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Madeline Beck

Kennesaw State University, mbeck10@students.kennesaw.edu

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Caitlin Keogh: Feminine Feminism

Cover Page Footnote

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Caitlin Keogh: Feminine Feminism

Madeline Beck and Dr. Diana McClintock (Faculty Advisor)
Kennesaw State University

ABSTRACT

The painter Caitlin Keogh (b. 1982) is a rising star in the Contemporary Art scene in the United States. Currently living and working in Brooklyn, New York, Keogh is one of countless emerging painters in the trendy arts hub, but her work is already receiving international attention and critical acclaim. Her refined use of flat figuration and bold but pastel colors combined with her striking subject matter has situated Keogh distinctly in the contemporary art scene today. Keogh's insertion of feminist discourse, personal identity, and appropriated imagery into her paintings begs a thorough analysis of her work. She implements themes and motifs of womanhood in her art in ways that force the viewer to reevaluate these symbols of femininity and what they fundamentally mean. Keogh does not reject her femininity or typically feminine imagery, but instead re-presents it in her unique style as a way to embrace the world of the female, while still critiquing problems of gender constructs. Keogh may be using typical feminine bodies and motifs, but in her representation the artist is ultimately questioning gender roles and identity, challenging the idea that there is any one way to be feminine or a feminist. Instead of her femininity working against or pigeonholing Keogh in the arts world, it has actually served her greatly—her nuanced perspective separates her from the masses and generates conceptual intrigue. This article investigates the art historical as well as the social implications of Keogh's body of work, which has yet to be thoroughly examined in Contemporary Art scholarship.

Keywords: feminist art, contemporary art, gender and women's studies

The painter Caitlin Keogh is a rising star in the Contemporary Art world. Within the past ten years, the 34-year-old artist has exhibited her work at high-caliber institutions in New York City, such as The Whitney Museum of American Art, MoMA PS1, Bortolami Gallery, and Mary Boone Gallery, as well as throughout Europe. Keogh was primed for a successful art career during her training in Paris, Cooper Union, and Bard in New York. Currently living and working in Brooklyn, Keogh is one among innumerable emerging painters in the arts hub, but her work is already receiving international attention and critical praise. Her representations and designs have received positive reviews from critics at

respected publications, such as *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*.

Caitlin Keogh's artistic style and technique is developed enough that her body of work is consistently recognizable and cohesive. She is distinct in her refined use of flat figuration, large-scale work, and saturated colors combined with contemplative subject matter. Her illustrative works evoke the aesthetic of Japanese woodblock prints and some of the crisp, graphic qualities of anime. As an example of Keogh's stylistic and subject choices, see *The Writer* (2014) [Figure 1]. Keogh applies such perfect, bold outlines and solid, flat fields of color that the

paintings have the impression of a mechanical print, yet her works are composed of acrylic paint evenly applied to large canvases.

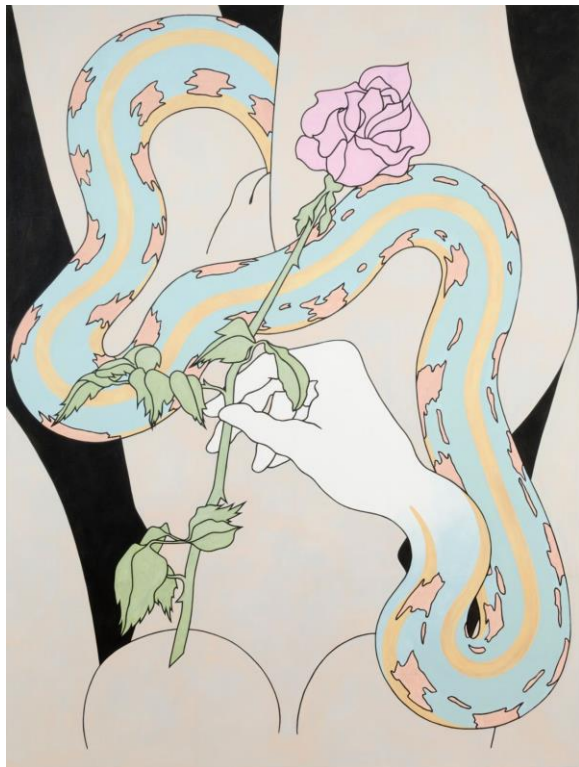


Figure 1. Keogh, Caitlin. "The Writer." Digital image. Bortolami Gallery. Accessed August 17, 2017. <http://bortolamigallery.com/artist/caitlin-keogh/works>.

