

On Exhibit: The Space Between Gender (RBSA)

The mechanical, the organic, and the role of gender binaries in the work of Yazmin Boyle

This article examines Yazmin Boyle's solo exhibition '[The Space Between Gender](#)' held at the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (RBSA). Exploring the role of gender binaries in the creation of *Unskinned Corsetry Enters Stage Right* (2018), it asks in what ways a sculpture can perform a feminist occupation of space.

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Collection: Royal Birmingham Society of Artists

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In the summer of 2018, the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (RBSA) exhibited '[The Space Between Gender](#)' by the contemporary artist Yazmin Boyle. Boyle was granted this one person show as a prize-winning artist at the [New Art West Midlands \(NAWM\)](#) 2017 exhibition of early-career contemporary artists.

Throughout her solo show in the RBSA, Boyle combined brass and copper, making use of their reflective potential, and covered these metals with decorative bitumen screen-prints. The largest piece in this exhibition was *Unskinned Corsetry Enters Stage Right* (2018, fig.1), a long tunnel-like structure reminiscent of an elongated corset, and the only piece with a specific title. Other untitled works included brass squares covered with bitumen-printed sewing patterns hung on the white walls of the gallery, and miniature 3D-printed sculptural forms, which were placed on leather squares atop plain white plinths. The artist used these contrasting materials and techniques to explore gender stereotypes and gendered labour. She paid particular attention to the imposition of 'male' and 'female' binaries onto technical and manual working practices, and the subsequent tension between the mechanical and the organic. As Fiona Carson notes, 'Sculpture's traditional preoccupation with the relationship of the body to space makes the 'gendering' of sculpture a fruitful topic for feminist investigation.'¹ As such, this article focuses on Boyle's show at the RBSA and includes excerpts from conversations with the artist to further explore questions of feminism, gender binaries, occupation of gallery space, and the female body.

What made this exhibition so intriguing was Boyle's approach to gender through materials, as well as her curation of the exhibition space. Significantly, she was given freedom to curate the space and her work. Her engagement with questions of gendered labour are evident in the contrasts of *Unskinned Corsetry* (fig.1). Its form represents the corset and the curves of the stereotypical female body, decorated with screen-prints of sewing patterns. All

reference the domestic, 'feminine', labour of sewing and dressmaking. But the decoration is done with bitumen, typically used in 'masculine' manual labour, such as building and road surfacing. The combination of these contrasts highlights the binaries of female and male, private and public, and the moment of dissonance when these binaries meet each other.

Boyle identifies quite strongly as a printmaker who returns to sculptural practice to express a play between the two mediums, an approach that often '[takes] something two dimensional and then put[s] it back into something sculptural'.² At present, her work utilises 'items and materials that infer femininity and feminine ideals', reflected in the central theme and works exhibited at the RBSA.³ To coincide with this, Boyle recorded the sound of an embroidery machine, although this played intermittently. This sound was part of a previous piece where Boyle explained that she 'embroidered words [she] identified with as a maker and as a woman, and this echoed in the space.' Boyle continues,

The words were process words, 'smooth, carve, rub', bringing it back to the body. We spin ourselves up, we pinch ourselves, we stare at ourselves in the mirror ... The machine is a womanly machine, with female-orientated materials, tying in with the exhibition.⁴

In her work, she explores the connections between the feminine and the masculine, the organic and the mechanical, and patriarchal control over the female body. The RBSA embraced the political nature of Boyle's work, encouraging its expression through the inclusion of a detailed statement by the artist, prompted by interview questions which the RBSA themselves supplied. The artist's voice, with its combination of political, social, and visual considerations, offered an informed interpretation to the visitor's experience of her work. The result was a thought-provoking experiment on the influence of gender in the conception, creation, and display of sculpture in gallery space.

A striking aspect of Boyle's work was the lightness of *Unskinned Corsetry*, hanging mid-flight. In her statement, Boyle referred to the sculptor [Richard Serra](#) (1938–) and pointedly connected his work to a stereotypically masculine artistic vision. His sculpture has a weight and solid mass that consciously occupies space. The sculptural object, with this conscious occupation, can reinforce or undermine the gallery space, creating 'a visual field where the entire space becomes a manifestation of sculpture'.⁵

Through this mention of Serra, it becomes clear that Boyle understands the dominant sculptural occupation of space through mass, as well as sculptural labour and metalworking, to be male-coded. The sculptural works in 'The Space Between Gender' intentionally disrupt this through decorative embossing and the deliberate reference to fashion. The public display of spatial domination is contrasted with the incorporation of private, domestic

references. The exhibition thus becomes a feminist challenge against such gendered coding of materials, processes, and the display of the sculpture itself.

