The Virgin and the Temptress:
Scintillae

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

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Introduction

‘The breath of a goddess, Minerva, is to fill our sails, patroness of heroes...and we are to be guided by the Muses, teachers of all arts, pointing out to us the navigational stars. For although our voyage is to be outward, it is also to be inward, to the sources of all great acts, which are not out there, but in here, in us all, where the Muses dwell.’(Campbell 1972, p. 240)

Throughout art history the Muse has been a source of inspiration for artists, both figuratively and physically. Muses can symbolise, provoke ideas and reflect on the depth and breadth of our universe. The Muse can be a catalyst for creation, as well as the embodiment of the creation. The journey to create is exactly that: a journey. It is not always known what will be our source of inspiration, that pivotal moment when we are captivated and compelled. As a source of inspiration, the Muse is defined by the individual’s perception. They can be anyone or anything, from a plastic bag caught in a breeze, as depicted in the movie American Beauty, to a reclining nude in a classical painting: the internal processes of an artist are just as important as the external catalyst.

I have investigated from the artists’ perspective what drives them to create. What is their muse? Is it their passion and erotic desire, or feelings of love for their subject? Is it the quest to put meaning to life? Or is the mystery behind their art, their creation, a divine universal presence? God? What is at the core of longing? Is it the desire to encounter something more than just the physical? Perhaps it is the search for the experience of something sublime, such as spiritual illumination. Or is it as the following quote suggests, that ‘love is the closest that most people come to transcendence.’(Prose 2002, p. 5)

‘And since falling in love is the closest that most people come to transcendence, to the feeling of being inhabited by unwilled, unruly forces, passion became the model for understanding inspiration.’(Prose 2002, p. 5)

Love and desire are both common projections onto the muse. To fall in love is a powerful emotional experience; it can crack our walls and open our eyes to new ways of seeing. Historically the arts are filled with evidence of longing as a catalyst for inspiration which echoes through to modern times.

During the course of this research I have contemplated my three muses love, longing, and beauty. I have sifted through the archives looking for an explanation, a superior authority that can unravel their mystery. Although my search has not been fruitless, it falls short of articulating the feeling that I have experienced when I have embraced these muses. I can use words that for many conjure up and define these states such as: rapture, profound, ecstatic, but words fall short of imparting the experience. At times the qualities embodied by love, longing, and beauty have touched one of my photographic images. It is as though some magical force has been imbibed into the image and left its aura for those with eyes to see. It is this mystery that is at the essence of many great works of art. It is this mystical energy
that I have been striving to capture in this exhibition. When I look at art that has this quality it is as though the hand of a benevolent higher power has touched the piece.

As humans experiencing the world through our senses in a physical body it is as though we are all on a quest. Ultimately we are all on the journey of life trying to make sense of the world and put meaning to our reality. For many it is a quest for self fulfilment, or to find our identity. For others it is a voyage to find the mythical path toward illumination, enlightenment. The search to find ourselves, to return to our source, to feel whole and complete, is often articulated in art and religion. This pressing human need is present through the ages in countless forms. It is evident in the Greek philosophers’ discourses on love and spirituality, the longing in courtly love, and the sensuous rapture of Renaissance art. Through the course of this research I have explored this need, this longing, and what makes it such a significant catalyst in my art. I have furthered this exploration of longing by examining beauty as a transcendental catalyst.

The content of this exhibition is layered as is often the case in art. It is a visual exploration of love, longing, and desire, from the physical through to the sublime. The narrative also has several subtexts: one that explores female archetypes, the muse as a figurative source of inspiration and also beauty as a spiritual awakening. I have sought to represent a comprehensive vision of the female muse that embraces both the spiritual and the sensual. Though this is done through photographic imagery, the journey it evokes is an interior landscape that takes place in the purgatory that is “longing” and aims to ascend to a sublime state of stillness and peace through an experience of the “divine”.

__________________________________________________________________________
Love, Desire and Longing

“For like the sun that strikes the frailest eyes, so does the memory of her sweet smile deprive me of the use of my mind. From that first day when, in this life, I saw her face, until I had this vision, no thing ever cut the sequence of my song…”(Dante 1292)

When we examine the art archives, it is an interesting reflection of the history of love, beauty and spirituality. The artists’ longings and desires were often depicted through their work. Their canvases and written works are shrines to the many throws of passion and yearning, both carnal and transcendental. The written works of thirteenth century poet Dante exemplify the duality of physical and spiritual desire. Dante saw his child muse Beatrice, ‘from afar and felt her image branded on his heart forever.’(Prose 2002, p. 6) This prompted him to write as an adult a poem of forty-two verses inspired by his longing for Beatrice called the Vita Nuova, and the Divine Comedy.

There are many who have been moved by Dante’s prose of love for Beatrice. I was struck by his impassioned longing for the fulfilment of love and of his soul. It was this vision of yearning that inspired me to create the Beatrice series. I felt that Beatrice as a subject is a fantastic metaphor for humanity’s struggle for love and spiritual realization. She is the embodiment of this projection of “longing” that is often articulated in art, religion and culture. The intensity of her gaze is suggestive. What is it that she is pining for - love, Dante? Or are her sights set on her spiritual yearnings as she pauses on her cathartic journey through the seven levels of hell to heaven? She is after all Dante’s guiding muse and through this process of light captured on film she has become mine; a symbolic synthesis of the divine and the mortal.

Dante argued that, by falling in love, one could rise to a place of celestial happiness. The author Jeanette Winterson echoes Dante’s thoughts. In her novel The Passion she writes of love and its capacity to free us because it enables us to forget about ourselves. “our desire for another will lift us out of ourselves more cleanly than anything divine.” (Winterson 1987, p. 154) It is this duality of physical love and spiritual pining that is at the core of this exhibition and research. This is contrary to the traditional thoughts of the church, where the flesh and its desires are a challenge to overcome, or as is more commonly the case, suppressed, in order to attain the divine. Renaissance ideals are permeated with the Platonic thought that by overcoming sensuality, humanity will see beauty and love in its purest form; through denying the body they will acquire mastery and spiritual realisation.

In medieval France the nobles developed an intricate society where the art of desire flourished; it was aptly named courtly love. Courtly love provided the perfect cultural climate to perpetuate longing and desire. Its elaborate codes and etiquette enabled a game of arousal that accentuated all those heady emotions that occur during the initial stages of love; the fantasising and yearning for the ‘other’, the heights of bliss and the “agony of separation”. (Ackerman 1994, p. 55)
Virtue was one of the key components of courtly love. The knight would go through a series of trials set by a lady in an effort to endear themselves to her. Yet his quest was not to consummate their love, but to abstain in order to master himself. The idea was to love, but not possess. In essence courtly love was “a delirium of gorgeous unbearable longing.” (Ackerman 1994, p. 54) It was characterised by feelings of torment, unrequited love and the possible fulfilment of love. Joseph Campbell believes that they were redefining love as a “sublimating force” that elevated life into the spiritual plane. (Campbell 1991, p. 242)

An interesting point about courtly love is that it was primarily about the male’s experience and that it objectified women as the desired. This is a familiar theme in art, as historically the female form has been the embodiment of longing and desire and a primary source of inspiration for artists. A parallel shared by courtly love and religion, is that by her virtue the lady served as inspiration to ennoble the knight. This highlights a Christian influence, where the Virgin Mary, who is often seen by many as the embodiment of divine love, also ennobled through worship. As stated in the ABC radio national series Great Lovers, “There’s a degree of crossover between those discourses of romantic and erotic love and religious love.” (Smith 2003, p. 11) Yet despite this, the ideals of courtly love were not those of the churches - quite the contrary. They were perceived as being sacrilegious.

Love is a precarious state; it is unpredictable, exhilarating and liberating. The following quote articulates the quandary of love: “…love in all its glory, its loftiest and deepest values, its hells and heavens, in all its human and animal entirety will turn out to be one main source of satisfaction and meaning in life.” (Beck & Beck-Gernshein 1995, p. 169) In our 21st century lives, we work hard at taming our environment, our emotions and our hearts. Yet we are not content or fulfilled by all these conditions we impose upon ourselves. We are surrounded by domestication, yet our hearts yearn for freedom.