The simplicity of Keogh's paintings prompted Ken Johnson of *The New York Times* to label Keogh a "semiskilled artist," explaining that she, "draw[s] on methods associated with commercial illustration and design in order to play with public signifiers and personal poetics."¹ Her representative

¹ Ken Johnson, "'Flatlands,' Where the Familiar Becomes Hypnotically Strange," accessed July 16, 2017, *The New York Times*. January 28, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/29/arts/design>

gallery, Bortolami Gallery, states that Keogh's work, "plays with, and undermines, the traditional relationship between technical illustration and painting."² These facets of her work are arguably why Keogh is so popular in the art scene today. Younger generations are expanding the expectations and limitations of what can be considered beautiful and meaningful fine art.

Some critics describe Keogh as if she is a breath of fresh air amongst the trite, uninteresting art that proliferates in the mainstream art scene, especially amongst emerging artists in New York City today. Reading critical reception of Keogh's work suggested an inkling of the Post-Modernism of thirty to forty years ago. Keogh's inclusion of feminist discourse, personal identity, and appropriated imagery in her paintings evokes the refreshing conceptual art made by women at the beginning of Post-Modernism. In published reviews of Keogh's work, critics write about today's art scene in a way that almost bemoans its current domination by male artists and their arrogantly abstract or painfully dull painting.³ Alex Jovanovich of *Artforum* wrote that Keogh's work thankfully differs from the "slopped-out, dudely, abstractionist facture littering Chelsea and far beyond."⁴ The use of the phrase, "slopped-out dudely" implies a critical appreciation for Keogh's

[/flatlands-where-the-familiar-becomes-hypnotically-strange.html](http://flatlands-where-the-familiar-becomes-hypnotically-strange.html).

² <http://bortolamigallery.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CK-Loose-Ankles-2016.pdf?a3adaa>, accessed July 16, 2017.

³ "'Flatlands' Review," accessed July 16, 2017, *The New Yorker*, January 2016. http://bortolamigallery.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CK_NewYorker_January2016.pdf?a3adaa;

⁴ Alex Jovanovich, "Caitlin Keogh," accessed July 16, 2017, *Artforum*. n/d. <https://www.artforum.com/index.php?pn=picks&id=50622&view=print>.

refined, feminine softness and affinity for deliberate, recognizable subject matter in conveying a greater feminist narrative.

In her art, Keogh represents a plethora of female imagery ranging from anatomical, to pop cultural and art historical. Bortolami states that Keogh “appropriates imagery of the past to get viewers to reconsider imagery, especially that targeted women.” She fashions these themes and motifs in ways that force the viewer to reevaluate symbols of femininity and what they fundamentally mean. Keogh does not reject femininity or typically feminine imagery, but instead re-presents it in her unique style as a way to embrace the world of the female, while still commenting on the problems of gender constructs and expectations. Keogh may be using typical feminine bodies and motifs, but in her representation she is ultimately questioning gender roles and identity, challenging the idea that there is any one way to be feminine or a feminist.

Keogh’s painting titled, *Intestine and Tassels*, is exemplary of her work’s overall thematic elements and technical approach [Figure 2]. The painting was created in 2015 and is acrylic paint upon a large 84 x 63 inch canvas.⁵ Against a neutral beige background, a starkly white female torso is adorned with a variety of intricately coiled and interwoven elements. The chain necklaces and knotted rope of tassels complement and echo the complex twining of the exposed gastrointestinal tract. Atlanta-based art critic Jerry Cullum stated that this lifeless form being wrapped up in its tassel is “emphasizing the torso’s status as an object of culturally chosen decoration, in

⁵ <http://bortolamigallery.com/artist/caitlin-keogh/>, accessed July 16, 2017.

