



# A Film and a Conversation

Simone Hine



*How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.*

*The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.*

*She went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end.*

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899)



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The curatorial question “How is feminism important to you?” which I will address in this short essay, requires a personal response. One that does not try to understand the field, but instead looks inward at those aspects that linger and recur over time. Furthermore, a first-principle question, such as this one, suggests a response that returns to the beginning only to find oneself in the present. It is with these two guiding principles that I will attempt to respond to this question.

In 1993, I saw the newly released film *The Piano*, directed by Jane Campion. One particular scene has stayed with me. In a small boat, surrounded by water, there is a sense of calm, which is broken by the film’s protagonist Ada, suddenly demanding that the piano, which has so far been central to her notion of self, be thrown overboard. As the piano plunges beneath the surface of the water, she calmly places her foot within the centre of a coiled rope that is attached to the piano, knowing that it will catch around her ankle and pull her to the depths of the ocean. Here, tied to her piano, she would escape the world.

This is of course a classic gesture of Victorian female emancipation. I have always felt that the clearest precedent for this scene is the final moments of Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* (1899). I am not sure if this is because it is the perfect example of this literary trope, as the final moments of the novel depict the female protagonist walking calmly into a body of water where she descends below the surface without struggle. Or, because

I happened to read this particular book at a similar time to my initial viewing of *The Piano*. I suspect that it is for both these reasons that the two texts sit forever tied to each other in my mind.

*The Piano* does not offer us poetic emancipation through death. As the piano drags Ada to its final resting place, her calmness is suddenly abandoned when she decides to free herself, returning to the surface and to life. As she is dragged back onto the boat, her internal voice is heard saying, “What a surprise, my will has chosen life”. The monologue continues with Ada describing her life beyond this point, which is supplemented by a montage of related scenes. Most notably, she is learning to speak, which she has not done since she was six years old. Ada’s previous refusal to speak, a central aspect of the film, can be understood as a refusal to enter into the language of patriarchy. But here, in these final scenes of *The Piano*, we hear her voice telling us that she is learning to speak. In these final moments of the film, Ada seems to be negotiating the murky waters between staying firm in her attempt to attain emancipation and living within the world that she finds herself.

*The Piano* presents a bleak outlook on the possibility of feminine emancipation. The Victorian notion of emancipation through death is already bleak, but here, even this is shown to be inadequate in explaining anything about the way women actually live. Instead, we are presented with the struggle between a conceptualised feminism and the world which it is supposed to occupy. The outcome of this struggle is deeply confused and somewhat unsettling.



This scene and the ideas that it evokes have stayed with me for more than twenty years. I am on occasion reminded of the way feminist ideals can be complicated by the process of living. It is quite telling that Ada locates the choice to free herself from the piano in her will, which she opposes to her conscious thought that sent her beneath the surface of the water. For the briefest moment we see her floating under the water, as an extrapolation of her monologue, attached to the piano in a type of suspended animation. This feels like a dream, rather than something that could have actually happened.

It is unclear if we are to see Ada's compromises, outlined in these final scenes, as emancipatory or as an act of failure, and I don't suppose it matters. What is of interest to me, is the inevitability of the disjuncture between one's ideals and one's actions. I do not see this as a failure, rather it is an indication of the complicated way in which feminism must negotiate theory and life. The way words meet actions and the way feminism infiltrates every aspect of one's life.

With this in mind, I would like to turn now to a conversation that I had with Sydney-based artist Mimi Kelly a couple of weeks ago. This conversation is mentioned here, as the most recent time that I spoke to someone explicitly about feminism. Interestingly, the question of feminist art practice turned toward its murky borders. Specifically, Kelly mentioned that she had, on occasion, received criticism of her work for complicity with the female stereotypes that she hopes to address. It seems to me that this is a criticism that is often applied to contemporary female or feminist

practices. Kelly's work tests the limits of what can be defined as feminist practice, creating a version of feminism that has more to do with one's emotive responses, than with the logic of any one feminist movement.

After this conversation I viewed *Loin of Loam*, a two-channel video that Kelly produced in 2013. This video provides a clear example of the way in which Kelly replicates feminine stereotypes within her work. The two channels are synchronised and both have been filmed in the same location. There are two characters, both played by the artist. The first, depicted in the left channel, appears naked with her long dark hair draped across her face and body. She emerges out of a lake, walking slowly toward the camera. Her eyes averted. She is depicted lying and at times crawling on the shores of the lake. She covers her naked body in dirt, sand and water. We are to imagine that she has come from the lake and is made of the matter of the earth.

In contrast, the right channel of *Loin of Loam* depicts the same woman from behind, walking through a lush landscape in Victorian attire. Her actions are deliberate. At one point she is depicted in profile, staring coldly from right to left across the picture plane. The woman's face is now visible, she is wearing heavy black make-up around her eyes and on her lips, which provides a disjuncture within the expectations of the character seen from behind. This moment is a precursor to the scenes that follow. Both women come face-to-face, each occupying a single screen, after which the two storylines merge into the right channel. The subject of the video turns at this point, somewhat unexpectedly, into a vampire narrative. At the end of which, the character on the left returns to the lake





and the character on the right returns fully clothed into the thick shrubbery.

