

**Age is Written on the Body**  
A Sculptural Installation

by (Ingrid) Diana Meredith

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## Abstract

*Age is Written on the Body*

Master of Fine Art, 2013

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Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

Ontario College of Art University

*Age is Written on the Body* investigates the different ways in which middle-aged people experience and reconcile this time of their lives. By interviewing middle-aged men and women in Toronto about their experiences of midlife and by subsequently transforming their narrative responses into visual statements rendered in sculptural body fragments and interpretative text, I highlight a part of peoples' lives often overshadowed by society's privileging of youth. My investigation about aging and the body is framed by theories in cultural studies and social science, as well as by art practices exploring figurative representations. Drawing additionally on my personal experience, I argue that the meaning of middle age in Euro-American society is not monolithic. Rather, as evidenced in my figurative sculptures, people construct their identity as middle age in multiple, fragmented, and intangible narratives that they continue to transform throughout this midlife phase.

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## Introduction

In my mid-50s I was revisited by an old injury. While I was not an athlete, in the 25 intervening years between when the car had knocked me off my bicycle and the second bout of physical trouble, I had been active – walking, canoeing, cycling, dancing and even rock climbing. For all of contemporary medicine's skill at putting me back together after the accident, no one had detected the broken bone in my foot that went on to cause alignment difficulties in my lower body. Arthritis had set in and suddenly, now in my 50s, my mobility has been compromised in ways that are painful and shocking. The shock I continue to experience is wondering whether I will ever be able to dance and portage again or whether this slow, lumbering body that periodically uses a cane will be my reality until the end of life? While my compromised mobility is related to this past accident and disability, the renewed symptoms were occurring as I was finishing menopause and thus I felt I was being given a sneak preview into aging. Primarily, I felt a strong feeling of betrayal and injustice framed by the burning question, "Why had no one told me this is what life held in store?" I began to look to my peers to understand further how they were experiencing and coping with the physical and mental changes that occur in this time of midlife.

For the generation, like myself, that came of age heralding the slogan "don't trust anyone over thirty," middle age seems like an anathema. Bob Dylan (1974) sang, "May you stay forever young" and summed up the zeitgeist for the youth of the 1960s – that they would elude the process of aging. As their bodies reflect the passing of

time with sagging flesh and periodic colonoscopies, men and women approaching and going through middle age, however, have had to change their personal understanding of the meaning this time of life holds for them. The public promotion of youth culture, generally (e.g., fit bodies, absence of facial wrinkles) means that many middle-aged people do not see themselves reflected in the mass media except for a few prescribed roles. Aging baby boomers are now actively seeking ways to stop or slow down the aging process encouraged by the media and product marketing. As they negotiate this next phase in their lives, new questions arise. In what ways do middle-aged people embrace or reject their identity as middle-aged or being in midlife? How do people experience losing their physical capabilities? Do new insights emerge with age? How do middle-aged men and women understand and experience the body as it changes through time?

This research project investigates and analyzes the social and cultural construction of middle age among a middle class population in Toronto between the ages of 45 to 65 years old. My research engages these issues by focusing on men's and women's personal experiences of aging – knowledge I gained through interviews and through the body castings I rendered in my studio practice. By exploring how people talk about and manage their transition into middle and old age, my objective is to understand in what ways people of middle age reconcile the processes of aging. As cultural journalist Patricia Cohen (2012:8) suggests, “Middle age is a story we tell about ourselves.” My research thus materializes and constructs figurative sculptures that evoke the multiple, fragmented and intangible narratives through which we exist within middle age. Framed by these critical positions, my research and practice has three objectives:

To analyze society's current understanding of midlife's meaning and value as well as shifts in these understandings;

To investigate the avenues through which people of middle age reconcile the processes of aging;

To evoke images of middle age embodiment through my art practice.

### **Research Questions**

Medical gerontologist and cultural historian Thomas Cole (1994:3) suggests that in European-American culture, because people live longer, combined with the loss of collective meaning systems (such as shared religion), "we have become deeply uncertain about what it means to grow old." While there are many researchers investigating the physical and social implications of middle age (e.g., Cohen 2012; Shweder 1998; Whitbourne and Willis 2006), few studies explore peoples' personal experiences of how it feels to lose one's physical capabilities and strength; nor has research analyzed, in any depth, the potential people may realize, with age, of gaining deeper insights into the nature of life. My research thus identifies these fragmentary narratives of people's experience and explores their multiple identities and understandings of middle age. The foci of my research and practice investigate middle age as an identity, how language constructs middle age, the different gendered experiences of middle age, the implications of modifying the body through new medical technologies, the age gap between generations, the acquiring of wisdom and the construction of the body image and identity as it ages. I frame this research within the contexts of cultural studies and social science scholarship as well as art practices that explore issues of aging and the body. My research

and practice have thus raised the following questions. Through what narratives do people experience middle age? In what ways do people reconcile the disjuncture between the physical reality of aging and the public discourse privileging youth? Through my art practice, how can I materialize or make visible the physical experience and intangible narratives about middle age? Given these inquiries, I argue that middle age has multiple identities and embodies fragmentary collective and individual narratives.

### **Limitations**

This research is not a broad-based ethnographic study of middle age as I am working locally with a very small group of interviewees in Toronto, Ontario. While I have been able to draw some generalizations about the nature and meaning of middle age from my research, the study focuses more specifically on my interpretive approach and thus provides an entry into understanding the process, experience and interpretation of middle age.

### **Methodology**

I am using a multiple, interdisciplinary approach to methodology calling on methods from both the social sciences and artistic-led practice. I use social science because my research seeks to understand the construction of middle age within a social context, and artistic practice because the methods herein have been my individual way of knowing for much of my adult life.

Depending on the issue being examined, both social science and practice-led research ask the researcher to look at him- or herself in relation to the research subject.

As a middle-aged woman myself, I use my embeddedness and my positionality (Wolf 1996:9-13) to understand my subject – the experience of middle age. There is no such thing as a purely objective view of my subject; inevitably I bring my own life history – my social context – to how I see and understand middle age. As an artist I use myself as an object of research much in line with what art methodology researcher and professor Graeme Sullivan (2010:70-71) suggests,

...the artist can be both the researcher and the object of study. Many of the self-study approaches and auto-ethnographic strategies available can be adapted in studio settings if the desire is to investigate and subsequently communicate the outcomes of an inquiry into the self or others to a wider audience.

