



## The Body of Mary:

# Critiquing Gender in Profane Marian Images

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### Abstract

This paper offers a glimpse into preliminary findings in my doctoral research, an Arts-Based Research project in collaboration with 11 artists – who created original artwork for the project – exploring meanings of femininity in contemporary non-devotional images of the Virgin Mary. The image of Mary provides an effective symbol of social understandings and expectations of womanhood and femininity, and the majority of the participating artists use it to explore and denounce gender-based oppression, stigma, and inequalities. Mary's body becomes a focal point in the artworks as her image gets re-purposed and re-shaped, not only as a reference to patriarchal values – sexualised violence and double standards – but also as a relatable (cis)woman combating contemporary struggles – the taboo around menstruation and the ejection of the realities of early motherhood from public spaces. In order to access the meanings emerging for viewers, I ran a focus group where participants considered the artwork and discussed their views on Mary, femininity, and gender. Although the focus group's views mirrored those of the artists, the viewers did not perceive the artists' creative and political use of Marian imagery, and instead interpreted the Marys in the artworks and their bodies as 'traditional'.

### Keywords

The Virgin Mary,  
feminist art,  
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gender

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For centuries, the Virgin Mary's body has been a vehicle to transmit and reinforce power structures, morals, and systems of gender. Her status as the purest woman made her a model for womankind and femininity, and she has successfully embodied societies' ideals. Alongside the gender roles and expectations she successfully embodied, Mary's image has been denounced as an instrument of control, a problematic and oppressive model, setting an impossible standard. Although she remains a religious icon, her image has spilled into the secular realm, and is present in countless profane cultural artefacts and artworks. It is this type of images that my doctoral research focuses on. The aim is to explore the relation between femininity and Mary's imagery in the (perceived) secularised West, by examining the different dimensions of meaningfulness in profane Marian

images. I set out to access the three sites of meaning-creation as proposed by Rose (production, the image itself, and ‘audiencing’) by designing an Arts-Based Research project centred on an art exhibition: I recruited artists to participate in the research by producing original artwork for the project and to later interview them; I studied the images through the curation of a public exhibition displaying the artwork; and I engaged with the images’ audience by running a focus group with visitors to the exhibition, where we discussed the artwork and the participants created their own profane images of Mary. This is a collaborative project, where I draw from the artists’ contribution of the results of their research on Mary and their artistic practice: a diverse and rich [corpus of images](#), exploring various social issues, most of them gender-related. The [11 artists](#) come from five countries (Ecuador, Mexico, Spain, the UK, and the USA) in which Western Christianity predominates. In this article I will present a summary of how the artists worked with Mary’s body to engage in social critique and how, in turn, the focus group participants interpreted the bodies depicted as adhering to tradition rather than challenging it.

Overall, the artists that focused on critiquing gender expectations in their artwork did not pursue creating an alternative new image of Mary, but rather mostly re-purposed existing Marian imagery to visibilise certain attitudes towards women and taboos surrounding the female body. The clearest examples are the Ecuadorian artists Pamela Pazmiño and Tania Lombeida Miño’s work, as both reproduce existing classical religious artworks created by men in their photoengravings and look to change their meaning by surrounding them with new text and images. Pazmiño’s [Entre santas y pecadoras](#) (Between Saints and Sinners) plays with the age-old Madonna-whore dichotomy. She selected four images, two containing saints and two containing whores, and changed their titles to mock patriarchal attitudes towards female sexuality. The sinners are marked by their nudity and their torture: in [La de los pechos es mi mujer](#) (The One with the Breasts Is My Wife) a woman is being held against her will while two men are being crucified in the background, indicating that she might be next; and [Deliciosa, vana y adúltera](#) (Delicious, Vain, and Adulterous) shows a hellish vision full of naked people being tortured by demons. The humorous titles diffuse the ghastriness of the images and highlight the role (deviant) sexuality still plays in judging and punishing women. The casual tone of *La de los pechos es mi mujer* – as if the speaker was simply identifying their wife in a photograph – lightens the scene while it brings our attention to the woman’s breasts, emphasizing her nudity and sexuality in an absurd way. Similarly, the use of the word “delicious” in *Deliciosa, vana y adúltera* gives the phrase a sensory overtone of guilty pleasure that makes the title almost comical: in Spanish, it has strong food connotations – it reminds me of a sensual yogurt or ice-cream advertisement – although it can be used (not commonly) to describe someone as being sensual. Moreover, it almost renders the moral judgement ridiculous, as an inherent quality (being sensual) is put on a par with the sins of vanity and adultery. By contrast, in the images of the saints, the humour is more directly targeted towards them. In [La quita piojos](#) (The One Who Removes Lice), a nun (Santa Mariana de Jesus) is catechising the poor and evangelising Indigenous children, showing her pious and caring nature, but the title removes any aura of sanctity by referring to her as a “lice remover”. [La que lo tiene todo](#) (The One Who Has It All) also teases the Virgin Mary, who is depicted with her child and wearing the crown of heaven. Although Mary is “blessed [...] among women” (Luke 1:42), revered around the globe, crowned queen of

