

ArtReview

Mary Kelly: The Condition Of Women After Motherhood

Claudia Ross | Reviews | 29 September 2022 | ArtReview



Mary Kelly, *Interim, Part I: Corpus, Menacé* (installation view), 1984–85, laminated photo positive, silkscreen, acrylic on Plexiglas, 30 panels, 122 × 91 × 6 cm (each). Courtesy the artist and Vielmetter, Los Angeles

***Corpus* at Vielmetter, Los Angeles explores the experience of non-normative femininity in older age**

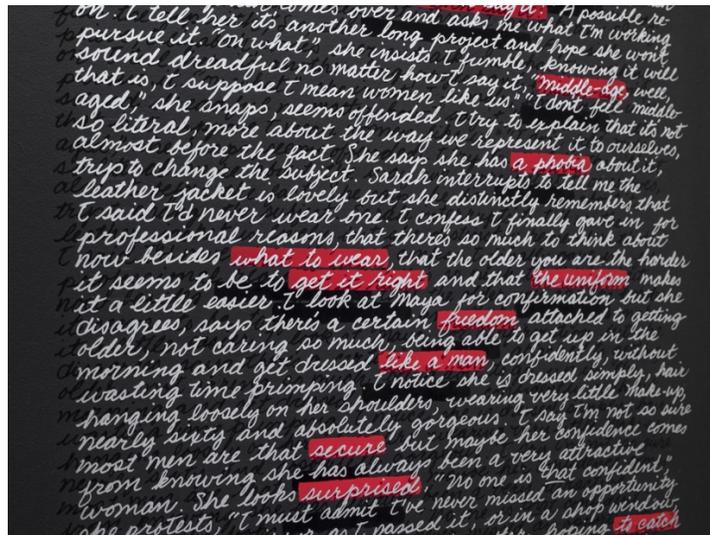
It is the mark of a truly successful artist that her work may feel forever contemporary. *Corpus*, restaged here at Vielmetter Los Angeles, is no less provocative than it was in 1990, when this first installation in Kelly's larger *Interim* series debuted at New York's New Museum. Finished ten years after her seminal *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), *Corpus* examines the condition of women after motherhood. The 30 silkscreened and collaged panels, shown in the us for the first time in over 30 years, propose a rigorous, striking examination of ageing women and the fraught history of psychoanalysis. Kelly structures *Corpus* around nineteenth-century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot's five-part classification of female hysteria, pairing evocative images of clothing with a scrawled, diaristic narrative by a first-person speaker contemplating the social experience of older women. In an American summer stamped by the reversal of the [Roe v. Wade decision](#), Kelly's work explores the vast territory beyond reproduction, challenging our focus on the young.

Hysteria, no longer considered a viable diagnosis, classified a series of then-unacceptable behaviours in young women – sexual forwardness, emotional expression – as a medical disorder. In a world still centred on the desirability of youth, *Corpus* reanimates Charcot's ideas to explore the experience of non-normative femininity in older age. Five sets of six rectangular panels form the installation, each grouped by language from Charcot's original taxonomy: the word 'Supplication' accompanies a pair of beat-up laced boots; a gauzy black nightgown looms above 'Érotisme'. Alongside Kelly's visual glossary, her handwritten protagonist ruminates over self-help books and anti-ageing advice, with key phrases highlighted in blood-red acrylic paint. Kelly presents older womanhood without an actual depiction of the body, forcing a confrontation with preconceptions about gender and ageing. *Corpus* renders the clothing and language associated with the performance of an outcasted femininity – with hysteria – both absurd and enduring, as relevant now as they were in Charcot's era.

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Interim, Part I: Corpus, Menacé (detail), 1984–85, laminated photo positive, silkscreen, acrylic on Plexiglas, 30 panels, 122 × 91 × 6 cm (each).
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'I think that being a woman', Kelly noted in a 2011 interview with *Art Monthly*, 'is only a brief period in one's life.' The statement resonates with the work in *Corpus*, where hysteria is recast to envisage the socially abject position of women no longer considered desirable in a persistently sexist popular culture. Absent any visual representation of the body, Kelly's work places the viewer into the literal shoes – the boots – of her older feminine subject. From here, American feminism's focus on reproductive justice feels no less important, but newly limited. *Corpus* asks a difficult question: *and then what?*

Corpus at Vielmetter, Los Angeles, [through 15 October](#)