In addition, my own journal writings on the experience of aging have been an important source of data for this project.

While auto-ethnography is part of this research, I also seek to expand beyond my own subjectivity in order to hear the experiences of other middle-aged women and men. As creativity and art theorist Shaun McNiff (1998:60) suggests, “The most difficult challenge for the art-based researcher is the avoidance of the quagmires of personal experience. Introspection must find ways to work collaboratively with empirical data.” With these cautions in mind, I decided to interview a small group of Toronto-based men and women about their experiences of middle age. To this end, I used structured and unstructured interviews as part of my methodology as well as informal participatory observation. Because these methods could potentially raise ethical considerations of privacy, in particular questions regarding sexual practices and identities, I obtained approval from my university’s Research Ethics Board (Appendix B).

Age specialists Thomas R. Cole and Ruth E. Ray (2010:9) suggest that humanistic studies of aging need to include the qualitative method of narrative in order to integrally capture people's thoughts and experiences. Addressing this point, they (2010:10) explain that, "Rediscovery of narrative as an essential form of seeking and representing knowledge has profoundly shaped gerontology's understanding of the search for meaning and identity." I thus use narrative in this research both on a personal level and, more generally, to address the narrative discourses that people use to shape their experiences of middle age. For example, I asked my interview subjects to tell their personal stories of their experiences of time, aging and change. At the same time as I framed my research within these current discourses on aging that I heard, I teased out visual narratives that could address these discussions.

As a practice-led artist, my main form of knowing takes place at an intersection of materiality, knowledge and experience. A number of theorists working in the field of practice-as-research refer to this mixture of methods as "aesthetic experience" (Barrett 2007; Shusterman 1992). Knowledge, creative arts theorist Estelle Barrett (2007:115) suggests, is gained through the aesthetic experience of handling materials and thinking and feeling through their handling. I undertake a similar inquiry by experimenting with a variety materials and searching for the most applicable form. As art theorist and critic, Donald Kuspit (1996:14-19, 53) suggests in his discussion of the bifurcation of art and craft practice, makers realize a mastery of ideas thru the mastery of materials.

In my search for form through mastering materials, I experimented with constructing plaster sculptures of human subjects The material techniques of working



with plaster, silicone and even pixels are part of my practice-led methodology as is the reflective practice that follows making (Barrett 2007; Schon 1983). As Sullivan (2010:101) suggests, “Meanings are made rather than found in the studio.” By operationalizing this medley of social science and practice-led methodology, I have tried to articulate, for myself and for the viewer, further insights into the meanings and experience of middle age.

## **Theoretical Framework**

While my research is anchored in the broad body of scholarship analyzing the cultural construction of the body – its meaning, value, politics and implications for physical change (e.g., Bradley 1994; Grosz 1994; Lennon 2010; van Esterik 2010 ), I focus specifically on peoples’ multiple experiences of and fragmentary narratives about middle age, in particular. To this end my investigation brings together bodies of scholarship across cultural studies, the social sciences (including feminist studies) and the humanities to analyze the channels through which people in European-American society, especially, construct their identity as middle-aged individuals. Indeed, as Thomas Cole and Mary Winkler (1994:8) suggest, the study of age per se is a modern phenomena: “As a separate topic of scientific inquiry, medical practice, philosophical speculation, personal meditation, or literary and artistic representation, aging is largely a creation of the last 150 years.” I also explore recent studies in neuroscience that chart the physiological changes in the middle-aged brain as such biological shifts, in turn, modify

how people construct their personal narratives of the midlife experience. In my capacity as a visual artist creating sculptural forms through which to make visible the physical experience of and intangible narratives about middle age, I further contextualize my work by referencing the practices of artists who address the issue of aging through their work and by discussing, in more depth, selected case studies of artists who work in figurative sculpture that foregrounds the body.

### **Discourses on, and Construction of, the Body in Middle Age**

Earlier scholarship investigating the processes of aging was commonly informed by the Cartesian model of the “mind-body split” (Grosz 1994:6). In European-American cultural thought, this model called for understanding the construction and meaning of age through an approach that separated the flesh from self, the latter an entity known variously as mind, soul or consciousness. The Cartesian mind-body split has thus meant that, as philosopher Kathleen Lennon (2010:3) argues, “the body was seen as something owned by, and thereby separate from the self, something over which the self had rights.” In this light, Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick, (1995:1), for example, echo this bifurcated view when they argue that the physical body has belonged to the purview of the hard sciences, while the culture of the body is studied by the humanities and social sciences. Other studies have argued against such arbitrary separations advocating instead for a more holistic approach wherein changes in the physical body cannot be understood outside of the cultural context in which they occur (e.g., Cohen 2012; Cole and Winkler 1994). Victoria Bazin and Rosie White (2006:iii), whose work examines the representation of older women in popular culture, build on gerontology studies to

similarly argue that the debilitating experience that many people have with aging is not because of the actual biology, the physical process of aging, but because of the social and cultural construction of the aging body. Yet, as English professor and age studies specialist, Kathleen Woodward (1999:x) suggests, while cultural studies have aggressively taken up the idea of difference through the lens of gender, race, sexual orientation, class and ethnicity, the criteria of age and aging has been overlooked. Woodward (1999:xi) points out that indeed, even feminist studies have ignored the issue of age, thereby positing that feminist studies have internalized the cultural prejudices against aging.

Many of the discourses on middle age grapple with defining the elusive question of “when” middle age occurs (e.g., Cohen 2012:13; Sontag 1972:32; Woodward 1999: xiii)? Is it 40 to 60, 45 to 65 (the range I use in my research), or 30 to 70, the range used by *Midlife in the United States (1995/6 – Present)*, a multiyear, cross disciplinary study of middle age? The ambiguity of such strict parameters highlights that specific beginning and end dates for middle age are arbitrary constructions that reproduce the “fiction of middle age” as cultural anthropologist Richard Shweder (1998:x) argues. The indistinct “when” of midlife also speaks to the uneasiness with which people enter this time of life as Cohen (2012:9) suggests, “Middle age is a kind of never-never land, a place that you never want to enter or never want to leave.”