which nature can appear only in a severely cleaned-up version.”⁶

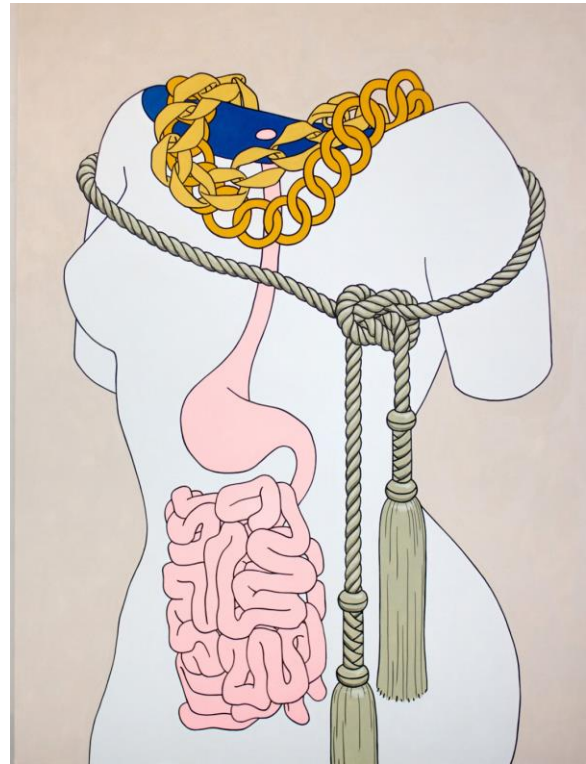


Figure 2. Keogh, Caitlin. “*Intestine and Tassels*.” Digital image. Bortolami Gallery. Accessed August 17, 2017. <http://bortolamigallery.com/artist/caitlin-keogh/works>

The body’s form is feminine, as defined by the contour of the breast and hourglass figure. That is all this form has, though, besides its lone viscera and decorative accouterment. The figure is without a head, left with a transverse cut across the shoulders. The hole that remains reveals a vacant, royal blue internal cavity. The form is headless, armless, and motionless—fully incapable of having any life-like function.

⁶ Jerry Cullum, “‘Gut Feelings’ uses food as an exploration of culture and nature’s collisions,” accessed July 16, 2017, *ArtsATL*. April 18, 2017. <http://artsatl.com/review-gut-feelings-food-exploration-culture-natures-collisions/>

Yet, the form retains one thing so very critical to any living being: the digestive system. The body is opened and transparent, exposing the form's pristine innards—the esophagus, stomach, and small intestine. But this digestive system is left abandoned with no mouth to bring in foods and no large intestine to lead waste out.

Color is abnormal and symbolic here; the body is white, utterly bloodless and thus weak and void. Her whiteness could allude to expected traits of innocence or cleanliness, which constitutes investigation given that the application of white is intended to represent the color of a woman's flesh. The digestive system is rendered a feminine, soft matte pink that makes such a display of internal organs less grotesque. The female body has been cleansed, removed of any human realness or grossness, and transformed into a lifeless form. This painting alludes to the social commodification and idealization of women's bodies into perfect objects of consumption. Our culture does this to women's bodies to the point of losing personal necessities of identity, completeness and autonomy. Keogh paints this figure as strong and alluring but constricted, exposed, prettified and isolated. She has put forth the idea that objects of beauty are groomed to be sexy and captivating, but are also forced to be vulnerable and void of any raw humanness.

In terms of iconography, the most noticeable motif in this painting is the set of gold chain-link necklaces draped over the shoulders of the neck-less form. The necklaces are directly appropriated from the German Renaissance painting *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (c.1530) by Lucas Cranach the Elder [Figure 3].⁷ The story of Judith and Holofernes tells of a woman who

⁷ Ibid.

used her sex appeal to ultimately decapitate a lusty, rapacious foreign general who was threatening her homeland.

