

JEN KELLY - PERFORMANCE ARTIST IN PROGRESS

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My most recent work 'Wild Woman', consisted of a dissertation and performance research lecture. The project provided an opportunity to research, develop and document an issue relevant to my contemporary performance practice.

My enquiry for this research:

'Can a concept from myth and storytelling be used to empower women through the medium of performance art?'

Below is a section from my performance research written submission to give some context as to what my work entailed.

My main stimulus for this performance research project emerged from *Women Who Run With The Wolves* (1992), by Clarissa Pinkola Estés. In this writing Estés argues that female intuition and creativity, among other qualities, have been repressed by a patriarchal framework, often dismissing emotions, instinct and wisdom, and states that this prevents women from living a natural life. Estés refers to the 'Wild Woman archetype' throughout this work. The following section from her book articulates for me what she is trying to put across in her writing. Also, it defines clearly the term 'Wild Woman' which is something that could be misinterpreted:

'So, the word wild here is not used in its modern pejorative sense, meaning out of control, but in its original sense, which means to live a natural life, one in which the criatura, creature, has innate integrity and healthy boundaries. These words, wild and woman, cause women to remember who they are and what they are about. They create a metaphor to describe the force which funds all females. They personify a force that women cannot live without.' (Estés, 1992: 6)

I aimed to transfer the concept of the 'Wild Woman' from the book into site-specific performance and films as a means of female empowerment.

Engaging with the work of Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir became a vital part of my research: Considering their work helped in exploring my question from a different approach of 'Why is empowerment needed for women?' Both put forward vital ideas in their work surrounding the problems of being a woman. Questions of 'What even is a woman?' (Beauvoir, 1949:3), explores the idea of women as an opinion set by others, and 'Do we need to have a settled idea of women?' (Butler, 2020), suggests that a 'settled' opinion of women is worrying, problematic and false. I relate to what both are saying and would argue that their ideas link to Estés's concept of the 'Wild Woman' and this wildness that she offers is a more accurate representation of a woman, rather than either feminine or masculine. Butler's critique of women as a 'settled idea', relates directly to my question of 'Can women be empowered through performance?' Is the term wild able to challenge this settled opinion of women, and therefore be empowering? Furthermore, does this mean that female empowerment can be achieved through transferring the concept of the 'Wild Woman' into performance?

Recently, I have been inspired by the work of Simone De Beauvoir, Judith Butler and Clarissa Pinkola Estes. Beauvoir famously states 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' (Beauvoir, 1949) There are many ways for this statement to be consumed, but I would state that the meaning which seems most clear to me is that a woman goes through physical changes to indeed become a woman; the physical changes without the glare of society would remain a mundane, natural



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progression in life and should not make her much different to a male. However, throughout the years society has projected meaning and judgement on to the female body, which through repetition within a patriarchal society has widened the gap between male and female, to being much more than their biological differences.

I believe I have become a woman, not only in the biological sense, but in the privilege of the unique experiences of being a woman, and how these have shaped me as a person. Being a woman is something that cannot be easily defined. I will continue to grow and become throughout my life and the work that I make. I do think this attitude stems from my refusal to accept the meaning that a patriarchal society places on women - This is what a lot of my work explores and critiques, as a performance artist. My work is varied, but I tend to lie within a spectrum of identity, autobiography and emotion in the work that I make.

My aim as an artist is to evoke thought and feeling above all - while still creating work that is entertaining and stimulates the senses.

As an empathetic person, I have come to realise that as a performer I have a skill of relating to people, connecting with them, through performance.

Barbie & Ken

I worked with a close friend, Brandon Hindle, to explore the duo Barbie and Ken over a period of 6 weeks, presenting a piece of performance at the end of the process. Brandon and I played with gender roles and the issues that these have created within our own lives, intertwining Barbie and Ken with Brandon and Jen.

Until exploring through performance, I had never truly questioned and unpacked my discomfort with stereotypical female signifiers constructed by society, such as the colour pink, make-up, dresses and a curvy body. This enabled me to realise and talk about the difficulties of navigating within societies pressures of what was expected of me as a girl, and the additional problems that surfaced when my body changed in my teens. There was a lot of conflicting emotions around my indifference to stereotypically feminine things growing up, and my self judgement or reluctance to connect with them at this later point in my life. The character of Barbie enabled me to both critique and access femininity in a way that I had never done so previously. The pink, camp and superficial aesthetic of Barbie and Ken enabled a dark and comedic critique of society and the freedom to delve into autobiographical work.



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Black Velvet Persona

Similarly to Barbie and Ken, this persona granted permission to explore feminine qualities that I would not regularly access as my non performing self, but wanted to try on through performance in order to explore sexuality and just other ways of being. The performance was in the style of a lip sync. it was sultry and explored the female fascination with Elvis. This raised questions of 'What is my truest form of self?' I knew that people I had known for most of my life would say "This is not Jen", or would judge me for acting this way if it wasn't through performance, or some would even be taken aback by my presentation of self within the performance. I often wonder if performance is a way for me to express myself and release pent up energy without judgement. Although, I would argue that this is still me; whether I am performing or not. Everything that comes from your body is you. I believe a big part of identity crisis stems from putting people in boxes; unable to express themselves and explore what feels right for them. Within my work there is a theme of accessing challenging subjects through persona, character work and working with strong aesthetics.



President of Scotland

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President Of Scotland

This persona, performed as part of a diorama performance was an empowering moment for me in understanding that I could explore my Scottish and feminist aspects of my identity simultaneously, but it also proved to be a complex project that unearthed a lot of questions. As an advocate for Scottish Independence, I moulded a fictional character throughout a process that became the president of a newly independent Scotland.

Beauvoir states:

Man is defined as a human being and woman is defined as a female. Whenever she tries to behave as a human being she is accused of trying to emulate the male.

(Beauvoir, 1949)

I thought about these words in relation to this performance. When performing 'President of Scotland' I never once viewed myself as a man; my character was inspired by Eva Perón, the First Lady of Argentina from 1946 until her death in 1952, a political figure that I had been massively influenced by growing up, with the help of musical theatre and my love of Madonna's earlier work. My character was based on a strong female, defying the usual misrepresentation of women in politics. However, I recall the conversation around my character often being referred to as the first female president of Scotland. Why could it not just be the first president of Scotland? It often made me question whether the most unbelievable part of the fiction was that I was a female president. Beauvoir speaks of women as existing 'in relation to man'. The fact that she is described as female situates her in relation to male, a male would not be described as the male president would he? Does simply being a woman situate the female at a disadvantage? I could choose to view it another way, the more empowering outlook that applauds females for their struggle, acknowledging that their mere biological differences have meant that they often have to fight harder and continue to prove their worth, just to be equal rather than other.

The pattern of accessing autobiographical work through a fictional persona in order to explore wider societal politics is emerging. Reflecting collectively on these three pieces of work, it feels key to note that Black Velvet Persona was a rehearsed lip sync performance, and I sang throughout my performances as Barbie and President of Scotland. The soundtrack and power of the female voice feels vital within my arts practice. I can often visualise a whole idea from a song and I find that music is a medium accessed to evoke emotion or to assist in telling a story. Similarly, with the characters that I embody I often move between dark comedy, lived experiences and emotions, intertwining the fictional and the real life struggles through a piece of performance, where my main hope is that I create an experience and it speaks to the audience, making them feel, in the hope that we can move towards a shared empathy and understanding within the various struggles of life.