The language defining middle age is equally slippery. A number of the people I interviewed for this research would not use the term “middle age,” preferring instead to call themselves, “older”, “adult” or even (for someone aged 57) “old.” English professor

Joseph Epstein (1996:30) prefers the French, rather coy phrase, *d'un certain âge* as the term “middle age” carries with it numerous negative connotations. Writing elegantly on the occasion of his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, Epstein (1996:24) probes what the words conjure for him:

*Middle-aged* - the English language contains jollier words, surely. Middle-aged has something of the ring of the end of the party about it. It suggests loss of hair and gains in flesh, stiffening of joints and loosening of teeth; it suggests a dimming of vision and memory, of physical and mental powers generally. It is a Bosphorus, a golden Horn, of the life span, where not east and west but youth and age meet.

The idea that aging is something negative, that it is, as Cole and Winkler (1994:3) argue, “...a problem to be solved by science and medicine,” exists because we live in a world where the fashion system, the media and product marketing extol the virtues of youth and the physically fit body this life-stage entails (Cohen 2012:85-95; Gullette 2011:33-34).

Middle age has thus been positioned as the “Other” constructed against the preference for youth in contemporary European-American society. Susan Sontag (1972: 31), in her seminal essay “The Double Standard of Aging,” suggests, “All modern urbanized societies – unlike tribal, rural societies – condescend to the values of maturity and heap honors on the joys of youth.” With mass marketing (Cohen 2012:166) and new technologies, digitally enhanced images of youth have paraded “across screen, billboards, publications and imaginations.” Cohen (2012:79, 166) documents the ways in which our contemporary market-led economy picked up the “cult of youth” after WW I and has continued to use it as a central trope to promote consumer capitalism. She (2012:89) suggests, “Capitalism links aging with decline because the ethos of the market demands it.

New is better.” The marketplace always has a new, better product that marries consumption to youth and progress. Margaret Gullette (2011:33), a major critic investigating the social construction of middle age, similarly argues that today, capitalism’s profit-based agenda consistently positions age against youth with the former emerging as the less desirable state when she asserts that, “As we know, ad campaigns exist only to get us to want their products badly. By giving us views of young heavily retouched models, they create a critical, ageist, comparative eye. That eye is rapt only by the tall anorexic youthful body.” That middle-aged people live uneasily in their more variably-shaped bodies is not surprising given society’s widespread and active support for a hard-to-achieve norm of the youthful fit body image.

Indeed, middle-aged people are often applauded for looking younger than their chronological age as well as for their ability to simulate the attributes of those 20 to 30 years younger than themselves (Cohen 2012:13; Epstein 1996:21; Sontag 1997: 36) – a comment that speaks directly to society’s general dislike of aging flesh. Given this public discourse favouring physical youth, studies have thus explored people’s urge to “defy biological, social and psychological clocks” (Cohen 2012:13) by using new and increasingly accessible technologies of body modification, namely cosmetic and plastic surgery. Sander Gilman (Azoulay 2009:68, quoted in Cohen 2012:78), a cultural historian working in the history of medicine, notes that aesthetic surgery depends on our “cultural presupposition that you have the inalienable right to alter, reshape, control, augment or diminish your body...” Indeed, Cohen (2012:67-79) outlines some of the more controversial aspects of technological interventions on age (e.g., hormone replacement

therapy and aesthetic surgery) to argue that science has posited, at different times through history, that it could restore the body to its youthful form. Cohen's framework of self-improvement is useful in rethinking more benign and proven modifications for regaining some aspects of the youthful body such as bifocal eyeglasses and hip replacements. In light of Cohen's argument, Bazin and White (2006:ii-iii) argue that when human fertilization, embryology and other reproductive technologies expand the reproductive options or boundaries for women, media hysteria has erupted over what it calls "geriatric" mothers, thereby exposing cultural assumptions about the body and age. In such circumstances, the "when" of middle age is modified and hidden by technological intervention.

As I have argued above, the popular societal norm of the preferred body age is youthful. While the advertising industry and other arms of the mass media reproduce this idea, middle-aged people themselves also collude in perpetuating this norm. In Foucauldian (Foucault 1995:135-169) terms this is referred to as "the docile body." Foucault argues that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, understanding control over human subjects – bodies – moved from regarding power as being a direct external discipline and punishment to seeing it as also originating in peoples' own internal coercions. Foucault (1995) maintained that state and institutional power exercised, for example, in the army, prisons, schools and hospitals, was effective not only through its top down, direct model, but also because people, themselves, reproduced this power through their own actions – via multiple instances of self-surveillance and self-correction. This theory, moreover, has been expanded to include the channels through which people discipline the gendered

body in order to fit dominant societal norms (Bartky 1990; Lennon: 2010). Those with middle-aging bodies thus feel compelled to modify and discipline themselves by dyeing their hair, losing weight, taking sex hormones, erasing wrinkles and otherwise policing their individual physicality into compliance with the socially-prescribed norm of youth.

As has become increasingly evident, middle-age people are often invisible in popular media. Indeed, articles have repeatedly reported how good acting roles for women especially, are less and less available (Angier 2001; Silverstein 2009) as Hollywood seems to have almost completely eliminated middle-age women from their films (Cohen 2012:200). Goldie Hawn's character in *First Wives Club* (Wilson 1996), for example, is often quoted on this subject for her statement that, "There are only three ages for women in Hollywood: babe, district attorney and Driving Miss Daisy." Indeed, Cohen (2012:172) provides us with the shocking statistic that nearly 70 per cent of women over the age of 40 in the United States dye their hair. Women are encouraged to remove wrinkles with a range of products and services starting with sunscreen and moving into Botox and laser surgery (Ellin 2012; Villett 2012). The advertising industry urges men to stop balding and to start Viagra. Such intervention on the changing state of our middle-age bodies clearly evidence that hiding signs of the aging physical form has become widely accepted and indeed expected, behaviour.

