issues that I saw arising within aesthetic philosophy that could perhaps be resolved by bringing in the masculine/feminine typology was a conflict of how best to interact with the experience of beauty in an “other,” and perhaps the struggle to articulate what the “superior” aesthetic experience truly is. Immanuel Kant was a major contributor to the evolution of aesthetic theory during the 18th century and played a significant role in asserting the independence of beauty from the domains of science and ethics. In my opinion, what was so unique about Immanuel Kant’s contribution was both his belief in the possibility of a universal subjective validity when it came to aesthetic judgement, and even more importantly, his specific articulation of a rational set of injunctions that could be implemented and, if followed correctly, would lead to this kind of universal agreement. Kant definitely favored a level of freedom from the objects of beauty themselves, and thus it makes sense that his first injunction was a subjective one in which he asks us to internally reflect on our aesthetic response and separate out whatever is merely agreeable or good because it satisfies some pleasure in charm, emotion, sensation, or moral connotation.²⁰ Without this first essential step of rigorous self-reflection, our experience will often fail to have the quality of disinterested pleasure that Kant argued was necessary.

For me, this type of injunction reflects a very masculine practice for cultivating our capacity to Witness, which is essential to obtain a certain level of distance on our own subjective likes and dislikes when it comes to beauty and attraction. We again feel the contours of the Witness spoken through Kant’s articulation of what he considered the highest experience of beauty, what he called the *sublime*. The sublime was a beauty that we confronted in vast landscapes, towering mountain ranges, and cascading views of starry skies, all of which acted as invitations by nature into the sublimity of our existence. In this sublime aesthetic moment, Kant believed that we were able to see past the mere objects in view and take in the transcendental and formless quality of the whole. It was a call to Infinity that surpassed the limited extension of our human senses. And for Kant, because the concept of Infinity as totality could never be exhibited through sensory experience, he saw it as supersensible or beyond any perceivable object.²¹

In this way, Kant’s injunctions help us to practice inhabiting our own formless awareness as it holds the space for forms to arise and fall without being attached to the specific qualities that they take or the particular emotions that they stir within us in their momentary passing. Kant offers us a tool for witnessing without grasping at any specific location, which brings with it a greater appreciation of the transcendental aspect of beauty’s expression. Thus the masculine, in its highest form, can represent the essential freedom from attachment to the specific appearances of beauty because of its capacity to release forms in every moment as they arise out of emptiness.

The possible unhealthy side of the masculine is an extreme detachment from all forms, the result of a belief in beauty exclusively as a transcendental quality (the sublime), which causes the viewer to lose any felt connection to the relative forms that it witnesses arising; the ultimate observer that is only able to experience the formless but unable to be touched or participate in the movement of the forms that arise within it. The proper balance for this masculine freedom is an equal appreciation of the feminine fullness of beauty, a dynamic for which we can account for by turning to the philosophy of Immanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray.

The unique philosophy of Levinas offers us the starting point to delve into ideas of what part beauty and desire play when we turn our focus to the realms of feminine fullness and relational engagement. Here we are interested in how beauty and attraction both inform and impel us towards embodied sensitivity towards one another in honor of our unique individual expressions. Although Irigaray departs from Levinas in some significant ways, both philosophers consider beauty and desire to be intimately tied with conceptions of ethical relations and responsibility.

To begin with Levinas, he started with a philosophy that questioned the very foundations of Western ontology by arguing that things do not come into being already contained and structured within pre-existing ontological realities, but rather life and humanity itself only come into existence through the interaction of relationships. Thus for Levinas, ethics precedes ontology.²² It was through this ultimate ethical situation that we rejoined the Infinite through the human face.²³ In his desire to overcome the notion of God as a distinct ontological reality, which he felt caused us to turn away from the divine in the face of the Other, he attempted to put forth an understanding of God that was embedded in intersubjectivity and language. In contrast to Kant, a deep felt connection to our own desire and attraction are central to the ethical relationships we create with others. For Levinas,

desire itself is reshaped by the face of the Other, shaped into a response that goes far beyond myself. It is not the name of a lack, but the release from self-enclosure, a joy, therefore, that is always in excess, and a desire not diminished in its fulfillment. In all this, it bears the trace of the divine.²⁴

