

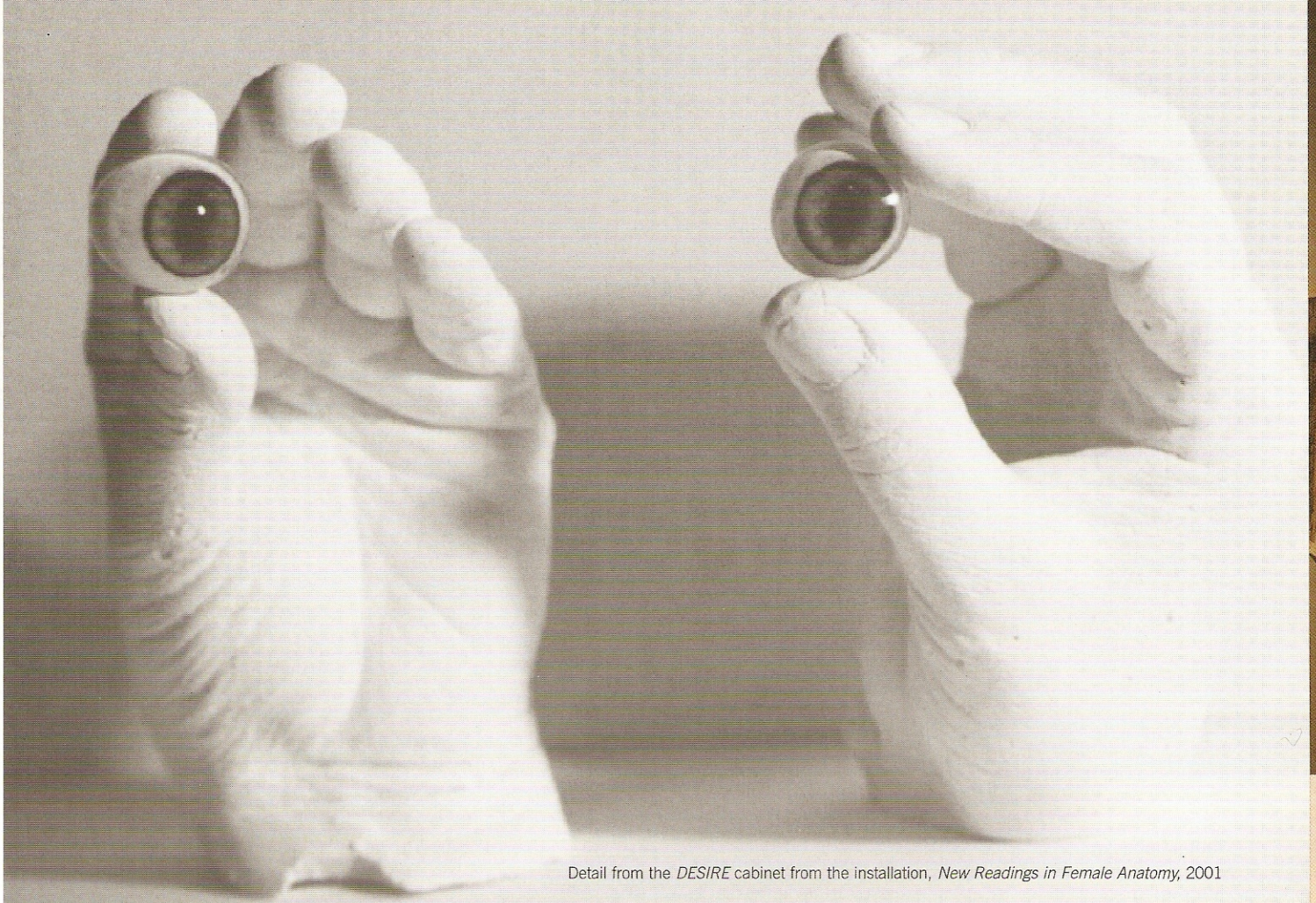
# **AN ETIOLOGY OF OBJECTIFICATION: Pam Hall's *New Readings in Female Anatomy***

by Natalie Beausoleil



Detail from the *DESIRE* cabinet from the installation, *New Readings in Female Anatomy*, 2001





Detail from the *DESIRE* cabinet from the installation, *New Readings in Female Anatomy*, 2001