There is a compulsion to use traditionally male-associated processes to make my work as a protesting gesture against male associated mediums within our patriarchal society ... These works alternatively sanction a decorative feminine nature, through the decadent use of metal and print.⁶

With the creation of an open sculptural piece that makes it possible to see each bolt and screw, the implicit gender bias towards such technical skills is exposed. In her practice, Boyle is very aware of the material she uses and the associated processes of filing, screwing, drilling, of 'putting bolt to metal'.⁷ She emphasises her labour, like the artist [Eva Hesse](#) (1936–70) (who Boyle also references in her statement).⁸ The physicality of this labour is contrasted with the organic and sensual waves of *Unskinned Corsetry*, the powerful use of circles, and the screen-printing of the decorative sewing patterns, 'of lace and lingerie'.⁹ The historical perception of the practice of sculpture has been 'interwoven with machismo' and to emphasise her labour, as a woman, and contrast it as she does, changes how her work sits in the gallery space.¹⁰ Like Hesse, Boyle's sculpture becomes a language to express the subjective experiences of being a woman and of femininity, while at the same time critiquing the fixed interpretations of these experiences.¹¹

This printing of the decorative on 'masculine' materials is a common theme of both the exhibition in the RBSA and Boyle's wider practice. Her monumental *Orbita* (see fig.2), displayed as part of the NAWM Exhibition in 2017, was made up of two 3-metre long steel traps overlaid with a lace print in iridescent pigment described as 'feminine'.¹² They were reminiscent of eyes, giving a sense of returning the viewer's gaze and disrupting the standard submissive-feminine-object and dominant-male-viewer interaction.

What is apparent in this work and *Unskinned Corsetry* is the artist's repeated use of circles and the pierced form. This form of open sculpture occupies space differently to the closed or disruptive sculpture of Serra. [Barbara Hepworth](#) (1903–75) is an influential figure in Boyle's work, especially in the exploration of the inner space in sculptural forms. Hepworth allows space to pass through the open form of her sculpture, which has relinquished its closedness and enters into a marriage with infinite space.¹³ Both artists have a strong sense of femaleness and connect the circle to the organic and the female body. Rather than a void, the circle or the hole is seen as a piercing of forms and a representation of an inner space. This inner space offers an alternative to the monumental sculptural installations of Serra. During the interview, Boyle confirmed that *Unskinned Corsetry* was intended to reference the controlling form of a corset:

The use of pattern-making, the use of lace and lingerie, I suppose, yes, it is. I was also looking at a lot of architecture during the last years of my BA and corsetry, of performing the body, so yes it was ... It became a bit more abstract through the use of the circles and playing with that shape. I love circles, the circle is one of my favourite things. The way you can loop it back and forth. But it's a channel, with the middle circle evoking a waist. I've always liked the channel and always had that shape in my mind ... It's a rendered body in my eyes¹⁴.

Much like Hepworth, Boyle is very considered with the language she uses to discuss and describe her work. In her statement, she offered an intellectual and feminist understanding of her work, consciously using the circle to demonstrate and disrupt 'the anxiety and patriarchal control of woman'. She explained,

The exploration on the circular is reminiscent of mathematics, in particular the Fibonacci Spiral; the square becomes the model shape to personify male and the curve of the circle is female. *We are all but circles, guided by the circumference, balanced within its centre point*. Particularly, the precarious roundness of women and what still hangs in the balance¹⁵.

The hole and the circle mark sculpture as a place of change, and their openness demonstrate the potential of *Unskinned Corsetry* as an entrance or passage (fig.3).¹⁶ Symmetrical in form, it is not apparent which end is the opening and which end is the closing. Boyle is conscious of the space and harmony between genders. Significantly, her work seems to point at the space between the masculine and the feminine as an infinite space of blurred boundaries and potential.