Luce Irigaray shares in these values of relational and embodied ethics/aesthetics, and for both Levinas and Irigaray, embodied desire is not something to be fought or ignored but rather is seen as the very site of transcendence.²⁵ But Irigaray uses Levinas' philosophy as a bridge to enter even more fully into the ideas and images of embodied desire and ethics. Irigaray brings an even more concrete and sensual language as well as a more feminist lens that offers greater attention to our own unique difference and the dynamics of our relations with other beings of unique difference. For Irigaray, the attraction that leads to the caress is a gesture-word that penetrates into the realms of deep felt intimacy, both for the one who touches and the one who accepts.²⁶ It is essential for Irigaray that in order to go beyond a limit, there must also be a boundary. She states, "To touch one another in intersubjectivity it is necessary that two subjects agree on the relationship... each must have the opportunity to be a concrete corporeal and sexuate object, rather than an abstract, neutral, fabricated or fictitious one."²⁷

With Irigaray, we gain access to the transcendental through the vehicle of a horizontal relationship with an individual, an individual whose differences are respected and invited within

ourselves without destroying the other.²⁸ For Irigaray, attraction and desire can be neither rendered into one nor divided into two but always dance in the space of holding both. She writes,

In my desire for you, in the love that I share with you, my body is animated by the wanting to be with you or to you, with me or to me, and it also longs for existence of a between-us. It wishes to love and to be loved, to leave itself and to re-enter itself.... I seek for a complex marriage between my interiority and that of a you which cannot be substituted for me, which is always outside of me, but thanks to my interiority exists...²⁹

In the perspective of Levinas, and even more so in Irigaray, we see beauty and attraction as a passionate, embodied gesture that begs for interaction and collaborative creation. In respect for the mysterious dynamics of exchange that occur between two people, Irigaray points out more than once the danger of purely abstracting our relationships with each other into a realm of Absolute Singularity or Universal Subjectivity (and, of course, this warning echoes that of Levinas who felt the same weariness about strict singular ontological claims concerning God and reality). From this perspective, the dynamics of beauty and attraction cannot be fully accounted for by exclusive notions of an Ideal Platonic Form or a sublime formless reality that has the potential to divorce itself from the realm of bodies, words, and sensuous relationships. Rather, from this perspective, beauty is a movement, an ever evolving dynamic of becoming that is continually manifested through creative tensions and energies arising between “separate” subjects and objects.

In this way, Levinas and Irigaray lean towards the feminine in their perspective on beauty and attraction as an interactive, embodied, and intersubjective process. We can look to Irigaray’s writing as a manifestation of the more feminine typology and expression of beauty, an expression that favours a focus on the constant movement and flow between self and other and honours the particularities of each intersubjective exchange. The higher forms of this feminine expression would eventually become the act of a free dance of energetic engagement through the process of surrendering into the flow between self and other. These higher forms of feminine desire would arise from a realization of the single energetic flow that runs through the ground of emptiness and breathes itself gracefully through all forms. The desire to touch becomes the desire to dissolve into every object: completely surrendering and merging into beauty’s vibration through all the transient manifestations it encounters through form.

The possible downside of the feminine type, when not incorporating a degree of masculine freedom, can manifest as a pathological attachment to the forms of beauty, something which Irigaray also works to avoid. This is to be contrasted with higher expressions of feminine fullness, which find their roots in the vibration that arises from and through emptiness. Thus the healthiest expression of that radiance arises when there is an embodied awareness of emptiness so that its expression is not stifled by egoic contractions of needing to be seen or fear of being seen, nor will it get caught in the pain of attempting to fulfill its desire for fullness by seeking it in forms that are inherently empty.

Keeping these masculine and feminine aesthetic expressions in mind, I would like to shift my focus to women’s unique developmental relationship with their own beauty. We can recognize

two distinct patterns to this development. One is brought forth by focusing specifically on the unfolding feminine energy (Shakti) that is attempting to express its inherent desire for beauty and shine with greater degrees of fullness. This desire for Shakti expression (which predominantly manifests through state-stages) is simultaneously unfolding alongside the structure-stage development of an evolving feminist consciousness that is attempting to assert women's socio-political equality with men and emerge into ever increasing levels of autonomy.