In this work, Kelly presents the viewer with a pastiche of different tropes and stereotypical representations of women. Derived equally from cinema and literature, they are sexually charged and highly aestheticised. When the camera focuses on the woman's body, it lingers, aestheticising the form and in turn the actions. It is difficult to think of these images as feminist, because the critique is absent in what we are viewing. Yet, there is something about the way this work isolates and focuses so specifically upon modes of representation, allowing no room for anything unique in these forms, which turns attention to the process of representing the feminine.

If we consider the extra-diegetic content of the work, it seems significant that the characters depicted in the video are indeed the artist assuming different roles. We know, from Cindy Sherman's seminal *Untitled Film Stills* and the decades of work they inspired, that assuming these different personas undermines the validity of the photographic based image as truth, which is an idea derived from the indexicality of the medium. Instead we see the personas as constructed, and by extension these representations are understood as images without a referent beyond systems of image production.

More than this, Sherman highlights the particularly visual nature of the construction of feminine identities. The ease with which Sherman applies different personas to her singular body demonstrates how readily the feminine is codified when it is understood in purely

visual terms. Sherman's seamless transformations often produce a sense of disquiet, caused by the disjuncture between overt feminine codes and a sense of self inherent within the unique body. As we try to search for consistency in facial features, postures or mannerisms across all the personas, we are reminded of how some bodies are more predisposed to the synthesis of feminine codes than others. Each of these elements work to map the point at which visual codes are applied to actual bodies.

In *Loin of Loam* Kelly follows a similar trajectory, handing herself over to the conventions of feminine representation. She inhabits different personas and layers them upon each other in ways that are only possible on screen. This gesture isolates the persona and draws attention to its form. While Kelly's practice can be understood in terms of the *Untitled Film Stills*, it deviates from Sherman's later works, which often embrace the grotesque with an equally grotesque aesthetic of excess and waste. When viewed in its entirety, Sherman's practice spans the palatable to the grotesque and when the *Untitled Film Stills* are viewed in the context of her more grotesque series, the critique becomes retrospectively clear.

In contrast to Sherman, Kelly presents the grotesque as attractive. The lingering camera creates a sensual experience that seems to arrest any critique that may arise. In the absence of an overt critique, and in combination with the extra-diegetic knowledge that the artist is also the performer, attention turns toward the motivation for putting oneself in these roles. What is it about these images that is alluring? Why does the artist feel the need to perform these tropes? And, what does the prevalence of this tendency say about the conditions



of femininity?

When thinking about each of these questions, my thoughts turn once again to the disjuncture between knowledge and action when it comes to implementing feminist theory in life. In this context, *Loin of Loam* can be understood as an investigation, through artistic practice, of the point at which feminine stereotypes are synthesised into a notion of self. It seems to me that Kelly uses her own motivations and desires as the site of this investigation. Drawing on cinematic imagery that appeals specifically to the artist, Kelly creates multiple personas that are layered upon each other in the diegesis of the work. However, in the absence of a clear critique of the diegetic content, these personas are layered upon the artist herself, as a type of provocation regarding the extent to which these stereotypes can be assimilated into lived personas. The fantastical elements of the personas present fictions that are not readily assimilated, which is contrasted with aesthetic elements that can be easily assimilated into lived experience. In other words, the personas themselves are not being critiqued in this work, instead, the process of utilising well-worn visual aesthetics to construct feminine identities is what is being addressed. This approach unravels as part of the extra-diegetic content of Kelly's work, while the diegetic content remains intact. I wonder if this disjuncture at the core of the work acts as a performative acknowledgment of the fine distinctions that can be found in the murky border between feminist knowledge and its implementation in life.

Kelly's work is far from Campion's, however, they both draw on a history of representing the feminine in order to tread the border between feminist theory and

life. Campion clearly addresses this border in the content of *The Piano* and many of her subsequent films and television series, focusing directly on the individuality of the characters, making us feel the particularity of these internal conflicts. Kelly, on the other hand, presents the viewer with a series of stereotypes within the diegetic content, and the tension between theory and experience is presented as part of the extra-diegetic knowledge that the artist is, and must be, unique, despite the personas she embodies.

So, if I was to say why feminism is important to me, it would be as an imperfect method of negotiating the way emancipatory ideals are implemented within the fabric of individual lives. I say this with caution as the ground beneath this statement is always shifting.



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Text and Images by Simone Hine

Images as they appear:

Cover

*Water 1/8000sec. - 1/250sec.* (2015) Digital Image

Internal

*Water 1/8000sec.* (2015) Digital Image

*Water 1/6400sec.* (2015) Digital Image

*Water 1/2000sec.* (2015) Digital Image

*Water 1/1000sec.* (2015) Digital Image

*Water 1/400sec.* (2015) Digital Image

*Water 1/250sec.* (2015) Digital Image

Printed 2015

for *f generation* at the George Paton Gallery