Boyle deliberately chose to hang the sculpture from the ceiling, in flight, rather than leaving it freestanding or on a plinth. This conscious decision changed the perception of the piece and offered new possibilities for viewers to engage with it. The decision to hang *Unskinned Corsetry* also tied into the artist's understanding of gendered labour and coding of technical processes. The manual physicality of the hanging is made visible and, in its visibility, becomes decorative. As Boyle explains,

I've always been taught you should never hide anything, so when using fixing don't use an invisible string. Whenever you're using fixing, be it the wire or nuts and bolts, make it visible, make it decorative and obvious.¹⁷

The suspension of *Unskinned Corsetry*, in combination with its comparative size and the absence of a plinth, offered a fascinating interpretation of horizontality. Historically, the uprightness of a sculpture – its verticality – was a sign of subjectivity or intelligence, while a

sculpture displayed along a horizontal axis or a figure lying down – its horizontality – was a sign of weakness or vulnerability.¹⁸ These differences have historically fallen into gendered polarities. The vertical sculpture, a standing ideal subject, is implicitly male and the horizontal sculpture, a reclining vulnerable object, is female.¹⁹

Hovering 30 cm above a reflective and polished brass surface, the suspension of *Unskinned Corsetry* created a moment of interruption, its length taking up space in the centre of the gallery. It resisted the floor and the reflective rectangular piece of brass placed below it. Exhibiting a defiant subjectivity, the work refused the gendered coding of horizontal and vertical. Its open framework – both an exposure and vulnerability – becomes an ideal strength. Much like Serra, Boyle engaged with the gallery space. Unlike Serra, she did so as a feminist challenge that rejects the notion that women must make themselves small. The wires that suspend the piece became part of the sculpture and its installation in the gallery space. The viewer was made aware of their own body in relation to the sculpture. But there was also an anticipation of movement as the piece was hung in a manner reminiscent of a swing. With the heat of the summer, the doors were open, and the piece gently swung in the breeze. This was, Boyle admitted, ‘a happy accident’ that amplified the concepts behind the piece and that the ‘oscillation was like a birth canal moving about’.²⁰

Its full title, *Unskinned Corsetry Enters Stage Right*, echoes this swinging sense of movement. When asked why the inclusion of ‘enters stage right’, Boyle comes back to the occupation of space, of making woman present in the gallery, and encourages the perception of the piece as a staged performance of gender stereotypes.

The RBSA wanted me to play around with titling. The title can be just as important to deliver your concepts as the physical form. The use of copper beneath was a platform ... If I’d not used that platform of copper [*Unskinned Corsetry*] would have gotten lost. You’ve got the reflection, that mirroring effect again, mirroring your reflection in sculptural form.²¹

Hanging above the rectangle of copper, the sculpture is staged as a performance and the reflective nature of the copper encourages the viewer to participate in this performance. Leaning over the sculpture, a blurred image of themselves is reflected at the viewer. We become participants in the sculptural performance and once again, this idea of blurred boundaries becomes apparent. The sculpture encourages its viewers to engage with the idea that gender – femininity and masculinity – is performative and malleable.

Without the boundaries of a plinth, *Unskinned Corsetry* was wholly in the round. The open framework of the corset allows the polished surface of the metal below to reflect this structure. Leaning over, the inside of the bands of metal were printed with pattern

dimensions, which reinforces the connection to the decorative and to fashion. Squatting down on the floor to view the opening of *Unskinned Corsetry* evoked the sense of a tunnel or a birth canal (see fig.3). In this position, the viewer's occupation of space is restricted, much like corsets once restricted women's bodies and made them small. This was an intriguing contrast between the open framework of sculptural object and the fashion garment of patriarchal control it symbolised.

The other works in the solo exhibition were displayed in the space around *Unskinned Corsetry* (fig.4). Hanging on the walls were the brass squares with bitumen prints of sewing patterns which showed the feminine decorative juxtaposed with masculine materials and processes. The other sculptural forms were in miniature and displayed atop white square plinths. They were 3D-printed, reminiscent of jewellery, and consequently more fragile and delicate than the other pieces on show. They were also completely static. On their white plinths against a white wall, these pieces were marked by visible and physical boundaries. However, the use of leather in the display of these pieces brought an organic and bodily tactility to the supported sculptural forms. This contrast was a conscious play by the artist, emphasising the push and pull between materials, between the body and the object, the organic and the mechanical, the private and the public. Her display and curation of these pieces was very considered.