Love can test the walls of our reality and knock holes in them. It poses an element of high risk that threatens all our carefully constructed safety nets: the risk of rejection, unrequited love, and the casualty of deprivation. Jeanette Winterson sums it up when she asks in her novel Written on the Body, “Why is the measure of love loss?” (Winterson 1992, p. 9) The loss of love is a critical component in all the tragic love stories through the ages: Romeo and Juliet, Anthony and Cleopatra, Tristan and Isolde, Heloise and Abelard. They are stories that continue to be retold in their various forms today. The experience of loving and the loss of love they so long for is a reality that we can empathise with. An example of this is the tale of Madame Butterfly. She loves with every part of her being and when she is left so harshly, “she sings with this incredible tenderness and longing for the fulfilment of love.” (Smith 2003, p. 15) We know that the relationship is destined to end in sorrow, but it still makes for compelling viewing, as it “touches one of our most basic longings and needs,” the “ideal of the perfection of love.” (Smith 2003, p. 15) Madame Butterfly exemplifies the romantic ideal of love that once attained all our yearnings will be sated.

This leads me to ask the question, what is it about love and desire that fuels the
engines of art? Desire “is a state of unresolved tension”, it is the wanting, not the having, that creates the tension. (Ewing 1999, p. 305) It is in the early throws of love that the juice of art lies. The yearning and restlessness are paramount ingredients. We may or may not know specifically what it is we will gain by possessing the subject of our yearning and yet we cannot rest until we do. The irony is that if we do manage to attain the desired, we are sated only momentarily, if at all.

The ancient Greek philosophers related a myth about the “round people” that has personally captured my imagination. It powerfully sums up the nature of love and the compulsion that drives humanity to seek another to feel complete. According to Aristophanes, the round people were composed of two heads, four arms, four legs and so forth. They managed to offend Zeus, the king of the gods who chose to punish them by splitting them in two. As a consequence of Zeus’s reaction, the round people spent the rest of their lives seeking their other half, in order to be whole again.

It is from this myth that Aristophanes conceived that love is an “ancient need” and that the source of humanity’s “intense yearning” for their other half stems not from the physical desire, but from the soul. Aristophanes concludes with this description of love, “…that human nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love.” (Ackerman 1994, p. 97)

It was Plato who first expressed the concept of the perfect other half: the ideal partner. This ideal of romantic love speaks to the minds and hearts of people so strongly that it continues to flourish in our society today. It is present and thriving in our everyday lives, entertainment, the arts and culture at large.

**The Beauty Muse**

“My eyes longing for beautiful things, together with my soul longing for salvation, have no other power to ascend to heaven than the contemplation of beautiful things.”

Michelangelo Buonarroti (Clements 1961, p. 9)

For many centuries now the arts have been a haven for the human spirit to articulate the mysteries of the soul. Love and beauty have been an exquisite catalyst to experience moments of divine exaltation. In short, beauty is an extraordinary muse. In its many shapes and forms it has inspired artists and in turn influenced and shaped the art world.

When I speak of beauty, what I am referring to is not necessarily classical beauty. Nor is it our evolving cultural perceptions of physical beauty. The beauty I am referring to has more to do with how we respond to the subject that has captured our senses - that beauty is a vehicle to experience a sublime condition. Andrew Sherfan states when writing about Kahlil Gibran that he believed “that beauty is a transcendental predicament of being.” (Gibran 1991, p. 257)

Gibran was an artist and poet who postulated that the beauty in nature was
evidence of divinity in the physical world. He saw beauty as living proof of God’s existence. This is reminiscent of Plato’s and other ancient Greek philosophers’ beliefs. They were so awestruck by the beauty, harmony and symmetry found on the earth and in the stars, that they felt it was the creation of the Divine. The experience of beauty is universal; it defies analysis in its ability to speak to the heart and soul. It is a language that transcends the physical and yet can be found in the material.

There have been many theorists, philosophers, architects and artists that have attempted to explain and define beauty. Freud spoke of the failure of analysis to explain beauty. “The science of aesthetics investigates the conditions under which things are felt as beautiful, but it has been unable to give any explanation of the nature and origin of beauty, and as usually happens, lack of success is concealed beneath a flood of resounding and empty words.” (Pacteau 1994, p. 17)

Dating back to the sixth century BC, the Greek mathematician Pythagoras believed that the answer to beauty’s mystery was mathematical proportions and ratios that were harmonious. The painter William Hogarth claimed that beauty was a balance between varied and uniform gentle curves. Yet when we examine these theories closely, though they have merit, they fall down when applied as the definitive measures and criteria for beauty. John Armstrong is a contemporary philosopher who writes about beauty in his aptly titled book The Secret Power of Beauty. Armstrong cites a very amusing example of how Pythagoras’ theory of harmonious proportions is flawed. He came across a site on the internet where an “attractive model” stated that she attributed the “beauty of her face” to the “perfect symmetry of her lips.” (Armstrong 2004, p. 35) Though there is some truth to her claim, Armstrong points out that Ronald McDonald also has “perfectly symmetrical lips” yet the notion of him being considered as a ravishing beauty is hilarious!

John Armstrong states: “Our first impulse, when we encounter something beautiful, may be to dwell in silence upon what we see or hear. We want, simply, to give ourselves over to it: to savour and prolong the engagement.” (Armstrong 2004, p. 9) On numerous occasions I have experienced the power of beauty to bring me into the “now” moment and to be moved to a state of heightened awareness. I find that when we pause for a moment, we sometimes discover that enlightenment is in those quiet and cherished moments where we are present to beauty. Beauty has the ability to transform the present “now” instance into a sublime experience. During these awe inspiring occurrences, time seems to stands still and I am transfixed by the object or scene that is the catalyst for a heartfelt transusion of joy, peace and wonder.

I recall such a discovery when I was on location one day in a large stretch of barren farming land close to Geelong. As I was walking through with my assistant in search of an interesting backdrop to photograph a fashion shoot, we came across a flattened and corroded old paint can. It was spectacular in its raw textures and deep rich hues. We were both so moved by it that we stopped abruptly and simultaneously let out an audible gasp. I became fixated by how the rain had enhanced the appearance of the can. The water had rusted the metal and
accentuated the colours to create a harmonious palate of warm golden hues that contrasted with other cooler tones. Eventually we had to tear ourselves away to continue on. It’s quite ironic when you consider that the model we photographed that day was the representative for Queensland in the Miss Australia Beauty Pageant and yet we were both more inspired by the beauty of the paint can. Remarkably, this discarded object was transformed into a thing of beauty by the elements. As I am writing about it now, it continues to evoke a feeling of joy within me today. These moments of transportation from the mundane to the sublime are varied and not always triggered by such an ordinary subject. There have been times where I have been moved by a more accessible occurrence of beauty, such as nature at its grandest, or a magical play of light.

When I think of the images I have taken for this exhibition I am often struck by their beauty: the physical beauty of some of the people who posed for me and also the beauty in some of the more banal details in the images. Photography as a medium has a great facility for discovering the awe inspiring in the ordinary. Susan Sontag asserts that “the most enduring triumph of photography has been its aptitude for discovering beauty in the humble, the inane, the decrepit.” (Sontag 1977, p. 102) For example, the colours of the concrete wall embellished with rust in the Apparition from the Beatrice series for me is profoundly beautiful. So too is the warm light that is raking across the left hand side of her face in the Pieta. Beatrice’s countenance and eloquent gesture in the Pieta evokes a spiritual and physical beauty. When I first saw this image on the proof I was transfixed by its poignancy and its emotional impact.

In the movie American Beauty, one of the main characters, Ricky Fitts, played by actor Wes Bentley, speaks quite passionately about his encounter with beauty. This scene so impressed me when I first saw the movie, that I was moved to tears. It articulates the life-altering spiritual qualities of beauty that make it such a captivating muse.