Beauty and States of Consciousness

Beauty unknowingly became the koan for my interior struggle with deep existential anguish. It was also through confrontations with death and illness that beauty seemed to become a more rampant and dark shadow within my own being. The more I reached out to explore not only the expansive world of the mind and intellect but also the mysterious realms of the soul and spirit, I came to find my struggle with my body and beauty to be greatly intensified. A growing obsession to understand the nature of beauty in the face of my own death and decay continually heightened a very painful alienation from my own female body. Throughout this period, I came to feel an even stronger desire to renounce the attention I had received for my physical appearance in order to uncover the deeper realms of beauty within my own being. But this desire to disengage from the merely gross forms of beauty conflicted with my fear of releasing something from which I had come to gain so many worldly benefits.

As I worked to unravel the mysteries of beauty through intellectual maps and tastes of the transcendental, I also lived out the struggle of this "beauty koan" on a very physical and emotional level. My body became the lived site for the struggle of my mind and soul as I fluctuated between periods of physical beauty and periods of what felt like unbearable ugliness. At times afflicted with all kinds of bodily ailments and visions of inner torment, it seemed that within this pain I was also given a wider expansion within my being that allowed me to be touched by chords of resonance of the deeper beauty that I truly longed for. In times when I would go through periods of noticeable physical beauty, I feared the praises of physical attractiveness, worrying that I would become attached to attention at the cost of my soul and the deeper desires of my Self. The koan of beauty became my painful lesson in impermanence. My mind worked ferociously to understand the nature of beauty so that I might free myself from the illusion of surfaces, while my body continued to become an unbearable prison in constant shift between two extreme opposites.

It was during these times when nothing seemed able to comfort me that I found small openings of beauty in others could induce a kind of warm disorientation that momentarily broke me loose from the binds of this unrelentingly intense pain. When everything within me felt dark and ugly, it would be these simple moments of recognizing the beauty of a leaf or a human face that would fill me with overwhelming gratitude. And it was in these movements of beauty that my thoughts and preoccupations with my struggle seemed to be mysteriously suspended, and, without any will of my own, I was brought to deeper resonance with the beauty that I truly yearned for. I began to have more of these experiences with others that came unexpectedly, and my appreciation for their beauty began to grow even as I struggled to feel any sense of beauty within myself or how I was connected to the beauty I was perceiving.

As difficult as it was to surrender to beauty in an “other” when I felt consumed by ugliness, it seemed to offer such profound gifts to my soul in transition and its state of painful disorientation that I would muster all my courage at times to do so. Perhaps the most potent appreciations on my own journey, the ones that have offered the most healing to me as a female, have been in the act of appreciating the beauty of another woman and holding space for her expression of that beauty in whatever physical or artistic form it may take. To be able to appreciate and feel grateful for the beauty in another woman was, at times, the only thing that gave warmth and peace to my soul in this state and emptied its unbearable self-contraction.

The divine for me has always been connected to a recognition of beauty, and thus a sincere embrace of beauty in another held the very touch of divine release. Surrendering to the beauty of another woman became an act that continually brought me closer to my own beauty by reminding me of that single movement of feminine grace from which the bonds of jealousy, competition, and envy could gently and ecstatically be unwound.

We could identify this shift and transformation I am now articulating as a movement within states (horizontal axis on the Wilber-Combs lattice)³⁰ rather than necessarily a shift in structures (vertical axis on the Wilber-Combs lattice), which I looked at more through the example of Wilke and her struggle to evolve into a Teal altitude of development. The existential tipping point was for me the beginning of an opening where I could explore the territory of states in relation to beauty. As we train and evolve our identity through horizontal states, we become more receptive to the subtleties of beauty’s numinous expressions and more openly in love with embracing the beauty of others. In my own interior journey, this process was experienced as a kind of painfully ecstatic emptying that allowed me to become a more clear and devoted receiver of beauty through others as well as a more open conduit for grace in the process. As we feel ourselves becoming a more subtle listener and perceiver, we find ourselves redirecting the attention and energy that had once been used to assert our own ownership of beauty to a place of inner stillness. In this stillness, it seems that our only desire is to be penetrated by the beauty of others, which is ultimately the desire to be touched by the divine. This could be described in third-person terms as the movement from gross to subtle to causal states.