The use of the plinths was also quite poignant. I wanted them to be beautiful but to not take away from the pieces. And obviously, you had that square of leather which is bodily, it's animalistic, it's tactile. They came from designer leather handbags. That use of materials, of hard and soft: I always refer back to the Fibonacci spiral. When you come to geometry, the curve and the straight line, [it's] really old school masculine and feminine.²²

The hierarchy of display and use of horizontality, the sense of movement and references to performance, the exploration of the circle, all create an impression of intervention in the gallery space, questioning power relations, gender stereotypes, and gender binaries. In the use of the circle and male-associated metalwork processes, Boyle's *Unskinned Corsetry* resists identification with a definitive gender label or stereotype. As Rachel Middleman argues, 'even in the case of vaginal imagery that was intended as a way of identifying and celebrating sexual difference defined by biology, the artworks themselves remain representations, the meanings of which are malleable.'²³ 'The Space Between Gender' was an exhibition of contrasting binaries: the rigid metal bands that curve organically, echoing the shape of a stereotypical woman's body; a tunnel or corset, a pierced object, hovering over a solid rectangular sheet of polished metal; circles dissected by straight bolts and references to the mechanical; the feminine suspended above the masculine; private and public; restriction and freedom. Boyle is trying to decolonise the rigid mapping of domestic,

private spaces onto the female body by playing with these binaries and critique the gendering of interior and exterior spaces.

In her advice to future artists, Boyle references [Sol LeWitt](#)'s iconic 1965 letter to Hesse, 'Stop it and Just Do!'. In this letter, LeWitt tells Hesse to stop overthinking, stop worrying, stop chasing perfection, and just *do*, to engage with the act of creation without overanalysing. For Boyle, this means steering clear of perfectionism within making and attempting to curate a more playful freedom in the artist's practice. This brings an air of levity to Boyle's work and the suspension of *Unskinned Corsetry* feels more apt. The theoretical and intellectual understanding she brings to her work becomes secondary to the way the piece hangs in the space. It could be argued that the intense theoretical commentary of Boyle's statement overcomplicates the work, and attempts to pre-determine or control its meaning. However, I would argue that the depth of consideration she brings to the practice, evident in her statement, opens a dialogue of possibilities between the object and the viewer, and expands upon what might appear abstract works with little human connection. There is a balance between the theoretical and the practical, and in this balance, there is a blurring of the boundaries between the mental and the physical, the circle and the rectangle, the masculine and the feminine, the mechanical and the organic. By doing, 'letting go, casting off, putting bolt to metal', the strength of presence of the work is undeniable.²⁴ Womanhood, female subjectivity, and the organic nature of the body is brought to the forefront of the gallery in a feminist occupation of space.

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Images

Fig. 1 Yazmin Boyle, *Unskinned Corsetry Enters Stage Right* (2018), brass, copper and bitumen, 150 x 30 cm ©Yazmin Boyle.

Fig. 2 Yazmin Boyle, *Orbita* (2016), steel, 300 x 300 cm ©Yazmin Boyle.

Fig. 3 Yazmin Boyle, detail of *Unskinned Corsetry Enters Stage Right* (2018), brass, copper and bitumen, 150 x 30 cm ©Yazmin Boyle.

Fig. 4 Yazmin Boyle, *The Shape Between Genders*, exhibition in situ in the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists.

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- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
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- ¹⁰ Carson (2000), p.57.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p.59.
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- ¹⁴ Boyle and Lyons (2018).
- ¹⁵ Boyle (2018).
- ¹⁶ Penelope Curtis, *Sculpture: Vertical, Horizontal, Closed, Open* (London, 2017), p.182.
- ¹⁷ Boyle and Lyons (2018).
- ¹⁸ David J. Getsy, 'Fallen Women: The Gender of Horizontality and the Abandonment of the Pedestal by Giacometti and Epstein', in Alexandra Gerstein (ed.), *Display and Displacement: Sculpture and the Pedestal from Renaissance to Post-Modern* (London, 2007), pp.121–2.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p.122.
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- ²¹ Ibid.
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- ²⁴ Boyle (2018).