Ricky is showing a video to his girlfriend Jane that he filmed himself. The footage is of an ordinary plastic grocery bag caught in a breeze. It is just before a snow storm where the air is so filled with electricity it is almost tangible. This exhilarating incident takes place over fifteen minutes; it is almost as though the bag has a supreme consciousness and is playfully “dancing” with Ricky. Ricky felt as though he was communicating with an “incredibly benevolent force who wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid; ever.” (American Beauty 1999)

He utilizes the video to remind himself of this realization. Ricky expresses one of fundamental aspects of beauty that I too am familiar with - that beauty is evidential of some higher power that we are fundamentally connected with. These experiences are a gift; because of the feelings of joy they give me, I also get a sense of connection with what I term my higher self. Beauty lifts me out of the harsh realities of this world and reminds me of who I really am in essence, in spirit. Now what that is exactly I don’t consciously know; it is an inner awareness that I have. Granted these sorts of spiritual realisations would not stand up in a court of law, nor would they prove conclusive under the scrutiny of science and yet
they have been powerfully apprehended by myself and millions of others since the beginning of recorded history. Albert Einstein states that “The most beautiful, the most profound emotion that we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and science.” (Taylor 1996, p. 34)

In another scene from American Beauty, Ricky describes an ‘evidential’ experience of beauty he had to Jane. This occurred when he was videotaping a homeless woman who had frozen to death. Jane is quite surprised by this confession, and enquires why Ricky filmed such a thing. He responds, “When you see something like that it’s like God is looking right at you just for a second and if you’re careful you can look right back.” Jane asks, “What did you see?” and Ricky answers quite simply, “Beauty.” (American Beauty 1999)

When I saw American Beauty I felt validated by the thought that I wasn’t alone in my perceptions, it was proof that others shared my convictions about beauty; after all they had made a whole movie about it. Like Ricky I have been astonished by beauty’s evidential power. There have been times where I have felt so moved by it that I have felt overwhelmed.

Peter Timms points out in his book What’s Wrong with Contemporary Art? that Mendes doesn’t try to illustrate why something is beautiful but rather why the "experience of it matters." (Timms 2004, p. 107) Timms continues by defining the importance of beauty in words that articulate and mirror much of what I have expressed from my original proposal to the final exhibition. “Some things are just beautiful, in a completely off-hand, accidental way, and they pop up in the [most] mundane of situations, taking us completely by surprise. If we slow down and are attentive, if we observe the life around us without seeking meanings, then epiphanies are possible.” (Timms 2004, p. 107)

The nineteenth century author and art critic, Stendhal, was deeply moved when he contemplated the sublime beauty of the Renaissance masterpieces in Florence. Stendhal was so overcome by the transcendental beauty of the art that he underwent a profound ecstatic state and fainted. Hence the condition of being overcome from viewing works of art is often referred to now as ‘Stendhal’s syndrome’. I was discussing Renaissance art with a fellow photographer, Gerard O’Conner recently. He spoke of how overwhelmed he felt when he first went to the Vatican, especially when he first entered St Peter’s cathedral. He described that the art and architecture impacted upon him so strongly that he had to sit down on the marble floor. The guards came over and spoke with him and said that they had seen this type of emotional response daily from visitors.

Stendhal’s passionate nature and the source of his exaltation is still contemplated by many today, to the point that it has entered mainstream media such as the internet and television. I was watching a new television series the other day where I was surprised to hear them speaking of and paraphrasing Stendhal and his euphoric experience of beauty, ‘Stendhal syndrome.’
“My head thrown back I let my gaze dwell on the ceiling, I underwent the profoundest experience of ecstasy I had ever encountered. I had attained that supreme degree of sensibility where the divine intimations of art merge with the impassioned sensuality of emotion,” (The L Word) What a fantastic way to sum up the sentient experience of art and beauty. Like Stendhal, when the beauty in art moves us to the point of being exalted, is it that we are connecting with a memory of “oneness” that many mystics and philosophers have described? Is the experience of beauty a condition whereby we become present to spirit, our essence? Does beauty’s transcendent quality stem from the compulsion to merge with the oneness from which we came, God, the Universe, our soul? Perhaps it is as many of our philosophers, mystics, and great minds have contemplated, that what we truly long for is to transcend, to enlighten, to experience the sublime.

The thirteenth century Sufi mystic and poet Jalaluddin Rumi sums up my thoughts in the following quote: “the human soul constantly complains of being separated from its divine origin and longs to return to the eternal home. It is this yearning song which reminds us of our true home, and it is the power of love which leads us - sometimes in one enraptured leap, sometimes slowly... to our origin.” (Taylor 1996, p. 176)

**Beauty’s Fall from Grace**

Despite beauty’s history in art and philosophy it appears to have fallen from grace in the contemporary art world. Indeed its decline has been quite marked since its exalted peak during the Renaissance. It has become tainted by commercialism, advertising and marketing. Modern perceptions about beauty have become quite convoluted and distorted. Instead of inspiring spiritual awakening it is used to market and sell anything from the latest cosmetics to a magazine, via an article on which Hollywood starlet is too “fat” or too “thin”.

Historically the ‘canons of acceptability’ of western fine art were influenced by cultural taste, ethical constraints (i.e. the Church) and patronage. Author and art critic Dave Hickey writes quite extensively on beauty in his book The Invisible Dragon. Hickey feels that one of the reasons that beauty is not considered to be held in high regard in modern art is due to views held by bureaucratic art institutions. The vernacular of visual pleasure and beauty held prior to the sixteenth century has almost become a measure of corruption in these institutions. Modern art is weighted disproportionately toward the concept of the piece. In short Hickey surmises that it is perceived that “the art professionals employed by our new institutions ‘really care about what it means’ ”. While there is a presumption that “art dealers ‘only care about how it looks’ ”. (Hickey 1993, p. 14)

The reality is that beautiful art is a saleable commodity. Unfortunately this has tainted perceptions of beauty as not being worthy of serious art. Artists are supposedly dedicated to being exponents of their truth, that their art should be an honest expression untainted by the market, galleries, and the politics of the art
institutions. Regrettably, this is not always the case. One has to ask: what options does an artist that is moved by beauty have, especially if this is a fundamental expression of their art? In this instance does one have to abandon one’s vision and passion to conform to current trends?

Prior to the sixteenth century, western art was powerfully controlled by the canons of the Church and State. Hickey makes a rather humorous analogy between the priests from the Renaissance and the bureaucrats of the powers that be in the arts today. He states that, “The priests of the new church are not so generous. Beauty, in their domain, is altogether elsewhere, and we are left counting the beads and muttering the texts of academic sincerity.” (Hickey 1993, p. 20)

The Duality of the Sensual and Spiritual

In my personal photography, I have often been inspired by different aspects of beauty, longing and spirituality - when my images have captured an expression or gesture that is sensuous and aesthetic, yet could also be interpreted as mystical. I find the ambivalence of sensuous and spiritual quite fascinating.

It is this intriguing quandary that has inspired me to embark on this project of having a solo exhibition. It all started with an image that I took several years ago that has that dual sensual-spiritual quality. The image is of a tightly cropped frame of a woman’s face; it is taken a split second before she kisses another’s body. Hence it is aptly named the Kiss (see illus. 4). The first time I exhibited this photograph I stood across the room and was struck by its presence. The Kiss has that mystical aura I spoke of earlier. Images that have this appeal often remind me of Michelangelo’s painting from the Sistine Chapel from the Creation section, where God is reaching out to touch Adam’s languid hand. For me it is symbolic of that moment when the unconsciousness ethereal energy takes form into a tangible creation. When I am viewing my proofs of a shoot for the first time, as I scan through all the different frames it is this “aura” that I am hoping to find in one of them. It is a rare find, almost like a miner searching for gold, when I uncover such an image; for me it has a luminous attribute that distinguishes it from the rest.

During the process of photographing for this exhibition I have been fortunate enough to have had such discoveries. From the Beatrice series the image titled The Pieta’ is one of those distinguished pieces as is Joan from the icon series. Although as time goes on there are various images that captivate me for different reasons - the haunted quality of the Apparition from the Beatrice series for example. When I initially inspected the proofs I was so taken by the Pieta’ that all else paled by comparison - until the emotive attributes of the Apparition caught my attention because of its strong photographic content, such as the contrast of the fluorescent light, the evocative warm hues of the rust on the wall, and the graphic framing of the pillar.
There are many examples of this sensual - spiritual duplicity in art. Joyce Tenneson's portraits reflect this duality as do Bill Henson's. A recent interview with Bill Henson by Peter Craven discusses one of Henson's images that has an ethereal quality that I have strived to capture in this body of work. The image the article examines is one of Henson's portraits of a young woman. Although it compares her to the Virgin Mary, it is also a fine example of 'longing,' for as Henson stipulates when speaking about his work, 'longing…is one of the things that animates the picture.' (Henson 2003)

‘She might be a Virgin Mary finding the apparition of the angel within her. She is illuminated – theatrically – and yet she seems the source of that drama of light and dark. The power of the Most High is overshadowing her – she exists in the moment of imagining that the photograph represented – yet there is an inner light here that is meeting whatever the source of illumination is.’ (Craven 2003, p. 7)