## INTRODUCTION

As you enter the room where Pam Hall's *New Readings in Female Anatomy* is exhibited, you can see large prints (33 in. by 40 in.) on every wall interrupted by three wood cabinets containing plaster sculptures. The 28 prints are set on coffee-dyed paper that is covered with images and text. The drawings of skeletons, human bones and organs that appear on them seem at first glance to have been taken straight from medical textbooks. Handwriting in pencil is interspersed with these images and printed text. Hall has called this series of prints *Gynaeopedia*. The sculptural works, which are cast from body parts, is untitled, but the doors of the cabinets in which they are displayed are etched with the words anxiety, ambivalence and desire.

At the centre of the room, red books are displayed on two reading tables. On one are four books entitled *New Writings*. The pages of these books are blank except for the first one, where Hall invites the audience to write about their own experience of the body. On the second table are three bookworks—*A Female Handbook*, *Hystories* and *Re-Membering the Body*—the results of similar previous collaborations. Three tape players produce a soundtrack of women talking and singing. The atmosphere is meditative, and the tables and chairs in the middle of the room provide a space to stop, read, look around and reflect. Though the voices are constant, the room feels quiet, like a library.

The exhibit is dense; it's a profoundly moving experience to stroll around the room and become immersed in Hall's work. From a distance, the prints appear to use standard western medical imagery to describe women's anatomy, but as you look more

closely, the work turns medical imagery upside down. The writings and images speak from women's experience of everyday life, of different moments in a woman's life and of the experiences of different women. The images and texts are in fact anything but standard; the images are accompanied by ironic statements, and the writings poetically describe the social norms of femininity, gendered language and women's feelings about their bodies.

As both a woman and a researcher of issues surrounding women's relations to their bodies, I was quickly drawn into Hall's work. Her words, images and sounds resonate with my experience of growing up and being a woman among other women and men in this culture. The artist's statement about the sexualization of women's bodies rings true. Her reflection on pregnancy also touched me—even though I have never been pregnant—because as a member of this culture I have observed and talked with other women and believe that she is right. Each time I walked through the exhibit, I was touched by what I saw and heard. Graduate students told me that leafing through Hall's prints and books left them speechless and reflective. Hall herself often writes about touch, and the word takes on powerful meaning in the context of this exhibit. I am grateful to the artist for having produced such magnificent and passionate work.

While Hall's use of words, images and metaphors is sometimes playful, the play is not empty, nor is it an attempt at appropriation. Hall's wordplay is an acknowledgment, an awareness that emerges from a grounded place—a place of flesh, bones and blood. Moreover, the artist is keenly aware of the larger power relations





Installation view, *New Readings in Female Anatomy*, AGNL, 2001

that shape women's experiences, such as how medicine and science regulate women's lives through their bodies.

In this essay, I'd like to say something about the trajectory that led Hall to this project and then explore some of the themes that emerge from her *New Readings in Female Anatomy*, including medical and popular discourses of the sexed/gendered body and women's voices and gazes. I hope to bring out two dimensions of the artist's work: her reflection on women's everyday lives and her critical perspective, enacted through art, on the social production of gender.

### THE ARTIST'S EXPLORATION OF MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE

In a public presentation on November 15, 2001, Hall explained that her departure point for this project was her "gut" or, more specifically, her 1992 hysterectomy, which was her "first real encounter with medicine and surgery." She started to learn about her body and wondered how physicians were taught to touch their female patients. She felt embraced by a community of women as she talked with others about their own hysterectomies, and as a result produced the film *Under the Knife: Personal Stories*.

In order to understand how doctors learn to see women's bodies, Hall attended courses in the faculty of medicine at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) in St. John's, Nfld., beginning in 1992. In 1995, she produced her first print for the *Gynaepedia*, reflecting on the authority of medical drawings and discourses to describe the body. She completed the last print for the installation last year, just a few months before the exhibit opened.

