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# Constraint and Control

Patricia Ayres

*CUNY Hunter College*

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## **Constraint and Control**

by

Patricia Ayres

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

December 2018

Thesis Sponsor:

December 17, 2018  
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I have long considered themes of the body. Drawing on my knowledge as a fashion designer, I bring materials and hardware from the fashion industry into my artwork transforming and rendering them non-functional. My sculptures relate to stories of isolation, separation, and confinement. Presently, the United States has the world's largest incarceration rate. This has caused me to give thought to my own family dynamics as they relate to incarceration. My work is an examination of the transgressions of my family. Sister Vessels and Father Curtin, my grandparents, had a love affair while still ordained and later fled the church. In my mind, these transgressions are bound to the experience of another family member, incarcerated in a state prison. This duality of circumstances, how the U.S. treats the physical body and the mind, and my family's encounter with imprisonment, has driven me to explore the many ways in which America's correctional facilities dominates its citizens' bodies and minds. Consequently, inspired by these different elements in my work, the following pages will analyze how the United States penal system controls, constrains and restricts the body through physical and psychological wounds. Furthermore, they will examine how the Catholic Church controls people's minds and behavior through a ritualistic belief system.

Using the architectural structure of the octagon as it relates to an all-encompassing vantage point, my sculptures bridge the sacrament of penance and the penitentiary. From the surveillance of a prison tower to the watchful eye of God, these forms embody constraint and control. Bound, dirty and distorted in scale, a corporeal existence saturates my monumental sculptures. (Fig. 1) The amputated and protruding bumps are bandaged, while restrictive straps are pulled taut. There is a direct relationship to the body, yet not completely figurative. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 1 *Untitled*

2018, Elastic, Metal Hooks, Women's Undergarment Hardware, Wood, Coffee, Dye, Coconut Oil, Iodine. 7 x 4 x 4 ft





Fig. 2 *Untitled*  
2018, Elastic, Metal Hooks, Women's Undergarment Hardware, Wood, Coffee, Dye, Coconut Oil, Iodine. 7 x 3 x 3 ft

One of the ways that the U.S. controls the physical bodies of its citizens is by incarcerating masses of its population which is reflected by the high rate of individuals in prisons. According to the US Bureau of Justice, as of 2016, there are 2,246,100 adults incarcerated in US federal and state prisons and county jails.<sup>1</sup> The state has the desire to gain control of the physical body in order to gain control over the mind. Considering this, I have created sculptures, *Untitled* (fig.3) that are segregated, solitary cells which I imagine a body could fit into. These structures sit low on the ground and measure 3.5 x 3.5 x 1.5 ft. The materials I chose are wood, cement, sand, emulsion, plaster, ink and charcoal. While these forms allude to something out of a science fiction movie, they are in the shape of an octagon which I began to use in my first semester at Hunter. It references the panopticon of Michel Foucault's surveillance state where he describes a society that is always being watched. The octagon allows for central viewing on all sides; those being watched are unable to see when and by whom, they are being watched. I connect this with today's society as we are monitored in our daily lives with the implementation of CCTV on roads, airports, shopping centers, schools and homes.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaeble, Danielle, and Mary Cowhig. "Bureau of Justice Statistics Home Page." *Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS)*, U.S. Department of Justice, Apr. 2018, [bjs.gov/](http://bjs.gov/).