The Pieta from the Beatrice series has some of the characteristics as just described in Craven’s quote. The figure of Beatrice has an “inner light” and yet also appears to be embracing a higher “source of illumination”. She has a reverent countenance that for me is reminiscent of depictions of the Virgin Mary. It is named the Pieta because the positioning of her hands and her humble downcast gaze suggests a plea for mercy. During the photographic shoot of Pamela as the character Beatrice, I took a frame of Pamela spontaneously with her palms out in the gesture of purity and openness that is now the Pieta. It was one of those moments when all of the elements of a shoot came together to create an instance of grace. It was later when I came across Michelangelo’s Pieta that I was struck by the similarities of the composition of the hands in the two pieces. (see illus. 5)

Like Joyce Tenneson I also strive to capture a person’s essence; and I share her conviction of seeing “evidence of a primal universal presence” (Tenneson 2003) in my work. She seeks to penetrate a person’s “private world, to [capture] these elusive but magic moments of revelation.” (Tenneson 2003) That for me defines The Pieta; it is like a moment of revelation captured on film. I know that I instigated all the components that came together to create this image. I did the research and was inspired by Dante’s verses. I chose the setting of the underground car park, the garments, and the model to pose as Dante’s muse. Yet when I look at this photo, it is as though it has everything and nothing to do with me. This magical energy is described in the following quote by Bill Henson, when speaking about beautiful and profound art seeming as though it “miraculously made it into the world and yet has one foot that is not.” (Henson 2003)

The content of Tenneson’s work tends to focus more on the spiritual, although her images are often quite sensual. While Henson’s images evoke both the sensual and spiritual, it could be argued that his work is more the former than the latter - even though both “longing” and spiritual qualities can be found in Henson’s work.

My work is situated with a blend of both these qualities. What differentiates it from Tenneson’s and Henson’s work is my primary focus is on love, longing, and
beauty with a subtext that alludes to the transcendental. I have sought to break past narrow definitions of the female psyche, to create images that encompass the sensual as well as the spiritual.

There are many parallels that can be drawn between religion, physical love and its depiction in art, for example: faith, devotion, the fevered heart, bliss and ecstasy. Spiritual ecstasy can also be comparable to the ecstasy that lovers experience. There have been many religious paintings and sculptures that have depicted Christ and other saints in a very detailed and sensual manner. The Renaissance sculpture of the Ecstasy of Saint Theresa by Giovanni Bernini is a testimony of rapture and sensuality (see illus. 1). It exemplifies “an intensely pleasurable out-of-body state” (Bristow 1997, p. 97) and also manages to convey the celestial state of bliss that Saint Teresa attested to as, “a shock, striking quick and sharp”. (Taylor 1996, p. 25)

Camille Paglia found during her years of teaching at the University of Arts that the art works that made an immediate and lasting impression on her students frequently had “a magic, mythological, or intensely emotional aspect.” (Paglia, 2003, p.2) Paglia also felt that the “frankly carnal images of the Italian Renaissance” were among these striking works as is Michelangelo’s sculpture Pieta and Bernini’s Ecstasy of Saint Theresa. (Paglia, 2003, p.2) Bernini’s masterpiece struck Paglia as being “wickedly witty”. She asserts that the artwork depicts “spiritual union and sexual orgasm occur simultaneously.” (Paglia, 2003, p.2)

What defines the nature of the rapture as sacred or erotic is not the experience of it, so much as the cause. Saint Francis of Sales wrote about rapture as an ecstatic means of abandoning ourselves to unite with God. Saint Theresa described rapture as ascending on the wings of a “mighty eagle” to be “carried away, raped.”(Taylor 1996, p. 25) Rape is a surprising metaphor that Catholic theology used to describe the experience of God; where one is completely overwhelmed and ravished. During the Renaissance it was called ascensio, “the upward flight of the spirit to God.”(Clarke 1956, p. 240)

Another point that I find particularly interesting is that they also perceived that through this “mystical salvation”, God and the enraptured became one. (Taylor 1996, p. 25) This belief is a reflection on Plato’s and Aristophanes’ philosophical discourses on love, especially in regard to the human compulsion to seek out their soul mate to become one. When considered from a modern perspective without the constraints of secular religion and social morality, there needn’t be a division between sensuality and spirituality. I watched an interesting movie recently called Angels in America that depicted the actor Meryl Streep as a conservative religious woman who has a vision in which she has a spiritual epiphany that was also a sexual encounter with an Angel, complete with ascensio and an orgasm.

From the Beatrice series, the image titled Dante Ascensio embodies this dichotomy of the sensual and spiritual. It emanates religious fervour and is reminiscent of renaissance depictions of saints enraptured during an epiphany.
The evocative nature of Dante’s head thrown back with her eyes closed is suggestive and conjures up a seductive yet ethereal atmosphere. The word rapture is inextricably enmeshed with Christian undertones. It alludes to that which some “Christian souls… ache for, what is forbidden and beyond the bounds of ecclesiastical piety.” (Taylor 1996, p. 25) It can easily be imagined that Dante as depicted may have struggled quite similarly with longing, both corporeal and otherworldly.

Michelangelo’s statue of The Dying Slave is also charged with a forbidden sexuality that was suppressed due to the conservative religious values commonly held in the Renaissance era (see illus. 2). The Dying Slave is often described as being a testimony to humanity’s struggle with the body and the soul in a Neo-Platonic sense. I have always found its overt sensuality quite intriguing, as did Camille Paglia in her book Sexual Personae. “I was fascinated by its blatant eroticism, which scholarship, in its quick escape to allegory, studiously ignores.” (Paglia 1991, p. 165) This is an obvious oversight of its erotic undertones, which history demonstrates was often the case in regard to sensual art. Many of the allegories attributed to Renaissance art were simply to justify the numerous nudes and sensual depictions. When we take into consideration the departure from humanism during this era, the only way to avoid official disapproval when painting the naked human form was through religious subject matter: such as the suffering of Christ, saints and biblical allegories.

Pathos was amongst the limited subject matter that was considered appropriate in Christian art. It was one of the vehicles utilised for nudity to be accepted. Many of Michelangelo’s nudes exemplify this notion of pathos but as previously stated there can be a fine line between eroticism for its own means and spiritual ideals. Paglia states that she “cannot be convinced that great artists are moralists.” (Paglia 1991, p. 166)

When we examine the Dying Slave from Michelangelo’s Slave series and its contrasting pair the Rebellious Slave this fine line becomes evident. (see illus. 3). The figure in the Dying Slave is surrendering to his bonds with his eyes closed and his body forming a fluid enticing pose. There is a distinct sensuality as his languid hand touches the fabric strap on his chest while his leg is suggestively flexed. While the Rebellious Slave is fighting to free himself from his bonds, his uplifted outward gaze more clearly exemplifies the philosophical thought of “the body … [despite] its physical perfection [being] vanquished by some divine power.” (Clarke 1956, p. 235) Admittedly, when the Captives are viewed as a group it is easier to acknowledge the theme of the body being the soul’s physical prison. Like the sculpture of Saint Theresa which exudes a spiritual luminous rapture, there are many works of art such as the Dying Slave that, though they arouse a duality of both the carnal and the sublime, they err on the former, rather than the latter. Paglia asserts that, “Sexual Personae are the red flame of Renaissance imagination.”(Paglia 1991, p. 165)
Photography

The working title for this project, *The Virgin and the Temptress*, eventuated as I researched quite broadly, mainly in the field of western art history. It was quite fascinating to revisit these areas with a more mature perspective than when I first studied them as a young adult. One of the issues that struck me was how women were depicted so narrowly in art, often as either a virgin or temptress. This was a reflection of the cultural climate of the times and a social structure that was quite oppressive towards women. This was also evident in religion, which instigated the framework for society, its codes, morals and acceptable behaviour and since religious allegories were a cornerstone of western art an artist’s freedom of expression could be somewhat limited.

As I continued my research and creating images for the exhibition – I came across the word *scintillae* (sparks of light). I instantly felt that it encapsulated in one word the essence of the images when viewed in their entirety and renamed the exhibition from *The Virgin and the Temptress* to *Scintillae*.