heaven, she most certainly does not have it all – she has no sexuality, and even no personality.

Lombeida Miño's work takes a darker turn, as it revolves around sexualised violence against women. The seven pieces of [Un Ensayo sobre "La Dormición de la Virgen"](#) (An Essay on the Dormition of the Virgin) juxtapose depictions of the dormition of the Virgin Mary with snippets of forensic reports of femicides in Ecuador. The reports describe the gruesome aftermath of the murders of seven anonymous women, most of them including abuse, and some committed by jealous (ex)partners. These are connected to the peaceful dying Marys and dead saints (Santa Teresa, Santa Rosa, and Santa Cecilia) through medicalised images of the female reproductive system, underlining the physical consequences on Ecuadorian women's bodies that the colonial system enforced and continues to impose through images of the Virgin Mary and religious values around sexuality brought to South America by Jesuit missionaries. The piece creates a stark contrast between the idealised Virgin Mary who goes to heaven "*sin pasar por la muerte*", spared from the ordeal of death, and the violent and sexualised deaths of so many anonymous women. Mary is revered for her motherhood and her virginity, while the rest of womankind is almost worthless, killed and abused for their gender, sex, and sexuality.

In [Untitled](#), Gabriela Corradini also uses a pre-existing Marian image to deliver her criticism of rigid gender expectations for women, in her own words: "it restricts your femininity, when a femininity is imposed on you". The piece pictures a trapped female figure fighting to free herself from a mould of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. It expresses the notion of an ill-fitting and even oppressive social ideal against which one must battle in order to claim the right to exist differently. Amongst the artists, there was a generalised acknowledgement that womanhood and femininity are socially understood to encompass the roles of mother and wife, but many of them expressed having a different personal sense of how to be a woman. For instance, Celia says she is "claiming the rights of women, to not just be a mother and wife, but also to be a woman.", and Gabriela notes that "one thing is how I feel as a woman and another is how people believe I should be because I am a woman". Similarly, when asked if femininity and maternity are linked, Silvia replied: "Not to me. I believe they are culturally. It's like, like the first clear characteristic used to define us. To me, personally, they are not.", and Pamela also expressed that "you can deconstruct femininity. You cannot follow the patterns, the traditional roles and, be a woman. Perhaps not necessarily feminine".

The artists respond to this constraining and inhibiting prescriptiveness with their critique, but they do not present an alternative. Although from an iconographic point of view some of these images are quite innovative, they all use a traditional body for Mary: a young, slim, female body. The artists have established a connection with Mary through their shared, lived experience as cis-gendered women and using it to denounce issues they face as women. Moreover, their critiques of the oppressiveness of the gender expectations that Mary symbolises rely on pointing them out rather than subverting them. And so, none of the [artworks](#) depict Mary doing anything unexpected in relation to gender.