On the soul’s journey to causal absorption, we come to see that the practice of surrendering to another’s beauty is in essence the very act of surrendering to our own Higher Self, and this act in itself has the power to pour a channel of clarity through our being as beauty comes to contain within it the very energy of divine feminine vibration, expressed in a multitude of subtle energetic flavours. Luce Irigaray offers a beautiful articulation of how we can approach the other with this sense of mystery:

The other is the one towards whom we advance in darkness, the disclosure of their coming never being revealed in the light of day.... it is in the respect of a mystery that we preserve in us for them that the other might take shelter.³¹

As our soul continues to awaken into a nondual state (if we can name it as such), we no longer experience being seen in the same way. In our love for returning to our own utter transparency, beauty itself reclaims its breath and its gestures through our unique bodies, hearts, and minds. Performing our beauty then becomes an act of continual consent of surrender to that single

energetic vibration that runs through the emptiness between us. It is within this performance of beauty that we learn how to dance freely in radiant fullness, a radiance that does not outshine the other but lovingly invites them forward into that same dance of intimate fullness.

In connecting this state-stage evolution with the masculine/feminine types that Kant and Irigaray have illuminated so beautifully for us, we can perhaps bring more clarity to these two paths to Spirit. It seems that some are more inclined to travel to their natural state of inner equanimity through the process of greater freedom and emptiness. Thus through a practice of witnessing, one gains the capacity to be unmoved and untouched by the objects that normally cause self grasping and limit the breadth of our view on beauty. This we could label as perhaps the more *masculine* path to Spirit. We could then say that the *feminine* path to expanded awareness tends to evolve more through a process of engagement. If this engagement is truly developing to higher state-stages of refinement, it is inherently going to be creating an increased degree of detachment from limited forms, as the energetic engagement with beauty becomes ever more subtle, refined and inclusive. This expansion through movement seeks to empty itself and find its Higher Self through the process of surrender in its interactions, finding freedom through deeper and deeper experiences of fullness and falling more into intuitive harmony with the objects and energies that surround it. Irigaray writes, “Listening-to favors becoming fluid... a raising of energy without stopping it in fixed forms. An energy which also can circulate as breath between the inside and outside, and thus communicate with cosmic energies and the energy of other(s).”³²

We can see that ultimately these two paths are not separate and that they must dance together as they evolve and eventually dissolve into the ever-present recognition that consciousness (freedom) and light (fullness) exist as the nondual formulation which bring forth every aspect of existence.

The Stunting of the Female Aesthetic Line of Development

Now that I have spent the time bringing to light the many possible dimensions of beauty in its process of unfolding through both the vertical axis (Amber to Orange to Green to Teal, etc.) and through the horizontal axis (gross to subtle to causal to nondual), I want to spend some time focused on a couple of the most powerful blocks that I see are stunting women from fully realizing and occupying these different dimensions of their own beauty.

I want to start with reiterating a definition of the aesthetic line, which is a line that unfolds relatively independently through each vertical stage of development. The aesthetic line as defined by Wilber is: the line of self-expression, beauty, art, and felt meaning.³³ The question that this line asks is: What is attractive? We can also look at the aesthetic line through both the masculine and feminine typologies which leaves us with two central questions: What is attractive to me? (the aesthetic concern of the masculine), and what is attractive about me? (the aesthetic concern of the feminine).³⁴

This understanding of the aesthetic line along with its masculine/feminine typologies plays a crucial role in the argument that I am going to make, and that is that the way a woman relates to her own beauty is the way that she relates to the Shakti force itself. And the health of the relationship between each woman and her Shakti energy also determines the health of her

relationship to her own creativity and self-expression. Thus a stunted aesthetic line would mean the very stunting of the Shakti force, which, as we will see, has profoundly devastating consequences for women, in particular.

Before I enter this last argument further, I want to fully illuminate in plain view what I see as the aesthetic disease of our postmodern era. First, we must understand why the extreme postmodern stance on beauty has taken such strong and seemingly unmovable roots in certain circles of feminism. I believe we can make sense of this stance by looking at it as one of two very distinct trends in the evolution of our understanding of beauty in today's Western world. If the postmodern feminist stance on beauty is dominated by Green values and interpretations, then there is also a second, powerful current when it comes to the expression of beauty, and that is, of course, the beauty fed to us by our dominant consumer culture. This second current is marked by a mixture of three distinct characteristics: The use of Orange altitude cognition and modern technologies (e.g., mass media and advertising), an adherence to largely Amber altitude gender roles (e.g., even pornography largely situates men and women in very traditional gender stereotypes), and a pathological Red underbelly of narcissism which largely drives the entire enterprise. And it is this second current of beauty's expression that postmodern feminists are so understandably reacting against.