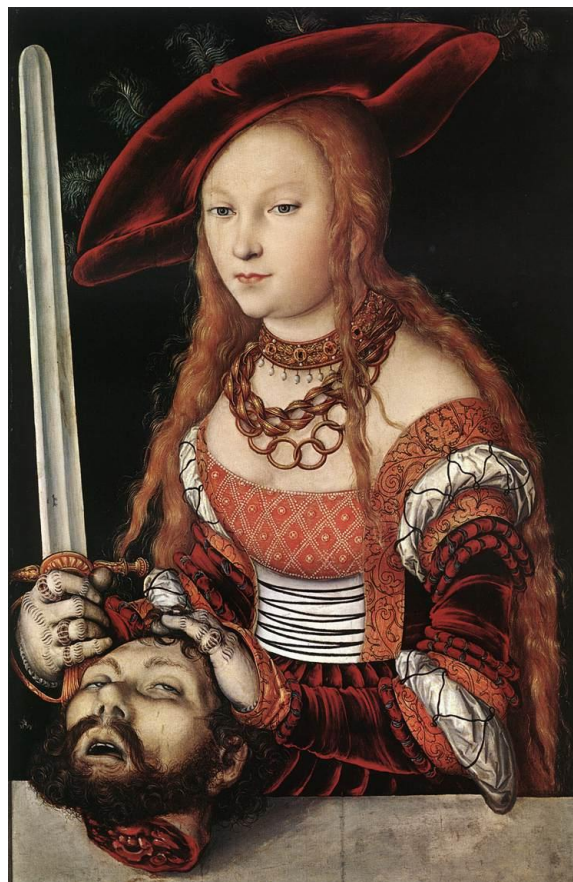


Figure 3. Lucas Cranach the Elder. "Judith with the Head of Holofernes." Digital image. Google Arts & Culture. Accessed August 17, 2017. <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/kgGcB1gO9zYlsg>

In the painting by Cranach the Elder, Judith blankly stares out at the viewer who she vacantly looks past, which suggests a sense of trauma. The corner of Judith's mouth turns up slightly as she holds the decapitated head of Holofernes, invoking the assertion of her pride in this act of female violence and power. This original story of Judith and Holofernes contains significant feminist connotations and has generated much feminist scholarship of its portrayal in art.

Parallels between the tale and Keogh's artistic themes include violence and the female body, confounding of gender roles, and the reclamation of sex appeal to gain dominance over men. Keogh's figures often allude to violence and violation of the female body, but maintain her narrative of feminine strength and the relentless battle against such pains.

Her figure in *Intestine and Tassels* (and most of her other paintings) is headless like Holofernes but still dons the jewelry of Judith. She has appropriated imagery from a man's representation of female strength and inserted it into her conceptual work on gender expectations. Sherman and Phipps conclude that Keogh takes the violence of the scenario "a step further. These dualities are reminders that, despite decades of advancements by feminist artists, the female body continues to be a site for anyone's gaze, an object to be manipulated into fantasy and stripped of its own agency."⁸ The tassels are ornamental objects that allude to domesticity and the womanly realm of home decor; but the rope with tassels is used in this scenario as a tool of bondage that directly summons themes of the suppression and relegation of women. The necklaces symbolize female strength while the exposed digestive organs cry defenselessness. Neatly wrapped around the figure, enveloping both the strength and weakness, is the constrictive rope of societal expectation.

The sanitized destruction of a female body can be seen again in Keogh's *The Illustrator* from 2014, measuring 96 x 72 inches [Figure 4].⁹ Keogh's use of large canvas sizes may suggest its own thematic purpose; maintaining a larger than life

presentation makes the paintings' simplistic style more impactful and engaging.