In contrast, there are also pieces that use Marian imagery to highlight what the artists consider to be positive and overlooked aspects of womanhood. In [La Virgen de la Leche](#) (Our

Lady of the Milk) Victoria Inglés denounces the hypocrisy of a society that sexualises the female body but cannot bear public breastfeeding. Her tender depiction of Mary as a young mother breastfeeding her child is a very classical image in its composition, reminiscent of innumerable paintings of breastfeeding Virgin Marys, but the modern Mary and Jesus are relegated to a public toilet. Similarly, Maria Amparo Gomar Vidal's [Our Lady of the Menstruation \(Bloody Mary\)](#) tackles head-on the taboo of menstruation by presenting the viewer with the artist's period blood, shaping a Virgin Mary with it, and by forcing the viewer to consider whether Mary bled or not. The cloth is carefully and deliberately stained with blood, creating an almond-shaped stain evoking medieval mandorlas, and the contour created by so many Virgin Marys and their veils. Menstrual blood is still a taboo that transcends geographical and cultural borders, and this was in fact the only piece censored in the exhibition I curated at YorkExplore - York's city centre public library. Interestingly, there was no issue raised with *Un Ensayo sobre "La Dormición de la Virgen"*, despite the graphic nature of the medical images of vulvas and the horrific forensic reports. This censorship implied that female genitalia are acceptable to be seen but their product is not, and that violence against women is more palatable than menstrual bleeding. Unfortunately, I never received an explanation from senior management as to why the piece could not be shown, but I was able to circumvent the censorship by providing viewers with a QR code linking to an online image of the artwork, making public the censorship of *Bloody Mary*. Not only did this accentuate the taboos tackled by the artwork, making it even more poignant, but it also brought greater attention to the piece and compelled the viewer to reflect on why such a piece would have been censored.

As part of the exhibition, I organised a focus group in the form of a workshop in which viewers discussed their impressions of the artworks and created their own profane images of Mary. The participants' discussion focused on their views of Mary and gender and mirrored the artists': critiquing the constrictive gender expectations Mary has come to represent; while also admiring Mary's strength and questioning social attitudes towards women, particularly around menstruation and motherhood. The images the participants produced also echoed the artists': they, too, connected with Mary through their personal womanhood and created images of Mary after themselves (figure A), as a "normal woman" (figure B), or as a mother (figure C). This reflects how historically Mary's body and lived experience - her motherhood, her suffering - have been a means to connect to the construct of 'woman' and inculcate in us patriarchal gender norms. The focus group, and many of the artists, recognised in Marian imagery those patriarchal values and they worked against them by also using Mary's body and lived experience to create alternative connections to those affirmed by patriarchal imagery. Interestingly, despite the parallels between the focus group and the artists - in their views and images - the former interpreted the artworks displayed as a corpus of mostly traditional, blue, passive, praying Marys. Although the artists critiqued social attitudes towards gender and experimented with iconography, they largely relied on traditional Marian imagery, without subverting Mary's gender or her performance of it, which prevented the focus group from recognising their shared concerns behind the images.



Figure A Drawing by Aida



Figure B. Drawing by Isabel



Figure C. Drawing by Nadia

With this short piece I have summarised how some of the artists collaborating in my research engaged with the Virgin Mary to critique social understandings of, and attitudes towards, womanhood and femininity; and how a group of viewers responded to, and mirrored, their work. In the artists' work Mary represents (cis)womanhood, mostly embodying the constrictive social aspects of it: Pazmiño teases dichotomous attitudes towards women's sexuality; Lombeida Miño denounces the violence female sexuality can bring; and Corradini highlights how stifling the construct of 'woman' can be. But the (cis)womanhood embodied by Mary is also vulnerable to oppression: Inglés brings to light the duplicity of social attitudes towards breasts as public sexualised objects, and private abject lactating flesh; and Gomar Vidal publicly displays one of the most prevalent taboos around female bodies. The artists have engaged with Mary's body, both by reproducing it in its traditional female form - Pazmiño, Lombeida Miño, Corradini, and Inglés - and by referring to it as a (relatable) female body - Corradini, Gomar Vidal, and Inglés. As reflected by the focus group's responses, the resulting images do not challenge viewers' expectations, Mary is still a cis-woman and she does not defy gender through her body or actions, and are viewed as traditional despite being effective and biting critical artworks that make viewers question social attitudes towards (cis)women.

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