While society's lack of acceptance for the normative physical signs of aging affects both men and women, it is women who bear the greatest brunt of this cultural attitude. We can see this most clearly in the language that has been used to talk about older women's physical changes. Anthropologist Emily Martin (1987) identified this

issue early on when she noted that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans regarded the female body as if it were a factory whose job it was to “labour” to produce children for a healthy work force. Indeed, even into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when women could no longer bear children, medical writers and hard scientists used derogatory terms to describe women’s change-of-life functions (e.g., menopause was depicted as a breakdown of authority; functions fail and falter; organs become senile). Martin (1987:45) argues that our language still depicts the female body – its function and appearance – in such technical terms as a machine no longer able to fulfill its goal or maintain its earlier physical attributes. Sociologist Ruth Harriet Jacobs (1998:563), in her study of aging stereotypes, echoes Martin’s findings when she identifies some of the common place terms that people use about older women including: “bag, battle-axe, biddy, dame, dowager, gossip, hag, haggard, hen, mutton, nag, spinster and witch.” Jacobs (1998:563) argues, moreover, that the media often portray older women as silly, stupid, senile, screechy or stubborn; she (1998:563) continues that one of the most insidious images is to portray women as useless. Addressing similar gender bias, Sontag (1972:37) argues that in our culture there is a visceral horror felt towards aging female flesh and that an older woman’s body is by definition repulsive. She further suggests that the physical aging of a woman carries with it a very different connotation than does the aging of a man as men do not receive moral disapproval for aging. A woman’s value, she continues, is determined in the way she represents herself to the world by “creating” the public presentation of her face and her body (see also Dellinger and Williams 1997).



Such associations reproduce the earlier and ungrounded link of a woman's role and value in society as tied to her biology (Ortner 1974).

The experience of middle age, however, is profoundly different for men and women. In this light, I noticed that in a book of women who are writing anecdotally about aging (Graydon 2011), most of the authors consistently comment on aspects of their bodies. In contrast, in two books of essays written by men addressing the same issue of aging, I was surprised to see that the authors mention the subject of their (e.g., men's) bodies more as an aside than as a personal statement of identity (Ellis 2001; Harvey 1996). One author, for example, English professor Scott Russell Sanders (1996:33-34), minimizes the effect of aging on perceptions of the male body by commenting that this life change, for him, simply means that he is no longer able to throw a baseball as well as his son. Sontag (1972:31) argues that men worry about age if they have not achieved a certain level of success in their work but that, in general, society allows men to age without penalty. For women, as the above studies confirm, identity is profoundly tied up in physical appearance.

Understanding the meaning of middle age in a youth-dominated culture and the narratives people relate about this process is also permeated by a deep sense of loss. Gullette (1998:4-7) refers to this construction of middle age as the "decline narrative." She argues that the whole cultural system of North America, with product marketing leading the pack, presents midlife as a "natural" downward slide. Yet middle age offers another narrative – one about enhanced wisdom, perception and insight. Indeed, there is even some physical evidence for these attributes in the work of neuroscientists who are

using fMRI scans to study changes in the physical composition of the middle-age brain (e.g., Cohen 2012; Goldberg 2005; Strauch 2010). Scientists maintain that while the middle-age brain shrinks in physical size, other provocative findings suggest the emergence of better emotional resilience and a growth in white matter or brain myelin which, in turn, allows for a greater increase in pattern recognition than in younger brains. Barbara Strauch (2010: xix), a science journalist at the New York Times who has compiled interviews with neuroscientists working in this field, suggests, “Our brains build up patterns of connections, interwoven layers of knowledge that allow us to instantly recognize similarities of situation and see solutions.” This might be called wisdom or experience. This idea of increased synaptic connections and pattern recognition has inspired a subtle visual corollary on my sculptures to communicate a more positive narrative of aging. I have included understated textures and patterns on the larger pieces in the exhibition as a way of nodding to the increase of synaptic connections. While the sculptural affect is delicate yet concrete, so too is the increase in brain connections.

### **The Body Plus Time Equals Age**

In contemporary European-American culture the understanding of time also shapes our understanding of the nature, experience and reception of middle age as Cole (1994:5) argues, “Aging is about living in time.” Yet, how we live in time is dictated by the cultural assumptions within which we measure time. Menopause, as noted by Emily Martin (1987), is a biological measure known often as “the change.” There is an expectation that with this biological shift, life behaviours – dress, sexual conduct,

medical needs - will also change. Shweder (1998:x) similarly points out that as well as biological markers, middle class European-American culture, “emphasises the markings of birthdays, including the ritualized celebration of decade transitions at ages 30, 40, and 50.” He (1998:xi) continues, “There are alternative ways of representing the temporal dimension of life without relying on the idea of middle age. Some cultures represent the stages of life through role and social transitions in their kinship groups.” For instance, in my recent 2011 visit to Bali, Indonesia, a woman with whom I talked, explained that in her culture, her name changed when she became a mother. This change in her identity indicates an enhanced status gained through respect for her accomplishments and responsibilities assumed in her midlife stage.

### **Artists Addressing the Body**

Throughout the history of art making, visual artists have addressed the subject of aging. Over his lifetime, Rembrandt (Maastricht University) painted self-portraits that profoundly and poignantly depict the story of aging as do Lucian Freud’s self-portraits (Hughes 1997) created over his painting life. I suggest, however that neither artist intended to consciously investigate the nature of the aging body; instead they each made many self-portraits, as these are always a ready subject at hand for a figurative artist; and as the portraits were executed and compiled over a lifetime, they document how the face changed over time. On the other hand, John Coplan’s (2002) study of his own body, executed in large format photographs spanning ages 60 to 80, was a very focused piece of research on age. Coplan understands critically what his work is saying in terms of ideas

about beauty, the body and maleness. His photographs are unsparing in their view of aging flesh. In an interview he explains, “The principle thing is the question of how our culture views age - that old is ugly (Berlind 1994:34).” Art and design researcher Alice De Certo (2006:5) analyzing his work in her thesis outlines that,

... his commentary on the perception of beauty in Western society is easy to detect. Coplans rejected the imposition of perfect, slender, and young bodies, presenting to the viewer, as an alternative, a usually neglected version of the male body: old, hairy and wrinkly .