The reason I see this as so important to bring up is because it shows how drastically feminism and dominant culture have split on the issue of beauty and how deeply it is affecting the hearts and minds of women who live under this split. Where extreme postmodern feminism has, in a sense, deconstructed and "banished" beauty for the purpose of gender equality and justice, the dominant discourse in the West has become fixated on physical beauty, within the limits of a very limited and pathological worldview. I would also argue that the consumer cultural phenomenon of elevating physical beauty has not been solely due to males constructing it, for I see a majority of the alliance/support for this elevation coming from women themselves. Access to careers in modeling, acting, and other aspects of the growing beauty industry originally offered women a way to get out of traditional roles and an easy way to gain economic independence. We can look to examples of this today in China and India where the movement from Amber/traditional to Orange/modern worldviews is presently in full effect and the beauty industry has all but exploded.

It was in reaction to this cultural elevation that the postmodern feminists were attempting to deconstruct beauty and unhinge the growing beauty obsession that they could see was spinning out of control. It soon became an emotional fight for feminists who were moving into a Green worldview while the larger culture around them only seemed to be solidifying its competitive stance. It was this reaction that created one of the major splits that Hannah Wilke was attempting to address in her own work and life, specifically the split between feminism and culture.

Postmodern feminism was rightly reacting against what was becoming a rampant, internalized "lookism" that was dividing women further from one another and creating an increasing culture of obsessive and superficially narcissistic females. The Green worldview was attempting to bring women together rather than divide them, and provide a more inclusive paradigm that could hopefully correct what was becoming an increasingly toxic, competitive society filled with jealousy and self-interest.

So where did all this well intentioned care and inclusiveness go wrong? It starts with the inherent problem that postmodern feminism (and feminism in general) has largely refused to acknowledge zone-#2 realities, namely the existence of developmental levels. And due to this sometimes vehement refusal to acknowledge development (for the notion of “stages” resonates too closely to our memories of oppressive hierarchical systems), feminism would never truly be able to see the source of the real problem. It is because of this flatland view of reality that the best intentioned approaches were bound to go terribly wrong.

Because Green altitude has trouble seeing developmental complexity, it makes sense that postmodern feminists would look to beauty itself as the problem and thus see the need to “get rid of it,” for it was this idea of beauty that was causing all the problems in the first place, right? If we take an integral perspective that willingly acknowledges and embraces stages of developmental unfolding (honours the validity of zone #2), we can begin to see the issue from a different angle. Through the eyes of a Second-Tier perspective, we begin to see that it is not beauty in itself that is the problem here but rather an Orange stage of aesthetic development that has gone horribly awry. This unhealthy aesthetic stage is, as I mentioned earlier, characteristically marked by its Red narcissistic underbelly which really only uses Orange cognition and technologies to exploit its own limited understanding of the beautiful. This unhealthy Orange interpretation of beauty thus continues to be increasingly solidified in our shared socio-cultural sphere by both men and women as we co-create our own aesthetic prison. In this system, our interpretation of beauty has only exacerbated our separation and competition with one another and that is the real problem, not beauty in itself, which I believe actually has the power to heal this split.

Feminists were unaware of this complexity because they had no room in their paradigm to incorporate zone-#2 realities and thus had no tools to spot the contours and complexities of both healthy and unhealthy development or to know how to correct them. Because of this lack of developmental sensitivity, beauty itself was made into the enemy of the feminist movement rather than recognizing that the real enemy to the emergence of Green values was actually a deeply stuck and unhealthy stage of aesthetic development that only used beauty to support its own swelling pathology—increasing profits by stripping women of their own deepest potentials at as early an age as possible.