From 1997 to 1999, Hall was the artist-in-residence at MUN's faculty of medicine, where she continued to explore the relationship between women and medicine. During that time, Hall created and collected some of the imagery present in *New Readings*. The faculty of medicine fully supported her work, and the public's

written comments about Hall's exhibits in the medical building ranged from high praise to angry criticism. Hall wanted to be provocative and stimulate reflection on medical practice through art; her interdisciplinary contribution was—and still remains—a successful experience, both for her and for the faculty. Hall's mixed-media works still hang on MUN's walls; the artist has also participated in medical teaching and started something called The Learning Body Project with medical students, through which she established what she describes as "profound and ongoing relationships with the undergraduate community" (Hall's report to the Canada Council can be found at [www.med.mun.ca/artistinresidence](http://www.med.mun.ca/artistinresidence)). Hall stays connected to the faculty, proving that art and medicine can fruitfully meet through such collaboration and joint reflection on the production of knowledge.

### DISCOURSES OF THE SEXED/GENDERED BODY

The *Gynaepedia* draws attention to dominant medical discourses of the sexed/gendered body. The texts and images mix medical imagery with a deconstruction of language from a woman's perspective. In doing so, the prints both underline and subvert the authority of the medical texts and images in western culture.

In the audio component of *New Readings*, women sing and are engaged in animated conversation. The voices speak about the lives of a generation of women from girlhood to womanhood. For example, the unspoken taboo surrounding the word "vagina" is mentioned. One woman says, "I remember my mother saying 'Don't touch yourself down there...don't...be careful.'" The topics of discussion are still relevant; even in the twenty-first century, the word "vagina" is spoken with great hesitation, even in conversations between doctors and patients. As one medical student recently told me, many graduating medical students are uncomfortable with the word, and instead use expressions such as "down there" and "down



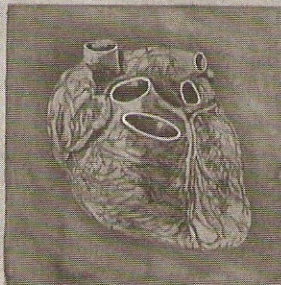
# TOUCHED *She's* Seduced by

## Sexual Response in the Human Female: Selected Influences and Factors in Variation

Ambience, experience, conscience and expedience  
transference, romance, clandestine, convenience  
accident, circumstance, complicity, commitment  
precedent, acknowledgment, acknowledgment, development  
embarrassment, endorsement, environment, and sentiment  
disparagement, and treatment, dirt, age, and drugs  
harassment, characters, good bones, conduct  
cockiness, courtliness, memory and mood  
richness, hardness, largeness, loveliness  
readiness, and timing, music, place, and food

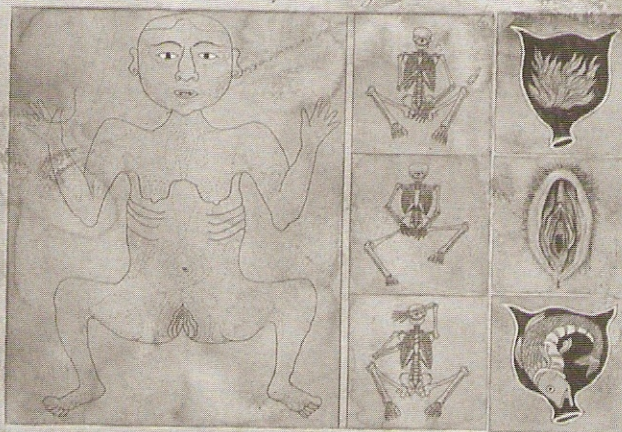
eyesight, appetite, candlelight, height  
dishes, horses, what she knows, certain clothes  
fascination, masturbation, flirtation, frustration  
obligation, conversation, adoration, affirmation  
anticipation, adaptation, aspiration, stimulation  
civilization, collaboration, desperation, damnation  
fixation, pretense, hesitation, hesitation  
fascination, legislation, liberation, and location  
lubrication, menstruation, procreation, relation  
recreation, occupation, sensation, situation  
inspiration, calculation, domination, education  
validation, utilization, penetration, invitation  
temptation and communication, inclination, meditation

anxiety, propriety, society, variety  
chem-litro, and artistry, biology, spinning  
technology, psychology, the rules of methodology  
stirration, feminism, romance, rum, criticism  
epitaph, criticism, epitaph, question  
some rocks, big thorns, devil's seeds, so the rocks  
intellect, affect, defer, self-respect  
protection, affection, erection, C-section  
ambition, position, inhibition, intellect  
consumption, dysfunction, prohibition, premonition  
reception, disposition, superstition, suggestion  
cegalian, parterrian, competition, misadventure  
incidence, television, good hands, rock bands