Similarly, Alice Neel’s (2010) naked, full-bodied self-portrait at age 80 is a profound example of an artist daring to see age in a way that challenges contemporary societal norms. Looking at the painting is a shocking experience as we rarely see images of naked old women. While her painting style does not show the details of wrinkly skin or lumpy veins, nonetheless we know this to be an older body by the figure’s sagging breasts, hunched shoulders, gray hair and ruddy facial skin. What is surprising is how confident and active the portrait appears. There seems to be neither shame nor artifice in the woman’s pose; instead she exudes an ordinariness in her naked aloneness. The ordinariness is the shocking part.

American-Canadian photographer, Suzy Lake, whose recent work also extensively addresses the subject of the aging body, firmly positions understanding the body and identity as a social and cultural construct. Writing about her (Lake 2013) recent work on age, Lake explains that she uses “the body as a means to investigate notions of beauty in the context of youth and consumer culture.” In Lake’s body of work *Beauty and the Ageing Body* (1993-2003), she repeatedly employs images of peeling paint and crumbling walls as metaphors for both the decay of age, but also for the “excavation into

experience” as independent curator Corinna Ghasnavi (2003:49) suggests. Lake is not interested in portraying the aging woman as a victim, but instead she “carefully investigates what it means for a woman to grow older in contemporary Western society” (Ghasnavi 2003:49). In this light, Lake’s pieces in *Beauty at a Proper Distance* (2001-2005) challenge our ideas about the normative, idealized female bodies commonly portrayed in advertising images of women. From a distance, Lake’s images show a woman’s lipsticked lips pursed into a variety of glamorous poses which read as advertisements for make-up; up close, however, the images reveal the characteristics of an older woman – wrinkled skin and unplucked facial hair. Elsewhere in the series, Lake shows images in the form of filmstrip stills of facial hair being plucked. Speaking about her work, Lake (2013) explains, “Plucking post-menopausal facial hair is something I can do that Brittany Spears cannot do – yet.” Like Alice Neel, Lake is showing us a most ordinary, yet shocking image of aging flesh. Shocking because we have seen so little of it represented by the popular media, and ordinary because, in fact, we see it everyday on the bodies of middle-aged and older people.

My representational sculptures of fragmented bodies in their midlife phase are in conversation with other artists, throughout history, addressing the non-idealized human body. As visual cultural theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (1995:2) outlines in his book about the body in art,

... the body has been the principal subject of Western art since the Renaissance. At the same time, the body is also a central locus and metaphor for understanding and exploring political change, in the broadest sense, whether as the body politic, in debates over the nature of sexuality, or sociobiology's claims to explain personality by heredity.

Mirzoeff thus positions the body as a site of metaphor and understanding whose meaning we comprehend differently at different times in history. Critic and curator Helaine Posner (1992:22) makes a similar argument in a catalogue essay for *Corporal Politics* (1992-93), a controversial exhibition mounted at MIT (controversial because US electoral politics, nervous about graphic depictions of the body, interfered with its application for federal arts funding); here she writes that, “The Greek ideal of classical beauty is the tradition on which modern Western art is founded.” Deviations from that ideal image of the human body immediately call attention to themselves in contrast to the default image of classical beauty.

*Corpus* (Grenville 1993:8) was a provocative Canadian exhibition in the early 1990s which compared how the body in the 1970s served as a site of materiality and lived experience while the body in the 1980s, influenced and shaped by the body’s corporeal presence of the previous decade, suggested a body inscribed by language. Independent cultural critic Eleanor Heartney (2007:192), writing about the context of American feminist artist Kiki Smith’s early work depicting body fragments and internal organs similarly suggests that, “...the body reappeared as a central focus of feminist artists in the seventies. By the eighties, the body was a carrier for all manner of political and social content.”

The 1980s and 1990s thus emerged as a particularly vulnerable time for constructions of the body in European-American culture as AIDS/HIV ravaged the lives of many young men (Fabo 2013). Women were beginning to understand that their identities as female bodies had been constructed within a patriarchal framework. Could

the body be understood separately from this framework? Kiki Smith's early work (1979-mid-1990s) addresses this frailty and the vulnerabilities of the human body. She constructs body fragments, internal organs and body fluids in two and three dimensions as well as whole bodies made of bronze and, in contrast, others constructed from delicate papier maché. This work speaks both to our messy existence in our bodies as well as to our strengths – physical and cognitive. Curator Jessica Bradley (1994:27) writing about a Kiki Smith exhibition at Toronto's Power Plant suggests, "Subject to its own internal processes, the body is revealed as fragile, errant, unpredictable and, at times, a formidable force to be reckoned with, despite our social and scientific efforts to contain it." Sculpture or other art that represents the human body in non-idealized, fragmented or distorted forms speaks to the experience of our bodies as cultural text rather than as the Enlightenment idea of the body as a natural phenomenon (Bradley 1994:30).

In looking at the construction of middle age in my own sculptures, I am particularly interested in the idea that identity is something that is inscribed or written on the body. Terence MacMullin (2002:2), writing about male embodiment, suggests that Foucault is credited with the idea that cultural ideas and norms are scripted onto the bodies. Indeed, I have taken this idea as the title and central trope of my project: *Age is Written on the Body*. Furthermore, I have captured Bradley's concept of our bodies as cultural text by materially inscribing fragments of interview data onto the represented bodies.

Evan Penny, a Canadian sculptor, similarly pursues the concept of the body as cultural text by investigating forums of representation, artifice and hyperrealism, even as

his sculptures are distorted in ways influenced by the possibilities digital techniques offer. Penny's work, however, also examines the vulnerabilities of the human body through time. At his recent exhibition (2012-2013), *Evan Penny RE FIGURED*, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, I was startled to see the physical attributes of middle age represented so vividly – mottled skin, wrinkles, baldness, flab and moles – yet details that were also executed with such a strong sense of life to them. Penny's strangely distorted, yet, in places, highly realistic sculptures of bodies and body fragments depict people of different ages, and men in particular, to reveal hidden truths about who we are – truths of corporal vulnerability that we see and deny in our daily lives.