The postmodern feminist attempt to deconstruct beauty completely would only exacerbate this because they never addressed the real problem, which lies in a very stunted aesthetic line of development. And the pathological Orange/Red system would continue to gain tremendously from this deep misunderstanding. To get a better handle on what I am proposing, we can look at this misunderstanding in light of what Wilber calls a Line/Level Fallacy (LLF), the confusion of a level of development for the entire line itself.³⁵ It is the LLF that the postmodern feminists have unknowingly committed and needs to be unwoven and seen for the harm that it is doing. It all started when feminists had recognized the no longer useful Orange/Red interpretation of beauty (although they would not use this language). This “commodified aesthetic” was having increasingly toxic consequences, as could be witnessed by the growing rates of eating disorders, suicides, and low self-esteem among young women. But because feminists could not recognize the real problem, which was an Orange/Red level pathology within the aesthetic line (a line also capable of Green, Teal, Indigo, and Violet expressions), it chose what seemed like the only

proper solution, which was to throw out women's interior aesthetic line altogether, what became the exile of beauty in feminism. (I realize I am making a sweeping generalization here but I would argue that even if some feminists do not take this extreme stance, they are still unequipped to deal with this issue because most do not have a deep understanding of zone-#2 development). At the same time, the dominant socio-cultural sphere was becoming increasingly obsessed with its own Orange/Red fixation on the merely gross forms of beauty that are modern and rationalized and here is where we find the crux of the issue.

In an attempt to throw out the aesthetic line completely, feminism, perhaps unknowingly, took a swift turn into repressing all those fundamental human questions that only the aesthetic line can answer for women. At this point, any woman who now expressed beauty (i.e., Hannah Wilke) became the site for the feminist shadow, an anger and resentment projected onto their own deepest unrealized potentials and longing. This became the stunting of the aesthetic line from above through *repression*. Simultaneously, the dominant culture was also perpetuating the stunting of the aesthetic line from below through its *fixation* at the Orange/Red level(s). What Wilber has termed the "pressure cooker" can be applied here in relation to what is occurring in the aesthetic line of development of women today.³⁶ Beauty has been fixated from below and deconstructed and repressed from above, and the problem is that, unlike some extreme postmodern feminists might like to believe, you cannot get rid of beauty; you cannot rid a human being of those fundamental questions and desires that only the aesthetic line can answer. And thus the aesthetic line for women remains severely stunted, with a growing temperature threatening to blow the lid off the pressure cooker as it leaves thousands of girls with severe physical and psychological damage in its wake. In this context, young women have one of two choices: to either identify with the feminists and repress their own deepest and highest expressions of beauty or identify with the dominant cultural images of beauty, which at least allows them to keep in touch with some form of their own beauty and aesthetic yearning but unfortunately at a very limited and pathological level.

So what is the role of feminism in the face of this toxic situation? I believe it starts with taking the lid off the pressure cooker from above by acknowledging developmental realities! This includes not only acknowledging vertical stage development but also horizontal state development. This additional acknowledgement of horizontal states would allow beauty to be seen and experienced not merely in the realm of gross surfaces, but also through subtle and causal apprehensions. Secondly, we need to stop reducing beauty to a pure construction of the LL and LR quadrants and honour the essential and unique role that beauty plays in every woman's life journey. By bringing in developmental sensitivity and a four-quadrant approach, we can allow young women free range to explore the contours of their own relationship to beauty. Through this act of permission we also begin to create space for the aesthetic line to breathe and blossom, unfurling into its own natural developmental unfolding through Green, Teal, and Indigo stages as well as subtle, causal, and nondual states where restrictive definitions of beauty that currently hold us no longer starve our deepest vision of the beautiful. And through the cultivation of deeper stages and states we find diverse new ways to express our own beauty, more expansive ways to appreciate each other's beauty as well as discover more rich avenues from which to contribute to the creation of beauty through our own unique artistic expressions. So that is my challenge to the future of the feminist movement, perhaps bold but nothing less than necessary.