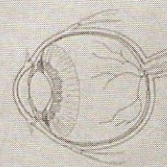


infection, projection, recollection, circumspection  
rejection, self-reflection, no protection, bad selection  
transference, adherence, exultance, and self-defense  
disfigure, erigence, rest, exasperate and exasperate  
neck swell, magic spells, tight pants, slow dance  
excess, surprise, dark eyes, telling her  
open mouth, but she, theories of original sin  
dreams, dope, what she read, language, hope, her own bed  
what she ate, if you were late, her view on fate, if she is straight  
local scene, children's shoes, underwear, body weight  
your touch, mystery, nature, nurture, history

your look or your mind  
or a tight, young behind  
her nose - your smell!  
or a need to peek  
or a finger, a tongue an embrace, a new face  
2 groins writhing in dance, a caress in the chest  
a mouth on her throat, or a hand on her ass  
an unwavering gaze, her reflection in glass



or romance - fiction's dance  
hearts in live lead to trust  
or the union of gods  
but to lust? (not a must)  
or by silk on her belly or the wind in her hair  
or the babe at her breast or a secret affair  
or the scent of a rose, the thrill of high-speed  
or by earth or by water, for need for your seed  
or debate, no ding hands, or the feel of your thighs  
or the rubbing of backs, kissing palms, or your eyes



Left panel from *On the Complexity and Diversity of Female Sexual Response* from *Fragments from a Re-Constructed Gynopaedia*, 1995-2001

under." Eve Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues*, which has been performed in Canada and the United States, bears witness to and challenges this discomfort.

In contemporary western culture, the vagina is the object of both scorn and fascination. Women are often reduced to their genitalia, a phenomenon that contributes to the heterosexualization of women, which has been decried by many feminist activists and scholars (Haug, 1987). Yet while popular discourses sexualize women, medical discourses reduce them to reproductive machines. In Hall's Dec. 6, 2001, reading of some of her prints, she emphasized that women's bodies are "too many parts reduced to a hole." Hall's sculptures of vulvas and breasts, displayed in vitrines as well as her bookworks, also ponder the theme of women's reduction to genitalia and reproductive functions. In her work, medical and popular discourses intertwine; in real life they are inextricably tied and not as different as you might initially think. Medical and popular discourses share similar assumptions because they are both socially constructed and the products of their time (Martin, 1987). Medical texts and images, as well as everyday popular language, produce norms of femininity that are expressed via the body in contemporary western culture. Indeed, the body itself is sexed through a mix of biological and social processes. Moreover, structures of oppression, such as patriarchy or masculinism, white supremacy, ageism, class oppression and heterosexism, are all articulated and established through the body. More specifically, in a patriarchal or masculinist context, women suffer numerous constraints and controls exerted through the body. Social scientists have denounced the particularly oppressive

impact of western medicine on women. An important issue is the way in which medical discourses have developed at the expense of women's self-knowledge, or women's knowledge about their own bodies (Duden, 1993). Hall's work addresses the role of medicine in the creation of sexed bodies, as well as the history of medical appropriation of women through the body.

Contemporary western society is not only patriarchal and masculinist, but it is also a profoundly dualistic place where body and mind are conceptualized as separate and unequal realms. Mind, or reason, has primacy over bodily and emotional matters. Women are associated with the domain of the body, while men are seen as masters in the area of mind and reason; this ideology justifies the oppression of women and the appropriation of their bodies. Feminists have denounced this state of affairs, some suggesting that women transcend the body and reach the realm reserved to men, while others have questioned that dichotomy between body and mind (Spelman, 1982). Hall questions the mind-body split in her own work as she writes about and draws the mind and the brain: "She-is-out-of-her-mind...in her body...brain-balanced, mind-fuel...even-handed women."

Ultimately, women are alienated from medical science. "Many elements of modern medical science have been held to contribute to the fragmentation of the unity of the person. When science treats the person as a machine and assumes the body can be fixed by mechanical manipulations, it ignores, and it encourages us to ignore, other aspects of ourselves, such as our emotions or our relations with other people. (...) Women are not only fragmented into body parts by the practices of scientific medicine, as men are;



they are profoundly alienated from science itself (...) In addition, the content of science presents a male-biased model of human nature and social reality" (Martin, 1987, pp. 19-21).