When I interviewed Penny recently in Toronto, he (2013) suggested, "Body is the field upon which we impose representation to understand who and what we are in the world." These are not remotely like the beautiful bodies we are used to seeing in advertising – bodies that have been smoothed and sculpted with makeup and digital manipulation. Anthropologist Penny van Esterik (2011: 113), reiterates this view in her research on contemporary constructions of the body, as she suggests that real women with material, concrete bodies do not see accurate representations of themselves portrayed in public media. This is true for men as well. That such idealized images of the body are omnipresent in the media means that we almost forget what "real-life" bodies actually look like. Indeed, Evan Penny's work is reminiscent of painter Lucian Freud's stark depictions of the body. The first time I saw Freud's paintings, I was electrically shocked. I felt as if he was telling a secret that was supposed to stay secret. I knew that flesh could look like this, but somehow, unconsciously, I did not acknowledge that others



knew this and here was Freud depicting this fact loudly and clearly on his canvases. I could hardly bear to look at them, but I was so visually engaged that I returned to view the images again and again. For me, Evan Penny's work holds some of the same fascination. The context of John Coplan's, Suzy Lake's, Kiki Smith's, and Evan Penny's almost raw depictions of the body have provided the creative springboard for my sculptural representations of our aging physical form.

## **Studio Practice**

I have used my studio practice to realize the challenge of exploring and visually representing the experience of midlife. As I pursue my ideas through this material practice - the mistakes that occur, the visual surprises and the painful shedding of assumptions - I stop and reflect critically on the material meanings I construct and discover.

The goals of this project have been to critically conceptualize, understand and materially realize forms that communicate the experiences and multiple narratives of middle age. The narratives have, at times, taken the form of stories told by the middle-aged people I interviewed; however narratives can also speak through art practice – visual forms and art installations. In this section of my paper, I elaborate on the three dimensional forms, text, texture and site-specific installation that have become the materials through which I realize my practice-led research on men's and women's experiences of middle age.

## Prelude and Dialogues

The visual prelude to my project was a sketch I did of myself, *Middle-Aged Sketch* (2011, Figure 1 Appendix A) that captured a sense of both personal dowdiness and strength and thus an image that spoke to an uncommon representation of middle age. My larger MFA art project expands upon this premise. At first I tried to reproduce this figure in three dimensions via three-dimensional printing; however that idea very quickly met some insurmountable technical and cost difficulties. Looking at my second attempt in clay, I realized I was making a doll – a dowdy, middle-aged doll. I thus decided to contrast this doll form with a more stereotypical Barbie-like doll and to this end, I subsequently explored mold making and plaster positives. Through this early foray, one of my conceptual themes emerged – the gap between youth and middle age and what this separation of years entails regarding the inevitable physical and perceptual changes that occur. To materialize this concept, I made an unresolved wall plaque, in which youth's exaggerated sexuality and middle age's diminished sexuality are set against one another. Six months later I returned to further explore this idea of a dialogue between youth and age by painting a more successful version of the same idea in oil – an image of a young woman positioned with her naked back to the viewer while she faces a clothed older woman who, in turn, looks forward with an enigmatic expression of possibly benign acceptance or implacable fortitude *Youth 'n' Age* (2012, Figure 2 Appendix A).

As discussed earlier in this paper, we live in a world in which youth is promoted in popular media as the preferred norm and in which age is positioned as the “Other.”

The lines dividing the adult ages are often demarcated in silence. A number of people I

interviewed said they felt most middle-aged when talking with younger people. People 50 years old may not feel comfortable talking about the subject of aging to people of 25 years of and vice versa. My oil painting, *Youth 'n' Age* (2012) is a statement made in hopes of opening a dialogue between generations. As scholarship on this topic has clearly argued, aging is another uncomfortable body subject akin to talking about sex or bathroom matters. While I was in my early 30s, I recall an instance listening to older women talking about menopause and feeling embarrassed about such a discussion. When I watched middle-aged people take their glasses off to read fine print, they seemed to me naked and exposed. And I found it almost unbearable watching them try too hard to pretend to be young when they clearly were not. This is a vulnerability that I find hard to look at, especially if one is looking at older people you admire. Who wants to see them fail? And the view from middle age towards youth is equally fraught. There can be a bittersweet longing for that robust strength and energy of youth, that vital force, let alone the smooth skin and hungry appetite for sex. At the same time, I feel such a relief at not getting so caught up in emotional quagmires. As one of my interviewees, Madelaine, said, “I look back on my younger self and think, ‘Why did I worry about all that?’” It is my intent that this art project speak, not only to middle-aged people, but also to younger people with aging ahead of them. During my thesis exhibition, I was delighted to see that this intention proved true - many younger people engaged with the work and the ideas.

### **Three-Dimensional Forms, Fragmentation and Loss**

Identifying an appropriate form for a particular idea is an essential part of the creative journey. My practice always starts with a material “what if” question. What if I

printed images on thin emulsion and then applied them to three-dimensional forms? At the outset of this project, I identified that my challenge was to locate a suitable material form through which to communicate the multiple narratives of middle age where the digital, printed images would be paramount and the three-dimensional substrates on which they sat would be secondary. Now, having come to the end of the project, I have discarded all the digital images, except one, and it is the three-dimensional forms – sculptures – that have survived. What follows is the story of those forms.

As my project is about the middle-aged body, I decided to do body casts of middle-aged people doing ordinary everyday activities. Taking a hint from George Segal (Tuchman 1983), the American Pop Art sculptor who pioneered body casting with plaster bandages, I cast people in plaster wearing their clothes. There is a anonymity in Segal's work that I wanted to emulate as I was looking, not for portraits of particular people, but rather for a more common representation of the middle-aged person.

My idea for the first piece was to cast half a woman sitting in a chair. While I needed an internal structure for the form, I planned to hang it on the wall to avoid having to build an armature to make it stand autonomously. The casting went well; however my plans for making the form into a giant wall plaque fell flat. Mistakes are often a gift to the artist offering opportunities for creative improvisation (Barrett 2007:120). Materially I realized I could put the cast body into an everyday plastic garden chair and use that as the armature for the sculpture. Far more importantly, however, I realized that metaphorically this partial, fragmented body form represented the bodily changes – in muscle tone, menses, flexibility, mobility – and the loss of physical power that middle-aged people

commonly experience. As Cole and Winkler (1994:4-5) suggest, “For the most part, physical decay and death are still culturally construed as personal or medical failures, devoid of social or cosmic meaning.” I have made such physical loss and fragmentation a central visual metaphor of this project by developing the idea further through other pieces in the series. By creating startling images of fragmented bodies, I give visual form to the experience of physical loss – loss of energy, muscle tone, mobility, sex drive and memory, the stiffening of joints and the gains and diminishing in flesh – and in so doing evoke new images of middle age. These images speak of a shared life reality that images in the media often deny.