3-2-1 Practice for Integrating the Shadow of Beauty

In order to deal with strong shadow elements that can often come up in my being surrounding issues of jealousy and judgement of other women, I have found the cultivation of a specific 3-2-1 shadow practice to be especially useful.³⁷ I start by putting on a piece of soothing music. Then, lying on my bed, I attempt to release as much tension from my body as possible by connecting with the rhythm of my breath, first filling up my belly, then my solar plexus, and then my chest. With a relaxed body, I gently close my eyes and bring forward a visualization of a specific woman in my life that I am currently jealous of because of her beauty. I then stand her in front of me to the left and take a moment to silently scan her body and look into her eyes, thus taking in the third-person contours of my object of jealousy. I then move into a second-person dialogue with my object of jealousy by letting all the emotions and voices arise that need to come to the surface as I look at her, and if I am in a good space, I can also allow her to speak back to me with any reactions I believe she might experience from my outburst.

With my object of jealousy situated to my left, I then bring forward a visualization of someone in my life who I have categorized as ugly, someone who perhaps induces a kind of fear in me and unleashes my own insecurity. I then place that woman on my right and go through the same process with my object of insecurity that I previously went through in relation to my object of jealousy. After this initial confrontation and dialogue with my two shadows, I ask each of them to look at each other and then back at me as I breathe through and release the many voices, emotions, memories, and judgements that these two women have provoked in me. As all these distractions begin to wash into the background, I focus on looking directly into their eyes.

It is important at this point that I initiate physical contact with these women by taking both of their hands before gesturing our flight up into the air. With one woman on each side we release into laughter and joy as we take in the beauty of the open scenery and the freedom of our flight away from worldly concerns. I usually imagine flying over an ocean, letting our bodies become lighter and more transparent as we scan the beauty of nature all around us and feel less attached to the limits of our physical form. In the last visualization, I again look them both in the eyes, all of us acknowledging the Divine Identity that streams equally within us and also the pain that exists in the relative separation we experience between us. I then invite them both into myself, giving full permission for both the beauty and the pain to enter my heart and allowing both these women to merge their souls into my body, letting my heart receive them equally before filling it with light.

After this visualization, I can often experience intense emotions of love and sadness and I find it helpful to write in my journal immediately following the exercise so that I can remember the textures and qualities it evoked in me and let these women into my first-person experience. I have found this visualization helps me not only expand my compassion for others but also allows me to become the bridge for the many selves within my own being, reclaiming both the pain and beauty and finding the divine that resides within it all.

Expressing Beauty through Art

As I have mentioned throughout this article, a woman's relationship to her own beauty determines the health of her relationship to the Shakti force itself. And because Shakti is so intimately related to creativity, a healthy relationship to the development of our own aesthetic line is central for the fullest expression of our own unique gift of creativity. Finding an outlet for artistic expression was one of the major transformative tools that allowed me to express my own radiance without the normal chains that I often experienced on my own aesthetic perception. By connecting with our own creative talent, and expressing our gift of beauty back to the world, we also come to expand our definition of beauty and our unique relationship to beauty as women.

Art offers a way for us to find our own resonance with the deeper breath of beauty running through us and can empty us more and more as we participate in the offering of it to others. In this way, art connects us to our Infinity and offers a mode to see through the illusions of our own limitations, while also embracing them simultaneously. I believe artistic practice to be a key tool for exploring and touching the ever-present states that are available to us (gross, subtle, causal, and nondual). Thus, art is a perfect practice for unsticking the pathological grasp that may be currently holding our aesthetic line in its stiff grip.

Through these expressions of beauty that tap us into higher states, we also create channels of connection through the apparent separation that we experience between one another. And depending on our degree of receptivity to these channels and the vibrations they carry, we can help each other to find our way Home in our ability to touch and be touched by the free gift of beauty that streams through all different forms of artistic expression. In One word, One sound, One touch brought forth by the flow of artistic expression, we can bring healing to others and ourselves as we momentarily become both the giver and the receiver of beauty and merge with that shared movement of mysteriously arising grace. As we become Shakti herself, as the Devi becomes manifest within us, we offer a touch of grace through our voices and hands that has the power to bring us as women to the center of our One shared Divine Identity, before finally extending itself outward in release beyond all limitations of gender and form.