Fig. 3 *Untitled*  
2018, Adobe, Wood, Ink, Charcoal. 3.5 ft x 3.5 ft x 15 in

A person living in the strictly controlled environment of the United States prison system, is subjected to the constant threat of surveillance that subsequently modifies their behavior. According to Michel Foucault, we have created a disciplinary society that is not only a form of power but also a form of control. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he states the following;

“Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So, to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who

exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.”<sup>2</sup>

In my work, *Untitled* (fig. 4) I have created visceral totemic sculptures that are larger than human size. They are 7 feet tall and up to 4 feet wide. I have pulled, stretched, bound, wrapped, and stitched elastic, a material typically used on the inside of clothing, sourced from the garment district. The elastic reminds me of skin but also of a straight jacket. The spoiled markings throughout appear as bodily fluids and bruising. I have stained and colored the elastic with coffee, dye, iodine, coconut oil and liquid latex. There is a medicinal quality with residual scaring and a suggested atrophic form. The constricting straps are connected with industrial hooks and women’s undergarment hardware. These bent metal fasteners feel cold and forced. The concave and convex forms allude to dismembered or severed body parts contained within it. These sculptures attempt to reference pain, torture, and control. Moreover, an implied violence is imposed on these carnal forms advocating a palpable psychological effect of the oppressed female body. The artist Louise Bourgeois has influenced me. In her work, *Arched Figure* (Fig.5) “she used cages, medical tools and sewn appendages to symbolize feminine psyche, beauty and psychological pain.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in my sculptures, I have stitched together over 100 yards of stained elastic to evoke thoughts of trauma.

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault, Michel, 1926-1984. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977. Print. pp. 201

<sup>3</sup> Nixon, Mignon. *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*. MIT, 2005.





Fig. 4 *Untitled*  
2018, Elastic, Metal Hooks, Women's Undergarment Hardware, Wood, Coffee, Dye, Coconut Oil, Iodine. Dimensions Variable



Fig. 5 Louise Bourgeois, *Arched Figure*, 1999

I have observed the artist duo, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's early works, *Wrapped Objects* (fig. 6), created from 1958-69, in which, "The concealment caused by the fabric challenges the viewer to reappraise the objects beneath and the space in which it exists."<sup>4</sup> In my sculptures, the use of elastic allows me to wrap my armatures in a curious way which provokes my viewers to question what is suppressed within the forms.



Fig. 6 Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Objects*, 1958-69

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<sup>4</sup> Tolnay, Alexander, et al. "Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-69." *Christo J-C*, Taschen. Cologne, Germany, 2001, [christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wrapped-objects-statues-and-women?view=info](http://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wrapped-objects-statues-and-women?view=info)

With the rise of the Super Max Prison, solitary confinement rates have increased in the United States. These prisons were created to gain control over inmates who have continually demonstrated a threat to both fellow prisoners and staff. “There are more than 80,000 men, women, and children in solitary confinement in prisons across the United States, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Inmates are placed under regimes of strict and invasive surveillance. Their movements and activities are monitored, restricted, enabled, and cataloged by the state”.<sup>5</sup> Numerous physical torture tactics are enacted, such as forced cell extraction, restraint chairs, hog-tying, stun grenades and stun guns. Psychological torture such as eliminating visitations, phone privileges, commissary, recreational time and library access. “Another tactic that is used is “no-touch torture” such as sensory deprivation, permanent bright lighting, extreme temperatures, and forced insomnia.”<sup>6</sup> Other methods involve chemical torture, such as coercive medicative practices. “Furthermore, sexual intimidation and other forms of brutality and humiliation are implemented.”<sup>7</sup> In my work, *Untitled* (fig. 7), I use elastic straps to convey restraint and obscurity. The tension implies sexual dominance and control. There is an unsettling feeling of restriction as the sculpture appears to be held up by a harness.

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, Peter Scharff. “The Effects of Solitary Confinement on Prison Inmates: A Brief History and Review of the Literature.” *Crime and Justice*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2006, pp. 441–528., doi:10.1086/500626 Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/500626>

<sup>6</sup> Smith, Peter Scharff. “The Effects of Solitary Confinement on Prison Inmates: A Brief History and Review of the Literature.” *Crime and Justice*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2006, pp. 441–528., doi:10.1086/500626 Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/500626>

<sup>7</sup> Smith, Peter Scharff. “The Effects of Solitary Confinement on Prison Inmates: A Brief History and Review of the Literature.” *Crime and Justice*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2006, pp. 441–528., doi:10.1086/500626 Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/500626>





