

Bloody Mary

Blood in art, especially when associated with issues around sexual reproduction, such as the loss of virginity and the start of menstruation, is still a critical and ambiguous topic: interesting, fascinating, irritating, frightening and touching. In the West, the menstrual blood is perceived as painful, as commonly linked to “the curse of Eve”, God’s punishment of all women for Eve’s role in the Biblical Fall. But it is also strikingly beautiful for its reproductive capabilities, securing human existence. Collapsing menarche – women’s first menstrual bleeding – not only to womanhood but likewise to fertility, is a heavily discussed topic that finds its roots in ancient cultures and in contemporary feminist-spiritualist agents.¹ During the course of human revolution, vaginal and uterine blood has been constructed to signal “taboo”, not primarily in the benefit of women. Attributes and meanings connected to this kind of blood were mostly in opposition to the reality and, moreover, served to (negatively) influence and control the female body. Until today the topic stands for merging social, religious, cultural and political contexts.² Real (female) and symbolical blood (the male Body of Christ), the purifying holy blood (the nubile perfection and the Blessed Virgin Mary) and unclean menstrual blood, can find their way altogether in religious spaces such as Jewish or Christian temples. By dealing with the female vaginal or uterine blood these spaces become gendered.³ Iconic female artists such as Judy Chicago, Vanessa Tiegs, Ingrid Berthon - Moine and Rupi Kaur use the material and the subject of the “female blood” to uncover the suppressive mechanisms that have been built up over centuries to invoke the way men and women alike think of female bodies. Although blood related to puberty, fertility, concepts of sexual activity towards virginity or the idea of “purity” towards being “unclean” in art is not new, it is quite unusual to meet a male artist questioning the constructed body politics around female bleeding.

So here he is again, breaking artistic and social boundaries: Lam is not afraid to approach this usually hidden issue, reflecting upon biological and social meanings around sexually or rather reproductively connoted female bleeding and their (male) agents, as well as the blood’s aesthetic dimension. The project perturbs at first with its bold title *Hymen*, addressing the membrane which, other than commonly supposed, only partially closes the vagina, but whose presence is traditionally taken to be a mark of virginity.⁴ This small, apparently minor piece of mucosa opens a broad, globally led discourse around the maturation of a young woman and her bleeding in connection with the first sexual intercourse – which actually may or may not occur – as well as the commencing menstruation. How can this discourse be properly visualised in a courageous and dignified approach?

The first thing to be noticed when observing Lam's work are only three simple and disparate materials, coming together in a performance simulating female bleeding. There is a green netting common in Malaysia for securing construction sites which the artist uses as a symbol for the hymen. He pours red paint over it, which in a slow process, drips through the net onto a numbered diaper cloth surface instead of a classical canvas. This process is being repeated with nine other nettings, with changes being made to the height but also the paint colour – from originally pure red to 90% black red at the tenth layer, symbolising the oxidation of blood known from menstrual blood. And although the communication of the first vaginal and uterine bleeding through construction materials and a large cloth canvas with red dye is a very abstract form of the real, unembellished bleeding process, the performance Lam is sharing with us is unambiguous – there are no other explicit signs necessary to understand what is being shown. Maybe it's the red, fluid colour that automatically reminds us of blood, or the white diaper cloth that leads us to think about menstrual pads or the blood on a bed sheet after defloration.

1 See the feminized trope of the (predictably red) rosebud – tight, protected, innocent and untouched – representing the pre-menarcheal girl who, once she begins to bleed, becomes open and accessible. She is now physiologically ready for sexual reproduction and can claim the identity "woman": "Red Bud Blossoming/You are Opening/Bleeding is Flowering/A New Woman Walks on the Earth." Stark weather, Alisa: A New Woman Walks on Earth, Daughter of the Earth (CD, 1997). Quoted after: Bobel, Chris: *New Blood. Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, New Brunswick/New Jersey/London 2010, p. 91.

2 Also the idea of holy vs. pagan blood meaning the juxtaposition of antique and early Jewish and Christian animal offerings in temples vs. the symbolical blood of God (the wine being drunk during the Sacrament of Eucharist) and the blood of the Mother of God. Cf. Branham, Joan R.: *Blutende Frauen, blutige Räume. Menstruation und Eucharistie in der Spätantike und im Frühen Mittelalter*, in: *Die Ordnung des Materials*, ed. by Georges Didi-Huberman, Berlin/Boston/Mass. 1999 (= *Vorträge aus dem Warburg-Haus*; vol. 3), p. 131-150.

3 Cf. Branham 1999, [passim].

4 Cf. English Oxford Living Dictionaries: Hymen (2018), in: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hymen> [11.02.2018].

Yet the performance and the installation are a much stylised, maybe even a “designed”, purified sexual and menstrual process. Lam decides to leave the brush and the classical canvas behind, refusing to depict a realistic scene with human agents and their bodies. Minimising the figurative, naturalistic aspect and enhancing the metaphors, Lam chooses a rather clean and reduced artistic language to illustrate the definitive maturation from a female child to a grown-up woman. The numbers one to ten, reminding us of counting in the first school year, are mapped on the medium surface, and the medium itself, actually a diaper cloth, can accordingly be read as attributes of a childhood that is slowly diminishing.