Martin shows that in both medical texts and popular culture, menstruation and menopause are described in terms of failed production, and therefore as pathological and even horrible. The author denounces those medical texts that use the "production gone awry" metaphor, which views the natural functions of the female body as symptomatic of a loss of control. By and large, textbook descriptions of menstruation and menopause are negative. Martin cites a recent passage in a college text about menstruation: "If fertilization and pregnancy do not occur, the corpus luteum degenerates and the levels of estrogen and progesterone decline. As the levels of these hormones decrease and their stimulatory effects are withdrawn, blood vessels of the endometrium undergo prolonged spasms (contractions) that reduce the blood flow to the area of the endometrium supplied by the vessels. The resulting lack of blood causes the tissues of the affected region to degenerate" (Martin, 1987, p. 47).

Martin underlines the negative verbs used in the text, including degenerate, withdrawn, spasms and lack, as well as weakened, leak, deteriorate, discharge and repair (Martin, 1987, p. 47). Such descriptions contribute to the popularly negative view of menstruation. In contrast, Martin found that medical textbooks about male reproductive physiology use flattering terms such as "remarkable cellular transformation" (Martin, 1987, p. 48).

Studies that have investigated women's encounters with medical science underline the sense of alienation and fragmentation many have experienced. Martin interviewed women about their experiences with childbirth. Just as a high incidence of hysterectomies has been criticized by health activists, a significant number of cesarean sections in the twentieth century has also been challenged (Martin, 1987). Moreover, the separation of self from body that women describe when they talk about menstruation, menopause and childbirth is present to an extreme degree when they describe cesarean section. "(...) It is clear that cesarean sections affect women very differently and often more negatively than vaginal births. One of the commonest reactions (...) is to feel out of control" (Martin, 1987, pp. 79-82).

Martin quotes women as saying, "Somehow being referred to as 'a section' after a cesarean does not help you feel like a whole person. I felt even more like a fragmented body the next day when I thanked the doctor who helped in my cesarean for his assistance and he did not even remember who I was." (...) "They talked over me and to each other, but not to me. I felt like an object and not a human. (...) I felt strange and detached from my body. I wanted to scream" (Martin, 1987, pp. 82-83). "Women who have had cesarean sections describe feeling forcibly violated and helpless as they raise violent images of crucifixion, rape and evisceration" (Martin, 1987, p.84).

## VOICES AND GAZES

*New Readings in Female Anatomy* offers a critical deconstruction of language itself. The words in the handwritten text and the photo transfers weave a rich poetic texture. Hall shows that language is not neutral, but that it contributes to the production of gender in everyday life—in derogatory expressions describing girls and women and also in the struggle to find one's own voice in an anti-women, anti-feminine language and social order.

Meanwhile, Hall has also created a repertoire of women's lives through language that reflects their daily activities. Her writing, and the conversations we hear throughout the recordings, emphasize women's typical activities. She evokes interactions, intimacy, paid and unpaid work, family and responsibility for the care of others, special events and daily occurrences—the unremarkable and the remarkable. Hall's language is so beautiful and strong it can stand on its own.

*New Readings in Female Anatomy* describes the making of individual and collective memories, as well as the role of women in the transmission of knowledge. "She has a long memory...memory for the tribe...she tends the dead...she flatly refuses to forget." Many women hold family and community together, heal others, know all there is to know to survive and are the bearers of culture. Hall's powerful performance last December was a perfectly rhythmic reading and enactment of a script in which memories, including how her own mother used language, play a crucial part.

In this way, Hall uses anatomy as a launching pad, but talks about much more than the physical body. She also talks about women's lives and the "body heart soul." Her work is clearly feminist in its portrayal of power relations and the complexities of women's lives, starting from women's perspectives. Hall's art undermines dominant representations of women in popular culture and in scientific discourses. Her work involves a critique of the biomedical model of the body, where the body is conceptualized as an entity separate from the mind and from the community. The artist points out the limitations of the biomedical perspective while challenging the authority of the medical and scientific discourses. She shows that artists play a crucial role in promoting awareness of how women have been represented by both popular culture and science (Chadwick, 1996).