Fig. 7 *Untitled*  
2018, Elastic, Metal Hooks, Women's Undergarment Hardware, Wood, Coffee, Dye, Coconut  
Oil, Iodine. 7 x 3 x 3 ft

Psychologically speaking, these systems of control and conformity desecrate the minds and behavior of its citizens through power that is exercised by the institution of the Catholic Church. For example, the Catholic Church recruits young women to enter into the religious order by becoming nuns. These women are required to take a vow of chastity, poverty, and obedience. My grandmother, who took those vows as a teenager and later broke them, questioned her identity throughout her entire life. In my sculptures, *Untitled* (fig. 8), I attempt to capture what the guilt of this perceived sin and disobedience might look like.



Fig. 8 *Untitled*  
2018, Elastic, Metal Hooks, Women's Undergarment Hardware, Wood, Coffee, Dye, Coconut Oil, Iodine. Dimensions Variable



Fig. 9 Sarah Lucas, *I might be shy but I'm still a pig* (2000)

Notions of gender, identity and sexuality are challenged in the work of artist Sarah Lucas. *I might be shy but I'm still a pig* (Fig. 9) In my sculptures, I confront similar issues. Additionally, I share the same affinity for “the humble materials of Arte-Povera and Post-Minimalism.”<sup>8</sup> I have no doubt that my grandparents felt deep shame, remorse and self-doubt, upon leaving the church as they were disowned by both family members and friends. Although their previous life had been kept hidden from us, they continued to practice the rituals of their faith. As a child my grandmother would take me to an old basement church for mass. I remember going up to the front of the church and kneeling down at the Altar Rail. The purpose of this rail was not only to receive the Holy Eucharist but was used as a demarcation of the chancel and a strict separation between parishioner and clergy. In my sculpture *Barricade* (Fig 10.), I have created a rail that is about the same height of 2 feet and 6 inches. I have made it unstable to signify shifts that occur from one moment to the next. In my exhibition, this sculpture is connected to the architecture of the gallery to both divide the space as well as lead the viewer from one sculpture to another. In *Bouncing Betties* (Fig. 11), the elastic spheres converge on one end, marking time.

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<sup>8</sup> Smith, Roberta. “Sarah Lucas, Unmasked: From Perverse to Profound.” New York Times, September 5, 2018. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/arts/design/sarah-lucas-new-museum.html>





Fig. 10 *Barricade*  
2018, Cast Plaster, Found Steel, Stained Elastic. 10 x 3 x 2 ft



Fig. 11 *Bouncing Betties* (detail)  
Stained Elastic, Thread





Fig. 12. **Cy Twombly, *Untitled***, Rome 1959, wood, cloth, cardboard, house paint, and nail, 26 3/8 x 13 3/8 x 10 3/8" (67 x 34 x 27 cm), Kunsthaus Zürich

Fig. 13. **Cy Twombly, *Untitled***, Rome 1976, cardboard tubes, cloth, house paint, and paper tape, 76 1/4 x 6 5/8 x 6 5/8" (193.6 x 16.8 x 16.8 cm), Collection of the artist, Rom

The early white sculptures of Cy Twombly resonate with my investigation of materials.

(Fig. 12-13) "In using wood, his primary ingredient, the artist judiciously combines the textures of found objects with the rawness of unprocessed or weathered woods. While the disparate components that constitute these assemblages retain their distinct character, they are unified by Twombly's coatings of plaster and white paint."<sup>9</sup> I use the same ordinary materials such as wood and plaster in my work. In my sculptures, I have used black along with the white of the plaster. The darkness represents a mysterious, shadowy underworld of damnation, chaos and death and yet, it is the source of light.