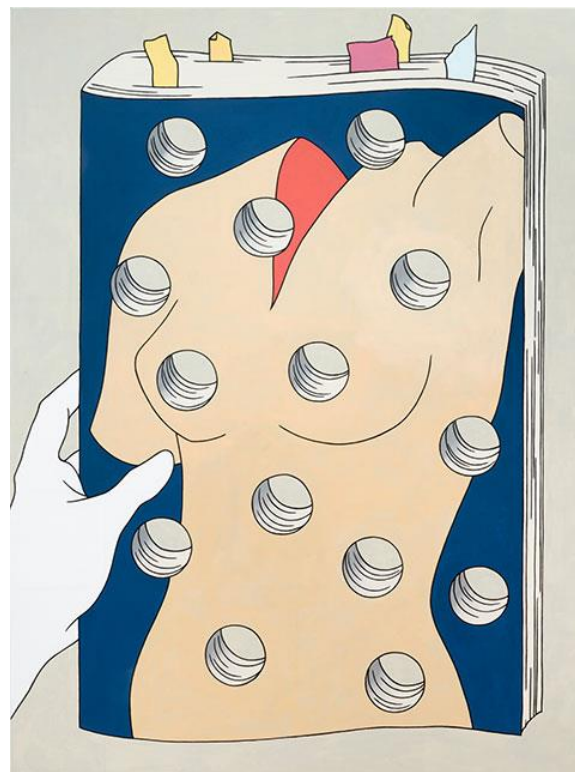


Figure 4. Keogh, Caitlin. "The Illustrator." Digital image. *It's Nice That*. Accessed August 17, 2017. <http://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/caitlin-keogh-loose-ankles-141016>

Their size also supports the idea that even though missing heads or exposed organs have marred these figures, they are still mighty and capable of asserting a commanding presence. Being female or feminine does not necessarily imply being small and demure. In *The Illustrator*, Keogh has painted a large, white hand holding out a book flagged with sticky notes. Perhaps since Keogh is so inspired by fashion magazines, the book shown here is a classically thick copy of *Vogue*, which would explain the mannequin-like form on

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://bortolamigallery.com/artist/caitlin-keogh/>, accessed July 16, 2017.

the cover.¹⁰ The form is armless and headless, quite similar to the one in *Intestine and Tassels*, but this one is decapitated differently; her head is removed with only a gaping sagittal gash remaining. The insides are again bloodless and clean, but this time the internal cavern is rendered a deep salmon color. Instead of a white figure, the torso adorning the magazine cover has fair toned flesh. Keogh's forms are sometimes painted white or pale-skinned, which conjures a variety of conversations regarding the intersection of race and gender and the social symbolism of color. As a white artist, Keogh is likely painting these abstracted female forms in a self-referential way, which could explain her proclivity for the white figure. Many of her forms are often rendered drained and colorless, which also may be implying our white-dominated society's constant desire to whitewash and dilute women of color, both physically and culturally.

The book and the figure upon its cover are punctured with fourteen round holes. The body of the woman is lifeless and useless, which is echoed by the punctured book that would now be illegible. This text, once instilled with importance and value as indicated by the many bookmarks, is now just as useless as the headless, armless body that once also would have had function. The hand that holds the book is pure white and appears feminine. It may be gloved in white fabric, suggesting a context of elitism and sanitation. The way the hand holds the book

suggests that it is the viewer's hand, that the viewer is assuming the role of whoever is holding the text. Keogh highlights the role of the viewer in this way, exaggerating the objectified nature of the female form and our role as the gazer. The whiteness of the hand also supports this notion in regards to the previous discussion of color usage, for it is the symbolic white hand holding up and gazing upon the damaged book of female bodies.



Figure 5. Keogh, Caitlin. "Wuthering Nephron (aka Renaissance Painting)." Artnet. Accessed August 7, 2017. <http://www.artnet.com/artists/caitlin-keogh/renaissance-painting-a-hS-K4tB9Mhotznph8dnIKQ2>

¹⁰ "I'll crack open any fashion magazine and get pretty excited about texture, color, narrative, craft and desire." "Artist Caitlin Keogh on Finding Inspiration and the Perfect Studio Uniform," accessed July 16, 2017, *Garmentory*, October 5, 2015.

<http://magazine.garmentory.com/2015/10/05/artist-caitlin-keogh-on-finding-inspiration-and-the-perfect-studio-uniform/>.