The content of this exhibition is layered and as is always the case in art, it is open to interpretation. It is a visual exploration of love, longing, and desire - from the physical through to the sublime. The narrative also has several subtexts: female archetypes, the muse as a figurative source of inspiration and also beauty as a transcendental catalyst. I have sought to represent a comprehensive vision of the female muse that embraces both the spiritual and the sensual. Though this is done through photographic imagery, the journey it evokes is an interior landscape, one of our longing and desires. Not unlike Dante’s passage, it takes place in the purgatory of our minds and ascends to a celestial state of stillness and peace through our inner being connecting with our higher self - spirit.

The images depict this transition by starting in an underworld setting with the Beatrice series as a metaphor for humanity’s quest for fulfilment. The voyage then starts its ascent with the image of Dante having an epiphany titled *Dante Ascensio* and culminates with a sense of the spiritual realm within the Icon series. Many of the images examine longing and desire as well as the traditional portrayal of women in art. Consequently this is why I chose to depict characters such as, Eve, Lucretia, Beatrice, Mary and Joan of Arc. The Beatrice series focuses on longing as a chaste catalyst from the carnal to the ethereal. This is an amalgamation of the sublimated longing of courtly love and that of a higher spiritual yearning. This is then followed by a more contemporary inquiry into female archetypes in the Icon series. The voyage of our muse draws to a close with the Icon series; which guide the viewer into a meditative place with the image of *Mary*. Stillness after all is a state of being which enables true contemplation to occur. The exhibition culminates with the image of *Mercurius* evoking a powerful female character, reminiscent of Mercury, (messenger of the Gods) poised and looking towards the future with a steadfast gaze.

John Berger writes that “paintings are silent and still” (Berger 1972, p. 31) This is
in direct contrast to the tumultuous emotions of longing. As previously discussed in the Desire section, longing by its very nature is a perpetual state of angst where one’s heart is at the mercy of another, the object of one’s desires. It is a state whereby one experiences want and attempts to fill this emotional need from the outside in. This is why longing can never truly be satisfied. This form of conditional love can be described as one of a more physical, earthly, base quality. Whereas pure love in its highest form knows no boundaries, it is absolute and like stillness it is generated from the inside out. It is from this contemplative position of stillness that we can gain access to a purer feeling of love. The process wherein we transcend ourselves and our worlds to engage with a work of art can be remarkably similar to the process of spiritual contemplation.

The expression “a picture says a thousand words” speaks of the impact that a visual image can have on the viewer. Language and words can be quite limited, especially when it comes to describing emotions. For example, the word love defines a myriad of different feelings and implications. Another reason why an image can be so powerful lies in the way in which we can respond to it as a tangible heartfelt experience. This bypasses the intellect to engage with the heart on a kinaesthetic level. A friend of mine had such an experience with the Pieta from the Beatrice series of images. Marina had been looking for sometime for an illustration for her book that was about to be published, called Nursing as an Aesthetic Praxis. I suggested that she have a look at one of my Masters photographs that I thought might be appropriate and e-mailed it to her. Now bearing in mind that Marina had just written her PHD and is renowned for how verbose and articulate she can be, upon opening the e-mail she said her heart was pounding. When she set her eyes on the Pieta; her mind went completely still; there was an intense warm energy in her chest and she was present to an extraordinary feeling of blissful joy. Marina expressed to me that she was rendered totally speechless; needless to say she used the image for her book cover. It is quite exciting for me to have someone describe such an experience so passionately knowing that one of my photographs was the catalyst.

Initially when I embarked on this journey of creating this exhibition I didn’t know what it would entail, who I would be photographing, or what my source of inspiration would be. It is fascinating to reflect upon how the whole process unfolded with all the elements coming together with each new development and discovery. This happened in a multitude of different ways. Sometimes I felt as though each turn of the corner was pre - ordained and I had only to walk to unveil the next step. Other times it seemed as though I was groping around in the dark catching glimpses of the light, yet not sure of my direction. Then I would make a discovery such as a pertinent phrase in a book, a great location or a chance connection with a person that was perfect to portray one of my muses. Such finds were often exhilarating and fortuitous. For example, I discovered Pamela the young woman who portrayed Beatrice in a restaurant; she was our waitress for the evening. I noticed her natural beauty; there was something in her energy and the way in which she held herself that led me to ask her to pose for me. Many of the quotes I found through the course of this research were so rich and poignant. They carry with them a timeless quality as does the theme of this project - love, beauty
and longing. I enjoyed how I would sometimes happen across them. Research, as one of the librarians told me, is sometimes like serendipity.

When I was leaving the RMIT library one day I came across a second hand book stall where I bought several books including Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, and Marina Warner’s, *Alone of all Her Sex*. As fate would have it, both books had excellent insights. The morning that I was to shoot the Beatrice series I had an interesting incident with Warner’s book. I was still half asleep as I had just gotten out of bed. I walked straight into my study and plucked her book off the shelf. At the time I was barely conscious and I really had no idea why I had done this, as I was still operating on automatic pilot. Upon opening the book I was quite surprised to discover on that very page a description by Dante about the first time he set his eyes on Beatrice. It was so exciting for me to be reading this on the day that I was doing that particular shoot of Beatrice. It is also curious to note that I wasn’t aware of the contents of the book as I hadn’t read it yet.

I went through an exciting process that initiated a spontaneous flow of ideas. I had glimpses of the images that were yet to be created as they streamed into my thoughts. Half of what I was to photograph for this project was conceived during a short period of time. It has been a much slower process to gather all the different elements required to manifest these mental images into reality.

Dante’s poem the *Divine Comedy* is an exceptional metaphor on love and longing from the carnal through to the sublime; it has captivated me and many others. In the first section of the exhibition in the Beatrice series I juxtapose images of the underground car park with the images of Beatrice and Dante. This makes for a more emotive and dynamic contrast between the theatrical costumes and the contemporary setting. In many ways the urban landscapes echo Dante’s tale of longing and his journey through hell to heaven. To portray Dante I specifically sought out a female dancer to convey his rapture.

In The Divine Comedy Dante’s “amorous passion” for Beatrice “of the chaste variety” is transformed to a “paradisiacal tone” towards the end of his journey. (Eco 2004, p. 174) Dante argued that by falling in love, one could ascend to a place of divine bliss: “through human love one could reach the plenitude of the beatific vision.”(Warner 1976, p. 171) At the culmination of his passage Beatrice has “become the only woman who can allow Dante to attain the supreme contemplation of God”. (Eco 2004, p. 174)

The following verse by Dante Alighieri from *The Divine Comedy* articulates his moment of grace.

> “What then I saw is more than tongue can say.  
> Our human speech is dark before the vision.  
> The ravished memory swoons and falls away.  
> As one who sees in dreams and wakes to find the emotional impression of his vision
still powerful while its parts fade from his mind –

just such am I having lost nearly all
the vision itself, while in my heart I feel
the sweetness of it yet distill and fall…

So dazzling was the splendour of that ray,
That I must certainly have lost my senses
Had I, but for an instant, turned away…

Oh grace abounding that had made me fit
To fix my eyes on the eternal light
Until my vision was consumed in it!

I saw within its depth how it conceives
all things in a single volume bound by Love,
of which the universe is the scattered leaves;

substance, accident and their relation
so fused that all I say could do no more
than yield a glimpse of that bright revelation.

I think I saw the universal form
that binds these things, for as I speak these words
I feel my joy swell and my spirits warm…

O light eternal fixed in itself alone,
Loves and glows, self - knowing and self - known…

Here my powers rest from their high fantasy,
But already I could feel my being turned –
Instinct and intellect balanced equally

As in a wheel whose motion nothing jars –
by the Love that moves the Sun and the other stars.”(Ferrar & Star 1991)

In *Painting Psychoanalysis and Spirituality* James Newton discusses how Plato felt that knowledge in its highest form was only possible “in the rare moments when the soul leaves the body in a state of ekstasis.” (Newton James 2001, p. 19) The Greek word for ecstasy being ekstasis, it is usually described as divine union although it means to “transcend oneself”. My perception of this condition is that the soul doesn’t necessarily leave the body but rather that we consciously connect with our higher self and this enables the duality of the physical and the spiritual to become a tangible experience.

The first image from this series is a walkway glowing with warm light called *Interior North*; this symbolises Dante’s ascension but also the catalyst for his transcendent experience, his heartfelt passion. The image of *Eve with*
Pomegranate in many ways is a similar metaphor as it conjures up emotions related to the heart and yet does so with very different subject matter and significance.