Hall is also very aware of the authority of visual and auditory senses in western society, in addition to the authoritative quality of scientific and medical texts. Though she uses visual and auditory means of presentation, she also challenges dominant systems of representations and "the male gaze." An accomplished printmaker, Hall has made sculptures to create a rupture from the authority of the printmaking medium. The resulting plaster sculptures are disturbing; one of them takes the shape of an erect penis with an eye on its tip. This particular piece forcefully evokes the primacy given to visual culture and the masculinist power to control women and femininity in dominant representations and practices of contemporary western culture.

Throughout the exhibit, Hall questions the origin of the gaze, and which gazes appraise and regulate women's lives. "The eye" cohabits with "the I." Hall's art, however, suggests that women can develop a gaze that goes beyond the internalization of the male gaze—beyond alienation or false consciousness. In the final print of the *Gynaepedia* series (Plate XI), woman ages; she "looks forward...reflects...regards herself...discards her illusions...looks away...looks back...shifts, finds her gifts." The aging woman has become the crone, with fierce pride and with "these wise eyes."

The last plate of the series strikes me as hopeful and empowering. It is about turning the tide, letting go, remaining oneself—and changing. In December, the artist came full circle as she ended her performance with the words, "She turns away, shifts, finds her gifts and changes...single-handed." On her first plate, Hall painted a hand from the imprint of her own hand and wrote: "A single hand reaching—for some definition." In this work, the hand symbolizes



women's daily actions. In her magnificent *Female* handbook, Hall relates the myriad ways in which women use their hands: "...to accede...to braid my sister's hair...to captivate, care for, caress, carry...to detect breast cancer, do up my mother's necklace... to nurse, nurture... to object, obstruct, open, organize, orchestrate...to wear my daughter's pride ring... to worry, wrap, wrench...to wring, write, yank, yearn, yield."

Hall's *New Readings* tells a story of both objectification and agency. Women are never completely subjugated in a patriarchal and dualistic order. They are, in fact, simultaneously objects and subjects (Young, 1990). Hall's work convincingly resonates with feminist scholarship, revealing the struggles, negotiations, coping strategies—even the subversion and rebellion—that women have shown in relation to their bodies (Fisher and Davis, 1994).

## CONCLUSION

It's impossible to adequately describe *New Readings in Female Anatomy* in this short essay. Hall has succeeded in reaching out to the audience to express the joys and pains of women's bodies and lives. In the "writing table" bookworks that are part of the series, where Hall invites the audience to write about their own experiences with their bodies, some women have penned how much the exhibit has stirred emotions in them; others recount their own hysterectomies, abortions, rapes...and finding themselves.

Though orchestrated by one woman, this work is the result of collective gathering of strengths. Women have shared their hysterectomy experiences with Hall; the voices of others engage in conversations with her as she reflects on the body and on women's relations to the medical establishment. Hall also takes part in an artistic lineage of women-feminists-critical artists who, in their own works, have explicitly and forcefully confronted power relations, the gendered body and the body/mind dualism characteristic of contemporary western culture. Activism through art, and feminist art activism, are fundamental strategies of subversion and resistance to the social order. *New Readings in Female Anatomy* confirms that artists have a crucial role to play in a radical critique of dominant discourses of femininity, masculinity, science, medicine and the production of the body. Pam Hall joins such artists as Orlan, Barbara Kruger and the Guerilla Girls who are leading the way in how we rethink gender and body. Hall's work is also an important contribution to social-science studies that examine women's feelings about their bodies and what their bodies means to them.

Through her artistic insight, Hall conveys a quest for understanding fundamental social processes at the heart of women's lives. If, as Audre Lorde suggests, the erotic is a power that comes from a place of knowledge, connection, understanding and struggle, then Hall's work is deeply erotic. It is work to be savoured slowly. One wishes to take *New Readings in Female Anatomy* home, using it to teach, to review it frequently as one does a treasured book or a special poem, a feast for the senses, an inspiration for resting and for dancing, creating art and living.

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Detail from the *DESIRE* cabinet from the installation, *New Readings in Female Anatomy*, 2001