In a different type of representation, *Wuthering Nephron* (2016) does not display a gendered body at all and thus introduces a new aspect to Keogh's message that is not directly about the female experience. The subject is a cold set of medieval-era

breastplate and faulds armor adorned with soft, pink endocrine and exocrine glands from human anatomy [Figure 5].¹¹ There is no corporal form occupying the armor, though, just lone, glandular adornment. On the chest is a thymus gland, an integral part of the human immune system. In the place of breasts, two mammary glands evoke hydrangea flowers, suggesting the procreative nature of these symbols. This is the only motif in the painting that could specifically allude to the female. Also shown affixed to the metal breastplate are a pancreas and two kidneys. Where any reproductive organs would lie there is just a dangling red rose. Gender ambiguity is clearly the intended theme of this painting. The tissues depicted are universal to both genders, even the mammary glands. The drooping rose could allude to the male sex organs, but it is also a known symbol of femininity. A historically male uniform of war is softened with delicate hormonal glands, some commonly perceived as solely female. This armor is rendered useless, for it is not protecting the exposed internal organs. In reference to Keogh's art in general, but especially relevant to *Wuthering Nephron*, *Artforum's* Alex Jovanovich wrote, "Keogh has appropriated from historically misogynistic sources and made entirely her own... destabilizing paint into maquillage, enhancing veneer into armor."¹² But, as in *Intestine and Tassels*, this display of the insides on the outside disturbs sacred human expectations of the body, which could comment on a variety of social complexities like gender essentialism and gender dysphoria. This breaks down the constant societal differences forced upon genders and reminds that we are, more or less, similarly structured beings capable of being equally vulnerable and stifled. The painting urges

viewers to rethink what we label as male or female.

If one were to assess Keogh's work without much thought, they would label it quite "girly" with its textile-like patterns, pastel pinks, and feminine imagery. Keogh embraces these qualities within herself and her art, but nonetheless the artist is able to put forth a more complex narrative. In other words, Keogh's works are very feminine, but it is a mistake to interpret that as meaning they are without serious social weight. Keogh's feminine, decorative touch does not preclude her works from being undeniably feminist—for the two are not mutually exclusive. Keogh expresses her feminized identity, greatly influenced by fashion advertising, in a way that celebrates the beauty of this imagery while still critiquing our society's history of female disenfranchisement. Keogh uses her feminine insight to raise questions of gender suppositions and identities. *Art in America* succinctly describes Keogh's art as "30s fashion illustration meets contemporaneous Surrealist fantasies, filtered through a theoretical lens informed by feminist psychoanalysis."¹³ Keogh has taken her technical skills for design and illustration and incorporated them into a fine art practice that is serving to speak the artist's message. Her massive works do not only require a fine-tuned ability for design composition, but also explore complicated and personal experiences of femininity and humanity in general. Her dreamlike presentations offer a sense of personal connection and investment in the figures, as if Keogh is using her style and forms to offer her perspective to the overall history of women in art and women as artists.

¹¹ <http://bortolamigallery.com/artist/caitlin-keogh/>, accessed July 16, 2017.

¹² Jovanovich, "Caitlin Keogh."

¹³ "Caitlin Keogh at Mary Boone," *Art in America: The Lookout*.

In an interview conducted with Keogh, a writer asked the artist what she thinks is the “perfect studio uniform” for painting. As I read this, I was skeptical of this interviewer’s interest in a woman artist merely to talk about something as mundane as her clothes. Keogh seemed eager to answer, though, and does in fact have a specific set of clothes and shoes she likes to wear while painting. She also stated that she likes to wear some makeup when she paints because it helps her focus.¹⁴ She enjoys fashion and makeup choices as an expression of her feminine interests. These aspects of her personality make her feel motivated and creative; she has taken aspects of femininity used to embroil women in their appearances and employs them in the process of creating art that fights against patriarchal expectation. This glimpse of Keogh’s personality contributes to my point stated throughout: women like Keogh can fight the patriarchy by reclaiming and being empowered by femininity. Keogh can use her art to relish femininity while still intelligently fighting with feminism. Instead of her femininity working against or pigeonholing Keogh in the art world, it has actually served her greatly—her nuanced perspective is separating her from the masses and generating conceptual intrigue. To conclude, this colorful statement by Alex Jovanovich of Caitlin Keogh says it all: “There’s nothing like a gracefully manicured edge to cut through all the shit.”¹⁵

¹⁴ “Artist Caitlin Keogh on Finding Inspiration and the Perfect Studio Uniform,” *Garmentory*.

¹⁵ Jovanovich, “Caitlin Keogh.”

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