In the icon series I chose Eve as a subject because she is such a dynamic, key figure, as she symbolises womankind. Eve is perceived by Christians as the first woman on the earth and she in turn can be interpreted as the founder of the temptress archetype. She is often shown in a negative light as the instigator of humanity’s fall from Eden, hence the extreme, misogynistic belief that women are the root of all evil. It is an age - old story that may be viewed lightly in our current era and yet it has a serious undertone. Historically, the notion perpetuated by Christian ethics was that women were easily overcome by evil and in turn they could corrupt man. It was Eve that listened to the serpent and first ate of the forbidden fruit. It was Eve that gave the fruit to Adam. “She took of the fruit thereof, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.” (The Bible King James ed. Genesis. P. 10 3:6) During the Inquisitions in medieval times this belief had tragic repercussions as thousands of woman were drowned, or burned, because they were believed to be witches.

When one looks at the Bible the references about Eve are as though she was an afterthought by God, because man was created in God’s likeness, and woman was made from man’s rib. One gets the impression that she is his subordinate. When one scrutinises Genesis it is curious to note that this definition of Eve is the most commonly upheld. However, on the first page of Genesis, which is at the very start of the Bible, it clearly states that God created both man and woman in his own image. Marina Warner discusses this in her book Alone of All Her Sex. She writes that one of the reasons for the initial statement which illustrates the equality of the sexes being overlooked in preference of the fable of woman coming from Adam’s rib was that is it was in keeping with “traditional interpretations of women’s place.”(Warner 1976, p. 178)

In her Women in Myth, Bettina Knapp offers a rather refreshing perspective of Eve. Knapp acknowledges those who admire Eve as a courageous woman who was a seeker of knowledge - that she ate the “fruit” even though she was told not to because she knew that it bore wisdom. By doing so “she absorbed within her God’s scintillae (sparks of light). Such energy charges gave thrust to her and Adam’s evolution.”(Knapp 1997, p. 49) The word scintillae, as used in this passage by Knapp, is what inspired me to rename the exhibition Scintillae. Knapp describes Eve as a heroine and an innovator, and, as many great minds since her have encountered, she bore the wrath of society when she departed from the beliefs of the establishment. Knapp views Eve’s actions as positive (which is contrary to patriarchal thought): that Eve was the catalyst for humanity’s evolutionary progress not evil. Adam and Eve’s eyes were opened, “and thus consciousness was born.”(Knapp 1997, p. 51)

Another interesting point that is highlighted in Genesis is the concept of shame associated with nudity. Prior to eating the apple they were oblivious to their nudity and yet after having done so they felt ashamed and hid from God, also covering
their bodies with fig leaves. As John Berger puts it, “nakedness was created in the mind of the beholder.” (Berger 1972, p. 48) In other words their sense of shame was a state of mind.

The Eve depicted in my exhibition questions patriarchal thought and alludes to a more empowered Eve. Her stance and expression emanate vulnerability and innocence. The fruit she holds is not an apple but a pomegranate, which is symbolic of passion, femininity, fertility and the rejuvenation of spring. Eve holds it in the palm of her hand like a beautiful jewel box glistening in the light. According to pagan mythology, the pomegranate is symbolic of Persephone. The myth of Persephone is one that has captured my imagination for some time now. Persephone was abducted into Hades, the underworld, by Pluto and was released because of the demands of her Mother Demeter. The condition on her release was that she had not eaten whilst she was kept in Hades. As the myth reveals she had eaten several pomegranate seeds and as a consequence she had to dwell for six months in the underworld and would return to earth for six months in Spring every year.

In the close up of Eve, she is holding a smaller pomegranate that has a suggestive opening in the fruit that is highlighted by the light. This too alludes to the theme of the Virgin and the Temptress as though posing the question: which one was Eve, “sinner” or “seeker”? I prefer the latter.

The pagan reference that is evoked through the use of a pomegranate rather than an apple is used to allude to a time prior to Christian patriarchy’s view of women. Women played significant roles in religion and culture in an era that many feminists argue was matriarchal in some societies.

I believe that the notion of virginity as perpetuated by the Church is a manipulative construct designed to suppress and control women. Marina Warner writes of it as a “long durable obsession with chastity”, that when it is “applied to women, however, it serves an evident social purpose” and when it is correlated with other seemingly innocent Christian virtues such as humility it is “interpreted as submissiveness.” (Warner 1976, p. 174)

Warner also writes that “together the Virgin and the Magdalene form a diptych of Christian patriarchy’s idea of women.” The church venerates two ideals of the feminine - consecrated chastity in the Virgin Mary and regenerated sexuality in the Magdalene. The Virgin Mary is “transmuted … into an ideal of sinless perfection and purity whereas the harlot saint reflects … that no one … is beyond the reach of grace.” (Haddad & Findly 1985, p. 116)

There is a pro-feminist subtext to the exhibition, one that uses women’s traditional role as the sensual muse as a point of departure, to then depict women in a more contemporary empowered light, a muse with a voice. For example, the key role such as Dante’s would often be played by a male, the emphasis being on the masculine tale of yearning and otherworldly and personal contemplations, while Beatrice would play the role of his muse, to be desired and projected upon. In
Scintillae both roles are played by women, they are the source of inspiration, the hero, and central figure in the tale. Another example of this is my portrayal of Lucretia as opposed to the story of Tarquin and Lucretia in Renaissance art. In some of these paintings Lucretia is committing suicide with a knife to her heart to regain her honour after Tarquin violated her. In my scenario she is holding a dagger yet it is turned away from herself as she stares back at the viewer in a strong, defiant manner.

I call this part of the exhibition the Icons because they are designed to evoke a sense of contemplation and like their name sake speak to us through the symbology of gestures. Icons originate from a time when a great deal of the population was illiterate. A wealth of information and narrative was imparted through seemingly simple means such as: the gaze of the depicted subject, a hand gesture and the juxtaposition of the subject to background details and props. Gombrich discusses the importance that artists had placed in “great periods in art” [on the] “task to make the figures in the painting speak through gestures.” (Gombrich 1982, p. 68) Gombrich also writes that Dante described the “rendering of certain scenes” from the Divine Comedy as “visible speech” [this is] “because the attitude of the figures so clearly expressed their mind.” (Gombrich 1982, p. 68) Having been brought up in a Greek family, I have always found Byzantine Icons quite fascinating. They can evoke a sense of reverence, and pose a “delicate invitation”. (Schilbrack 2002, p. 31) “The Byzantine icon has come down to us a silent witness.” Over the centuries it has been “the subject of prayer and contemplation and meditation as well as extremes of anguish and joy.” (Schilbrack 2002, p. 31)

In the images titled Joan and Joan with Sword, I use the sword and armour to illustrate some of Joan of Arc’s significant qualities and pivotal life experiences. The vertical angle of the sword as it gleams before us is both a shield for protection and a weapon for penetration it implies the emphasis placed on Joan’s virginity. During her trial Joan volunteered the information that she had vowed to “remain a maid” since she first heard the voices that would speak to her at the age of thirteen. This was of paramount importance because “it was widely believed that the devil could not have commerce with a virgin.” (Warner 1981, p. 15) Had Joan not been chaste it would most likely have been deemed that the voices she heard were not God or saint but the devil. “The image of Joan’s unconsumed heart became a new touchstone, of her integrity, her incorruptibility, her charity, her love for God and God’s love for her.” (Warner 1981, p. 29) Unfortunately this did not save Joan from burning at the stake. She was one of the thousands of women that were put to death after being condemned for being a ‘witch’.

On Joan’s armour the raised emblem with radiating lines around an eagle signify Joan’s spiritual devotion and passionate nature as they draw the eye to the heart. The use of arms in the imagery also speaks of how Joan is viewed as a heroine and a courageous leader. Marina Warner writes of Joan’s unique ability to transcend female stereotypes that have achieved significant recognition historically. “She is a universal figure who is female, but is neither a queen, nor a courtesan, nor a beauty nor a mother, nor an artist.” (Warner 1981, p. 6)
In 1920 Joan was canonised and made a saint. Joan’s life achievements are quite extraordinary. In an era where women’s freedom and status was negligible she managed to convince the future king of France to give her an army so that she could assist him to be crowned by winning back Reims from the English. Traditionally Reims was where all the French kings were crowned. She was from a humble peasant background and yet she made a confident and determined military leader who was - until her capture by the English - successful.