<sup>9</sup> Cy Twombly, National Gallery of Art



Fig. 14 *Untitled*  
2018, Adobe, Plaster, Wood, Ink, Charcoal. 3.5 ft x 3.5 ft x 18 in

One of the ways in which the Catholic Church controls the bodies of its parishioners is through the enforcement of Penance and Reconciliation, one of the seven sacraments. The act of confession takes place in a small booth within the church, referred to as the confessional. A parishioner “gives priests authority over his or her sins”.<sup>10</sup> My interest in this emanates not only from my grandparents but from having attended parochial school where I experienced the sacrament of reconciliation. Through my sculptural work, I attempt to re-create this confined space. In my sculptures *Untitled*, (Fig.14) they are sealed off structures, albeit for the embedded

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<sup>10</sup> Stotts, Jonathan Andrew, et al. *The Confessional, the Couch, and the Community: Analyzing ...* Graduate School of Vanderbilt University, Aug. 2016, [etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/available/etd-07192016-101415/unrestricted/stotts.pdf](http://etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/available/etd-07192016-101415/unrestricted/stotts.pdf).

grills which are punctured, manipulated confessional booth screens. These grills create boundaries between sinner and priest, prisoner and guard, and the concept of heaven and hell. At the same time, they become breathing holes for a mythical underworld or a passageway. I initially built these structures as bases for columns, which I then removed. The towering octagonal columns represented authority. Their absence represents a past that no longer exists and becomes a memory. It focuses the viewers gaze from upward to inward. My work draws some elements from the sculptures of artists Mary Miss and Alice Aycock. (Fig. 15-17) While they both created work outside, which spoke of an anti-institutional stance, they also used simple materials such as wood and concrete. Moreover, they use architectural components that encourages equal parts conjecture and introspection.



Fig. 15 *Untitled* (Installation view)  
2018, Adobe, Plaster, Ink, Charcoal, Wood. Dimensions Variable





Fig. 16 Mary Miss. *Room Fence*, 1970

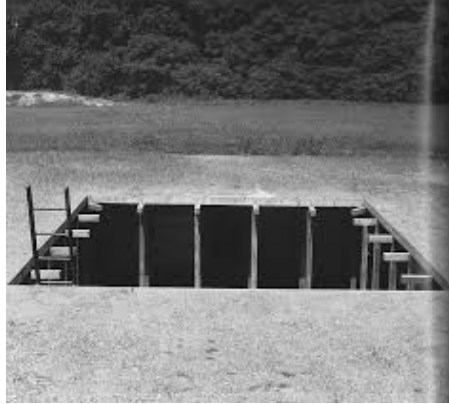


Fig. 17 Mary Miss. *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, 1977-1978



Fig. 18 Alice Aycock. *Project for a simple network of underground wells and tunnels*, 1975

In the United States, we enjoy the separation of church and state. While one's individual beliefs may spill from one area to the next, there is no interference between religion and the government. However, it may be the goal of these institutions to exercise control and constraint over its parishioners and its citizens. As both religion and the government have informed this body of work, I have created disturbing yet precarious sculptures. They speak to the fragility and repercussions that may occur with this type of dominance. It is my intention to stimulate my viewers to further investigate.



Fig. 19 *Untitled*  
2018, Adobe, Wood, Ink, Charcoal. 3.5 ft x 3.5 ft x 15 in

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Fig. 20 Thesis Exhibition (Installation view) 205 Hudson Gallery, Hunter College, New York





Fig. 21 Thesis Exhibition (Installation view) 205 Hudson Gallery, Hunter College, New York



Fig. 22 Thesis Exhibition (Installation view) 205 Hudson Gallery, Hunter College, New York



Fig. 23 Thesis Exhibition (Installation view) 205 Hudson Gallery, Hunter College, New York





Fig. 24 Thesis Exhibition (Installation view) 205 Hudson Gallery, Hunter College, New York



Fig. 25 Thesis Exhibition (Installation view) 205 Hudson Gallery, Hunter College, New York