Furthermore, this “passage” from childhood to puberty has to be understood as a process, not a quick moment in time. Rather than a still canvas, the performance is the appropriate art form to address the transition from one stage in life to the next – due to its mobility. As during the show the netting gets denser by adding new ones onto the previous nets, their height is accordingly changing, too. Until the fifth layer we get to see an up and down, back and forth movement which unavoidably reminds us of the specific activities exerted during sexual intercourse. We get to understand that the passage from child to woman not only means menarche and the growing fertility but also the passage from “innocence” to sexual desire and all the other, mostly negative attributions being prescribed onto a sexually reproductive – and bleeding – woman’s body. According to the Levitical purity law (Lev. 15:25ff. and 29ff.) a menstruating or a bleeding woman associated with childbirth is ceremonially “unclean” and cannot have sexual relation with her husband or approach the temple for a certain period. Moreover menstrual blood is seen as foul and dirty; on the other hand, failure to excrete was taken as a sign of disease.⁵ Even more, a woman bleeding after giving birth to a girl meant danger as she multiplied the generative potential and therefore competed with the divine creation.⁶

5 Cf. Martin, Emily: *Medical Metaphors of Women’s Bodies: Menstruation and Menopause*, in: *Writing on the body: female embodiment and feminist theory*, ed. By Katie Conboy/Nadia Medina/Sarah Stanbury, New York 1997, p.15-41. Here p. 17.

6 Cf. Branham 1999, p. 136.

All these differing natural processes of bleeding – after defloration, while menarche and menstruation or even after childbirth – are being traditionally and cross-culturally used as an essential issue of (male) power over women and their bodies. Lam's green netting is therefore much more complex on the inside than its abstract aesthetics. Its original role to keep building rubble from the streets and protect the people passing by construction sites, is in the performance being used to symbolise the protective abilities a net such as a hymen might have. Simultaneously it is questioning the false widespread idea of the hymen as a defensive net, which in reality cannot control the blood or even be controlled. Although the net got thicker after adding more and more layers during the performance, the symbolised blood poured onto it always found its way to the diaper cloth canvas. And interestingly enough – leaving behind the same size of blood motif on all the 10 image carriers. This disclosure may help to tear up the entrenched "net" of social, religious and cultural restrictions of women based on their vaginal and uterine blood loss.

The truth is – a net is never a closed system, neither is the hymen, nor human nature in general. A netting can be strong, but seen in its temporal dimension it is in fact a very fragile bonding, a short-termed one, like the construction netting that cannot hold back all the building rubble from falling on the street. Likewise, the "blood" Lam is pouring during his performance onto the symbolised "hymen" stays on the surface for a glimpse of time before seeping through the net. Even the social net we are constructing around our children to protect them, cannot withstand their inevitable detachment from mother and father during physical and mental growth. A lesson each parent is learning with a heavy heart.

Lam's project is again a bold undertaking, an ongoing analysis of own beliefs and working methods. By letting himself "fall" through the net openings, he dares to take a new path. This is where a very complex theme, such as the bleeding female body and its biological and social parameters, start merging with a specific, minimised aesthetic. As shown, the blood attached to the female body has a difficult and deep social connotation, but Lam never misses to address the formal aspect, too. The passage from a girl to a woman, from an "innocent" to a sexually reproductive person, the process of losing blood, as well as its constant renewal, stand for endings and new beginnings in life and art alike. So the Hymen project is not only a father's declaration of love to his growing daughter, his struggle with and acceptance of the natural process of attachment versus releasing. Nor is it only a universal, courageous statement of an enlightened man towards a commonly suppressive thinking on

women and their natural body processes. As an artist, Lam recognises the existing aesthetic and content quality behind a shameful and long-time hidden topic and gives it a new, unusual, and stunning shape – a higher level on his ongoing journey of questioning life and art.

“[...] as if this process is less natural than breathing, as if it is not a bridge between this universe and the last, as if this process is not love, labour, life, selfless and strikingly beautiful.”⁷

Dr. Hanni Geiger

Dr. Hanni Geiger is an art and design historian and theorist. She studied fashion and textile design in Zagreb, Croatia, as well as art history, art education and intercultural communication at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich (LMU), where she completed her doctorate in 2014 with a dissertation on the British-Cypriot couturier and artist Hussein Chalayan (form follows culture. Entgrenzungen im Konzept-Design Hussein Chalayans, Vienna, Cologne, Weimar: Böhlau 2016 [= mode global; vol. 1]). From 2015 to 2016 she undertook a research period in Malaysia and Singapore and, to date, has collaborated with Wei-Ling Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. Previously, from 2013 to 2015, she was a research associate and lecturer at the Institute of Art History at the LMU Munich. From 2011 to 2012 she was part of the research project Exile, Migration und Transfer at the Center for Advanced Studies in Munich (led by Prof Dr Burcu Dogramaci). Further career steps include among others the project work at the Goethe-Institute Croatia, as well as the editorial work for the reviewed (art) history academic online journals sehpunkte and lesepunkte. Her research focuses on modern and contemporary art, the interdependencies between (fashion) design, art and migration and the relationship between mobility, exile, transculturality and identity building, as well as postcolonial artistic positions.

7 Rupri Kaur's comment towards the patriarchal and misogynist Instagram politics because of the removal of her photo post showing the artist on her bed with a little bit of period blood on her pants. Gray, Emma: The Removal of Rupri Kaur's Instagram Photos Shows How Terrified We Are Of Periods (27.03.2015), in: Huffington Post (online), https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/27/rupri-kaur-period-instagram_n_6954898.html [13.02.2018].