Another interesting fact about Joan was that she wore masculine attire; this is one of the main reasons that the Inquisition condemned her. By donning male apparel she liberated herself from the confines of the social codes for women - meekness and submissiveness. Joan could then adopt all the masculine traits that she required to be leader: courage, action and reason. She “was usurping a man’s function but shaking of the trammels of his sex.” (Cardell 1990, p. 84)

I have always had an interest in mythology and the fascinating images that myth evokes. I can remember watching Epic Theatre on the weekend as a child and being transported by the trials of the heroes. Epic Theatre was a very poorly dubbed series of Italian motion pictures with loosely based mythological plots and characters. Despite its lack of finesse, it fuelled my young imagination. Early in my research I made a conscious decision to have a sense of mystery and myth about the images and yet to also retain a modern flavour. Through the images I have sought to create parallels between the world of myth and that of contemporary women. Bettina Knapp states that “aspects and [themes] of ancient myths are timely today, and may answer our yearnings and help alleviate our terrors.”(Knapp 1997, p. xix)

Knapp asserts that “the archetypal approach to myth posited by Jung is unique in that it lifts readers out of their specific worlds, allowing them to expand their vision, to relate more easily to issues that may confront them.” The power of myth also lies in its ability to create an empathetic “awareness of the fact that people in past eras suffered from alienation, identity crisis, and sexual crises [prior to creating] ...some semblance of fulfilment...”(Knapp 1997, p. xv)

The Muse

Traditionally in art the gaze of the artist has been male. Perceptions of women and desire have been from a masculine or patriarchal view point. Feminist discourse highlights how the female body has often been exploited as the passive object of male fantasy. The European traditional relationship between muse and artist is based on this premise of the masculine spectator. This unequal relationship has proven to be disempowering to women and muses alike. It is a two edged sword, that of being both “worshipped and degraded” at the same time, always the source of inspiration that is projected upon, never to be perceived as the powerful creator.(Prose 2002, p. 9)
In fact the term muse itself today has a somewhat archaic and misogynistic connotation to it because of this tradition. In modern media the term is seldom used with the exception of fashion designers and their models and the world of ballet. Francine Prose humorously states: “Certainly feminism has made us rethink musedom as career choice.” (Prose 2002, p. 9)

History shows us that women were often in the background; they were the muses and the nurturers of male artists, with little opportunity, acceptance, or recognition as artists in their own right. Hence the modern perception of a muse evokes this stereotype of the male being the active creative artist and the female being passive, submissive, without a voice.

When we examine the art archives it is evident that the social conditioning of every era is also reflected in the work. From the turn of the nineteenth century there are many noteworthy collaborations in art where the distinction between artist and muse has shifted from the traditional roles: Tina Modotti and Edward Weston, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, Lee Miller and Man Ray, Salvador Dali and Gala Dali, Pablo Picasso and Dora Maar, Auguste Rodin and Camille Claudel. As was sometimes the case in these relationships, the roles reversed or at the very least the distinction became blurred.

Lee Miller and Man Ray had a mutually beneficial relationship; she inspired and modelled for him whilst he nurtured her own skill in photography by mentoring her. “Man Ray gave her confidence in her own eye and contact with his Surrealist friends stimulated her imagination.” (Penrose 1988, p. 25) There is no doubt of her talent as a photographer as she has left a legacy of images to her credit - from Vogue fashion, society portraits and war documentary. Even though they were lovers and she was classically beautiful, she managed to extend herself past the cliche muse/artist relationship because of her strong personality and her exceptional talent. Man Ray was a Surrealist and believed in the doctrine of free love, however Lee with her free spirited nature was more successful at this kind of lifestyle. Despite the premise of “free love” being more of a masculine construct, Lee “exposed the hypocrisy of its double standards” by not allowing the traditional notion of monogamy, that was more harshly imposed on women, to restrict her sexual desires. (Penrose 1988, p. 38) Man Ray, as did many others, suffered horribly from jealousy because of Lee’s capriciousness. She certainly turned the tables on the muse, artist relationship as the following quote from Man Ray shows. “I have loved you terrifically, jealously; it has reduced every other passion in me, and to compensate, I have tried to justify this love by giving you every chance in my power to bring out everything interesting in you.”(Penrose 1988, p. 38) When she left Man Ray her career continued to flourish despite his convictions. He certainly longed for her and was inspired to express his feelings through his art. In his now famous painting called Observatory Time–The Lovers 1932-34, Man Ray altered the “rose bud lips” which were originally modelled to resemble his wife Kiki’s, to a more sensual mouth that looks decidedly more like Lee’s.(Penrose 1988, p. 42) The painting can be perceived as a surrealist interpretation of longing; it depicts a pair of lips floating in cloud dappled sky like two entwined lovers.
The construct of the muse/model/mistress was very much the primary narrative that can be observed in the lives of women amongst the Impressionists, Cubists, and the Surrealists. Although Whitney Chadwick, author of Women Artists in the Surrealist Movement, states that “male surrealists encouraged creativity among women associated with the group and demanded the liberation of all women from the bondage of hearth and home.” (Cottingham 2000, p. 203) On the other hand author Xaviere Gauthier writes that feminist academics have “often sought to recast the Surrealists agenda as emancipatory for women.” (Cottingham 2000, p. 203) In regard to the muse-artist relationship and the Surrealists it has been argued both ways. Yes, women did have a presence as artists in the movement but it was usually after they had fulfilled their role as model and mistress. Laura Cottingham felt that there was “little” if any evidence to support the theory that Surrealists, sought “female sexual autonomy” (Cottingham 2000, p. 205) In the Surrealists self published journal called La Revolution Surrealiste, Andre’ Breton was quoted as responding to another male associate’s conversation about his female partner’s sexual desires as “have nothing to do with it.” (Cottingham 2000, p. 205) When we examine the images of the Surrealist photographers such as Man Ray, as captivating as they are, it is hard not to notice the age old theme of the female body from a “voyeuristic” male perspective.

Photographers Tina Modotti and Edward Weston’s relationship started in the classic muse, artist, mistress genre. She posed for his photographs initially and then progressed to the other side of the camera. Tina was to develop into a great artist in her own right; her work displayed a rare sensibility. David Siqueiros who spoke at Tina’s exhibition in Mexico in 1929 described the emotional impact of her images: “The purity of her expression the surprise of being able to look at what the viewer had previously only seen” (Constantine 1983, p. 150; Taymor 2002) Modotti stayed on in Mexico after she and Weston had undertaken a photographic trip there. She was taken by the people and their struggle from poverty. She joined their fight for freedom with her camera and politics.

Although Weston did influence the development of Tina’s artistic eye she developed a style that was distinct and bore no resemblance to his. Weston “had an extraordinary technique” and “a very different sense of space,” (Constantine 1983, p. 186) while Modotti’s images “show a kind of human obsession, and a tragic sense of life can be seen in her work.” (Constantine 1983, p. 186) It is interesting to note how her angle of view differed from Weston’s. Modotti’s images showed a compassionate eye, through her choice of subject matter and composition. Her camera was often held at head height of her subject to capture the “directness” of their gaze, while Weston’s striking nudes of Modotti (and others) were often from a high vantage point depicting her lying passively.

Weston denied any “erotic motive” in his images. He said that he was drawn to capture the female nude from a perspective of shape and form. Many of Weston’s nudes have become famous iconic images. There is merit to some of his assertions; the human body can be a thing of aesthetic interest worthy of artistic rendition and emulation as Weston did in his black and white images of shapely
capsicums that are inspired by the female form. Yet the fact remains that Weston did have affairs with a great many of his models and that to totally deny that his images are devoid of any sense of voyeurism but are purely aesthetic is being disingenuous.

Modotti was considered to be strikingly beautiful. Early in her career she had been an actress in Hollywood movies. Although she moved on to become a photographer and a political activist, it is interesting to note that in a letter she wrote to Weston when she was deported from Mexico to the USA she described how the reporters focused on her physical attributes and not her other merits. “Here in the United States everything is seen from the ‘beauty’ angle- a daily here spoke of my trip and referred to me as ‘a woman of striking beauty’ – other reporters to whom I refused an interview tried to convince me by saying they would just speak of ‘how pretty I was’ – to which I answered that I could not possibly see what ‘prettiness’ had to with the revolutionary movement nor with the expulsion of Communists – evidently women here are measured by motion picture standards.” (Franscina & Harris 1992, p. 156) I have included the previous quote in its entirety because it articulates in a succinct manner western cultural perceptions of a woman’s worth. This superficial assessment is evident today in our media, arts and society at large.