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NOTES

- ¹ Halprin, "Look at my ugly face!": *Myths and musings on beauty and other perilous obsessions with women's appearance*, 1995, p. 2
- ² Steiner, *Venus in exile: The rejection of beauty in 20th century art*, 2001, p. 21
- ³ Consult Etcoff, *Survival of the prettiest: The science of beauty*, 1999.
- ⁴ Lambert, *The face of love: Feminism and the beauty question*, 1995, p. xi
- ⁵ Lambert, *The face of love: Feminism and the beauty question*, 1995, p. 28
- ⁶ Etcoff, *Survival of the prettiest: The science of beauty*, 1999, p. 242
- ⁷ Steiner, *Venus in exile: The rejection of beauty in 20th century art*, p. 125
- ⁸ Steiner, *Venus in exile: The rejection of beauty in 20th century art*, p. xvii
- ⁹ Hansen, Dybbol & Goddard, *Hannah Wilke: A retrospective*, 1998, p. 6
- ¹⁰ Hansen, Dybbol & Goddard, *Hannah Wilke: A retrospective*, 1998, p. 10
- ¹¹ Frueh, *Hannah Wilke: A retrospective*, 1989, p. 52
- ¹² Frueh, *Hannah Wilke: A retrospective*, 1989, p. 52
- ¹³ Hansen, Dybbol & Goddard, *Hannah Wilke: A retrospective*, 1998, p. 26
- ¹⁴ Hansen, Dybbol & Goddard, *Hannah Wilke: A retrospective*, 1998, p. 26
- ¹⁵ Hansen, Dybbol & Goddard, *Hannah Wilke: A retrospective*, 1998, p. 26
- ¹⁶ Frueh, *Hannah Wilke: A retrospective*, 1989, p. 52
- ¹⁷ Frueh, *Hannah Wilke: A retrospective*, 1989, p. 44
- ¹⁸ Hansen, Dybbol & Goddard, *Hannah Wilke: A retrospective*, 1998, p. 28
- ¹⁹ For further information on the masculine/feminine typologies see Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006, pp. 11-15.
- ²⁰ Kelly, *Encyclopedia of aesthetics* (Vol. 3), 1998, p. 33
- ²¹ Kelly, *Encyclopedia of aesthetics* (Vol. 3), 1998, p. 37
- ²² Rose & Sanders, "A dialogue about the philosophy of Levinas," n.d.
- ²³ Jantzen, *Becoming divine: Towards a feminist philosophy of religion*, 1998, p. 237
- ²⁴ Jantzen, *Becoming divine: Towards a feminist philosophy of religion*, 1998, p. 251
- ²⁵ Jantzen, *Becoming divine: Towards a feminist philosophy of religion*, 1998, p. 252
- ²⁶ Irigaray, *Key writings*, 2004, p. 20
- ²⁷ Irigaray, *Key writings*, 2004, p. 20
- ²⁸ Irigaray, *Key writings*, 2004, p. 176
- ²⁹ Irigaray, *Key writings*, 2004, p. 22
- ³⁰ See the W-C lattice in Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006, p. 90
- ³¹ Irigaray, *Key writings*, 2004, p. 31
- ³² Irigaray, *Key writings*, 2004, p. 101
- ³³ Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006, p. 60
- ³⁴ This understanding of aesthetic line typologies came largely from personal communication with aesthetic philosopher, Michael Schwartz, who shared with me his art interpretation of Massacio's, "Expulsion" or "Fall," from the Brancacci Chapel. Schwartz understands this art piece as an archetypal image of post-medieval Western views of the masculine and feminine, as embodied by Adam and Eve. A quick reading of the image in these terms: Adam covers his sight, Eve her breasts and genital region—these are the features of themselves that they have become self-conscious about and ashamed of as well. Adam is an ashamed Seer, the self as subject; Eve is the ashamed Seen, the self as embodied object. The tantric expansion of these more contracted moments are, following Deida and others, the Masculine as the eternal witness that is Shiva and the Feminine as the perpetual energetic-embodied dance that is Shakti—together uniting as Conscious Light.
- ³⁵ Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006, p. 184
- ³⁶ For Wilber's use of this metaphor consult *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006, p. 181
- ³⁷ To learn more about the 3-2-1 shadow process consult Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006, p. 136

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VANESSA D. FISHER is currently working towards her undergraduate degree in religion, literature and the arts at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Dedicated to her academic career and writing as spiritual practice, she hopes to enter into a Master's program where she can extend her research and ideas on an AQAL based understanding of beauty for future generations. Vanessa has co-authored a publication in the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* (2005), entitled "Awakening the Divine Feminine: A Stepmother-Daughter Collaborative Journey through Art-Making and Ritual."