This project has taken me through a number of casting techniques. Initially I cast directly into plaster bandage, but, eventually, I was unhappy with the loss of detail I was sustaining with this technique; I thus switched to body-safe silicone casting for the hands, feet, faces and necks. This gave me realistic skin detail as well as enabling me to better reference the indexical relationship with the models. As the models were all friends, casting them demanded a degree of intimacy that became part of the final piece. It was through this transformation of materials – plaster to silicone – that my ideas about the aging body began to change. The materiality of the plaster opened my eyes to beauty found in the vulnerable signs of age on the hands, feet and necks that I was casting.

While I started by casting whole bodies, the project culminated with a series of six neck casts as a way of making visible the narratives of middle age that I had heard through my interviews. As the project proceeded, I was amazed at how a small physical gesture could show so much about age – the angle of the bony knee in *Frag-Man* (2012-

13, Figure 3 Appendix A) or the box shaped torso of *Centering* (2012-13, Figure 4 Appendix A). With their sagging flesh and more defined muscles, necks reveal age quite dramatically *Nexus #2* (2013, Figure 5 Appendix A). Somehow we all know this but we do not usually discuss this physical trait as often as we identify middle-age features such as gray hair or wrinkles. Nora Ephron, however, discusses these very issues in her funny book of autobiographical essays called *I Feel Bad About My Neck and Other Thoughts on Being a Woman* (2006). I have long noticed that women of a certain age will start wearing beautiful scarves that just happen to cover their necks while men will suddenly decide to sport a beard. A recent article in *Harpers Bazaar* (Krieger 2012-2013) on the subject of neck-lifts quotes Sam Rizk, a New York plastic surgeon, as saying, “That crisp and clean neckline is the gold standard of youth.”

With this in mind, I asked a number of friends to let me cast their necks from just above their lips to just below their collar bones. I then made these plaster positives into a line of wall relief sculptures. I had initially planned to cover these objects with paint and text as I outline below in more detail; however I eventually realized that the pieces were stronger with the simplicity of the form starkly illustrating the narrative of middle age. In these pieces, the skin hangs and shows its age while the mouths reveal a deep sense of character and personality. Through these works, I suggest that body fragments can sometimes say as much or more than can the whole body piece as the viewer fills in the missing details – what he or she thinks the eyes, for example, may additionally reveal. Indeed, art historian and critic James Elkins (1996:125-159), in his article “Seeing Bodies,” suggests that the human eye is built to mentally complete partial figures. By

leaving the upper face out, I ask the viewer to engage more personally and directly with the objects. I suggest that the fragmented bodies simultaneously demonstrate both vulnerability and strength.

To make the silicone neck molds, the models had to remove all facial hair prior to the castings. Two of my male models had mustaches and beards that they kindly shaved for the event. This has meant that all six necks are bare skinned. I find it worthy of note that for some viewers, gender is now indistinguishable in the pieces. In my oil painting, *Youth 'n' Age*, the middle-aged woman facing out is often thought by viewers to be a man. As we age and the sex hormones begin to diminish, it seems that, with more gender neutral clothing, there is a leveling of difference such that gender may become more ambiguous.

### **Text, Identity and Broken Narratives**

My practice has some solid roots in the early feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s which asked women to speak to their own personal experiences as a source for their art (Meyer 2009). It is my personal experience of middle age that has been the genesis for this project; however, as I have mentioned earlier, I decided to interview a small group of men and women to gain alternate perspectives on the experience of middle age. After conducting my first interview, while delighted with the new insights and perspectives I had gained about middle age, I was puzzled as to how I would incorporate this material into a visual form. My initial art training took place within the framework of Modernism which espoused form over content, so it has been a challenge contemplating using text both as a visual element as well as a site of meaning. I have spent much of the last year

researching visual forms of text that work on my fragmentary body pieces. Among other visual solutions, I tried making ‘clothes’ with text manipulated into patterns. After a number of other experiments, I finally identified a form through which I could write text directly on the body. In so doing, I clearly reference the work of Shirin Neshat (Verzotti 2002:81-84) with her *Women of Allah* (1997) photographic series where Arabic text is written across the skin of Iranian women. To transpose dialogue from my interviews onto the body forms I had cast, I decided to use handwritten text rather than a printed font; I felt that visually the irregularity of the handwriting reflected the organic nature of a body. Handwritten text also speaks more directly to the personal narratives my interviewees related. This approach has thus enabled me to visually illustrate that our identities as middle-aged people begin with the experience and perception of the body just as our handwriting, coming through the body, reflects our identities.

Through my practice-led research, I have grappled with how to use text on the sculptural form to analyze and understand two key conceptual ideas about middle age. First, I explore, as noted, Foucault’s idea of identity being inscribed on the body by societal norms – the inspiration for the title of my thesis and exhibition, *Age is Written on the Body*. Feminist philosophical theorists and cultural theorists have also analyzed how many of our identities are written on the body – gender, race and disability for example (e.g., Bazin and White 2006; Butler 1990; Foucault 1995). As Conboy et al. (1997:1) similarly note, “There is a tension between women’s lived bodily experience and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences.” Age is also understood, or read, via the body. We read a multitude of visual cues about



the body – skin texture, muscle tone, physical posture, hair colour and thinness – to determine age.

The second conceptual idea that I discovered through the visual text was the idea of fragmentary narratives or broken narratives. Fragments of stories from both my interviews and my own writing communicated the multiple understandings and experiences of middle age. As I listened to the interviews, I made notes of particular phrases that told a narrative in fragments. A middle-aged person saying, “I grow orchids now,” captures, in a poetic modality, more about the changes midlife brings than many longer, drawn out narratives can communicate. Placing these fragments of experience beside one another with no apparent order conjures multiple moments of experience. Middle age emerges not as a continuous thread of narrative, but rather as multiple, embodied threads that overlap and intersect one another.