Naomi Wolf writes extensively about how women have been suppressed by cultural perceptions of beauty in her book The Beauty Myth. A quote that has made an impression on me since reading her book articulates what is at the heart of the controversy in regard to the “male gaze”. “Female sexuality is turned inside out from birth, so ‘beauty’ can take its place, keeping women’s eyes lowered to their own bodies, glancing up only to check their reflections in the eyes of men.” (Wolf 1990, p. 155) The unfortunate reality is that women are perpetuating the ‘myth’ unwittingly because it is so seeped into our culture and conditioning, that they measure there own worth by standards set by men. As Berger states, their negative tradition has become “So deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They survey, like men, their own femininity.” (Berger 1972, p. 63)

The perception of beauty as an ideal that women are identified by is “more powerful than ever.” (Sontag & Leibovitz 1999, p. 31) Susan Sontag writes that although in our modern consumer - driven society “narcissistic” values have become the concern of men, the fact remains that women are more likely to experience anxiety over their “personal attractiveness” because essentially the fact remains that, “a man is, first of all seen. Women are looked at.” (Sontag & Leibovitz 1999, p. 23) It is true that men can be considered as sex objects, but when this is the case it is still not their only source of identification. Traditional views of women and men are deeply ingrained, and the cultural climate wherein self development and identity are formed is heavily slanted towards favouring men.

I wonder if the feminist debate about the male gaze is not so much that it exists but rather the sheer volume and consistency of it in art and western society. When one adds the lack of regard of female artists in western recorded history prior to the
nineteenth century to the discourse and the abundance of depictions of naked women in art (also not forgetting the current shallow imagery of women ever present in modern society) and you have fuel for any feminist debate on your hands. Yet despite all of this there have been enormous changes that have transformed the lives and consciousness of women, especially in the past thirty years.

In *The Obstacle Race* Germaine Greer writes about the lives, fortunes and circumstances of female painters and their art. This book may well have been a response to Linda Nochlin’s controversial essay written in 1971, “Why have there been no great women artists?” In it Greer concludes that “There are no Leonardo, no female Titian, no female Poussin, but the reason does not lie in the fact that women have wombs, that they can have babies, that their brains are smaller, that they lack vigour, that they are not sensual. The reason is simply that you cannot make great artists out of egos that have been damaged, with wills that are defective, with libidos that have been driven out of reach and energy driven into neurotic channels.” (Greer 1979, p. 327)

With the growth of feminism in the 1970s there was also a dramatic change to the roles and perceptions of female artists and art history. Feminists searched the archives for any female artists that they felt had been excluded from the “male dominated canon of western art.” (Arms 2001, p. 15)

One of those artists whose reputation benefited posthumously by this search was Frida Kahlo. There were many reasons why Kahlo and her extraordinary work spoke to feminists. Kahlo was an inspired artist who defied western ideals of feminine beauty. This can be attested to by her flamboyant attire, her literal renditions of her facial hair, her unflinching gaze and her strong demeanour. Kahlo’s paintings often portraying suffering, especially her own, yet her images never depicted herself to be a victim. There isn’t any submissiveness in Kahlo’s self portraits, naked or clothed, nor is there any suggestiveness that is “necessary to the male eroticization of the female look.” (Franscina & Harris 1992, p. 157) When writing about Kahlo, Hayden Herrera asserts that her face was “nearly beautiful”. This is partly because of the “uneasy feeling” generated by the pain conveyed in her work but also because it isn’t about the male gaze.

Although Frida was married to a famous painter, Diego Rivera, she doesn’t fit the traditional muse/artist relationship. In fact upon examining their now famous marriage it could be considered that Diego was more Frida’s muse than the other way around. Kahlo herself states that “I have suffered two grave accidents in my life. One in which a street car knocked me down … The other accident is Diego.”(Arms 2001, p. 14) Their tumultuous relationship and her intense attachment to Rivera, was often expressed in Kahlo’s work. One could call it inspiration, but it could more appropriately be described as art therapy. Rivera described Kahlo as “the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings.” (Arms 2001, p. 12) Diego was also depicted as stating in the film *Frida* “I don’t think that a women has put such agonised poetry on canvas before.” (Frida 2002)
Although Diego was a renowned artist in his lifetime and his career overshadowed Frida’s, her fame has steadily grown to cult status since her death. As Anthony White writes, which is also an apt conclusion to the demise of the subservient muse, “This must seem like the ultimate vindication to generations of women whose talents and achievements have been downplayed when set against those of their husbands or lovers.” (Arms 2001, p. 16)
Conclusion

It has been a great dream of mine to have a solo exhibition of the sensual and spiritual essence that the Kiss image evokes that I took some years ago now. To have this come to fruition is incredibly rewarding. When I look at the images now I feel so proud and grateful that they somehow made it in to this world to grace us with their beauty and presence. I feel that the images do articulate their beauty more eloquently than I can convey when describing them with words.

As I researched I came across a multitude of inspirational information and visuals to fuel my subconscious. Yet why I photographed the images I did is not such an easy thing to consciously pinpoint. It is as Francine Prose suggests that “to create any thing is to undergo the humbling and strange experience - like a mystical visitation or spiritual possession - of making something and not knowing where it comes from.” (Prose 2002, p. 2) The journey that I have been on from the onset of this project to the opening night of Scintillae has truly been a profound transition. The impact it has had on my life has been enormous! It is one thing to know that there was something in me longing to be expressed and quite another to see the final images glowing on the gallery wall. The passion and emotions that many people have imparted to me from engaging with the images has been both humbling and deeply moving for me. It is my intent to continue exhibiting and to see my art hanging in peoples’ homes and galleries around the world, touching us with their sparks of light. This has surely been an enlightening experience for me that I will reflect upon in the years to come. Love, longing and beauty have certainly been most gracious muses.
Illustrations
Illustration 2  
Michelangelo  
*The Dying Slave.*  
1513-16

Illustration 3  
Michelangelo  
*The Rebellious Slave.*  
1513-16
Illustration 5. Michelangelo. *Pieta*. c. 1500
Specifications

The Beatrice series was photographed on Kodak NC colour negative 400 ISO film. The Icon series was also photographed on Kodak NC colour negative 400 ISO film and a Fuji 6 80 camera with shift lenses and a Phase One medium format 64 MB digital back.

The film was scanned at 100 MB at 300 dpi. All the images were retouched digitally using Adobe Photoshop CS.

The image titled Mercurius was written onto an 8 by 10 inch colour negative from a digital file and printed using a Type C process.

With the exception of Mercurius, all the images were printed by a Chromira photographic process with a satin finish archival paper.

The Beatrice series was printed with the image size of 106 cm by 86 cm plus a 10.5 cm white border.

The Icon series was printed with the image size of 104 cm by 76 cm plus a 10.5 cm white border.

All prints were pinned to the gallery wall.

Images

Icon series

Chromira digital print on archival photographic paper:

Joan 125 cm x 97 cm
Joan with Sword 125 cm x 97 cm
Eve 125 cm x 97 cm
Eve with Pomegranate 118 cm x 125 cm
Lucretia 125 cm x 97 cm
Lucretia 125 cm x 97 cm
Lucretia Profile 125 cm x 97 cm
Mary 125 cm x 97 cm
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<tr>
<td>Self Portrait</td>
<td>125 cm x 97 cm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self Portrait Benediction</td>
<td>125 cm x 97 cm</td>
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**Beatrice Series**

Chromira digital print on archival photographic paper:

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<td>Pieta`</td>
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<tr>
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Type C print:

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References


American Beauty 1999, motion picture, Directed by Mendes, S USA, Dream Works

Angels in America 2004, video recording, Directed by Nichols, M USA, Warner Brothers.


Frida 2002, Film, Directed by Taymor, J USA, Miramax, 2002.


Greer, G 1979, The Obstacle Race, Secker & Warburg, London.


The L Word 2004, video recording, Directed by Troche, R USA, Show Time.


Bibliography


**Filmography**

*Angels in America* 2004, video recording, Directed by Nichols, M USA, Warner Brothers.

*American Beauty* 1999, motion picture, Directed by Mendes, S USA, Dream Works

*The L Word* 2004, video recording, Directed by Troche, R USA, Show Time.

*Frida* 2002, motion picture, Directed by Taymor, J USA, Miramax.

*Samsara* 2001, motion picture, Directed by Nalin, P India, Madman Entertainment.
Internet


Conferences


Beatrice series

Mercurius
Beatrice series
Dante Ascensio