The idea of multiple, broken and, at times, contradicting narratives about middle age is central to my research. It is through narratives that we construct our experience of aging or any other identity. Margaret Gullette (1998:4), as noted, writes at length about middle class European-American culture having an “ideology of midlife decline.” In her (1998:4) analysis, this ideology presents two narratives: one, people who experience aging “as an unavoidable decline, like a curse,” or two, the flip side, those “who are seeking and experiencing midlife ‘growth’ or ‘change.’” Gullette (1998:7) makes a convincing argument that these two narratives are presented by the popular media and even some fields of academe as “truth” while they are, in fact, cultural constructions. And yet cultural constructions are the paradigms within which we live. Interviewing my

subjects and looking at my own writings on the subject, I find that we vacillate back and forth between narratives of decline and narratives of growth – autumn and spring. I suggest that there are more nuances of the experience of aging than the binary Gullette presents. Middle age is made up of narratives that are “simultaneously black and white and shades of gray” (Heymen and Smart 1999:11).

### **Texture, Patterns and Wisdom**

At the outset of this project, I had thought the finished artwork would be colourful, representational imagery sitting on top of three-dimensional forms. As the project developed, it became clear that the work would speak more forcefully with no imagery and little colour. Text remained and, on some of the pieces, thick textures. These textures represent the increased synaptic connections that middle-aged people develop as a number of researchers discuss (e.g., Cohen 2012; Goldberg 2005; Strauch 2010). As people age, they experience an increase in pattern recognition which could be called a narrative of wisdom. Neuropsychologist and cognitive neuroscientist Elkhonon Goldberg (2005:10) suggests,

What are they, these strange phenomena of mental levitation, when solutions come instantly and without apparent effort? Is it, perchance, that coveted attribute of aging, that stuff of sages called wisdom? At first I feared getting carried away, lest my foray into the mysteries of wisdom prove to be an exercise in foolishness. I sought to stay away from such expansive, poetic language and stick to the most austere language of science, which has been my language most of my life, to speak not of “wisdom” but of “pattern recognition.”

Middle age can bring with it not only Goldberg's rapturous "mental levitations" but also more mundane perspectives which makes everyday experience much sweeter. Here is literature professor, Joseph Epstein (1996:24), writing about the "positive side of fifty,"

You see more going on around you. Setbacks are easier to take; victories are no less pleasant, but you know that the sweet taste they bring does not last. Baggier and saggier though your skin may grow, you feel more comfortable in it. Things that used to outrage you can now sometimes amuse you.

In my search for a visual form of wisdom/perspective/pattern recognition, I decided that the thick, swirling textures with which I covered the figures made a telling analogy – understated moments of wisdom and perspective that are not immediately visible to an onlooker. Middle age has subtle narratives of growth that counter the narrative of middle age as stagnation (Goldberg 2005:8).

On the six neck pieces, *Nexus* (2013), I left the surface of the sculptures as they came out of the silicone molds. In so doing, the aged skin with its pores, wrinkles, sags and bags is visible as are peeled blotches of plaster. Like Suzy Lake's images of peeled paint and decayed walls, my neck skins show how they have been written on by time.

### **Installation, Mind-Body Split and Alternate Narratives**

The fragmentary structure of my sculptures also brought with them cut, inner facets. For example on *Frag-Man* (2012-13), the figure has been cut into two pieces. The top of the cut waist is a flat facet and the inner surface of the torso is a curved surface as it pierces through the body. Initially I thought of these as a metaphoric split between the inner and outer worlds of self. When I was still planning to add imagery to the sculptures, the cut, inner facet represented a deep, inner world of the self. I used the specific forms

that the sculptures and their surfaces assumed to continue to develop my thoughts about middle age. Many middle-aged people speak of a disjuncture between their own sense of age identity and the body they see in the mirror clearly illustrating its physical changes. As one of my interviewees, Madelaine, said, “I’m shocked whenever I look in the mirror because I still think of myself as 18.”

This perceptual split recalls Descartes’ mind-body dualism, mentioned earlier in this paper, and the dominance this idea has had in Western cultural thought. Regarding this issue, Goldberg (2005:6) argues that, “Until recently, the mind was not regarded by most people as part of one’s biological being, subject to medical and quasimedical scrutiny.” I thus asked my interviewees about their perceptions of the mind-body split. One man, Geoff, felt that as his body aged, there was a self, a mind, that separated more and more from the flesh as he explained, “This body is only going to keep falling apart; my consciousness is separate from my body.” Reflecting on Geoff’s comments, I found that the visual separation of inner and outer bodies on my sculptures made for a useful visual binary. On the surface of my second piece, *Frag-Man*, I contrasted the inner sense of a fluid dancing self with the external, physical reality of a self hampered by arthritis and a generally decreased degree of mobility. I did this by applying digitally painted dancing figures to the inner surfaces and static patterns of text to the outer ones.

Another interviewee, Oriah House, took a different view when I asked her about Descartes’ idea as she notes: “Yes, I am a product of my culture, so I experience a mind-body split; however I work very hard to heal that split. People often say, ‘You are not your body,’ and I answer, ‘Really! Try leaving home without it!’” As I reflected on both

her comments and on my first two sculptures, I was unhappy with the simplistic split of inner and outer worlds. The experience of middle age seemed more complex and layered than this binary implies. Visually I sought to disrupt the boundaries separating and delineating clothing, skin, internal world and external support. I also wanted to find a visual way of communicating the idea of the self being constructed from both within and without. It was in planning the exhibition installation that I came to a visual solution for these various problems. As well as putting the voices of myself and of my interviewees as text written on the body, I have made a site-specific installation, *Nexus* (2013, Figure 6 Appendix A) by putting this text, written on the wall, in very large type. This work thus emphasizes that our internal sense of self is shaped by external cultural narratives and vice versa – the cultural narratives by which we live are shaped by our internal experiences. To reinforce my intent, I used a typeface, as opposed to handwriting, for the wall text. This accomplished two goals, one, the practicalities of legibility – enabling the reader to easily decipher the text on a wall, and two, the machine made version of writing nods to the technological society outside of self that helps to shape the identity of self.

Lastly I have included one digital image in the exhibition, printed large and on a textured surface. This colourful face, *In the Face of Experience* (2012, Figure 7 Appendix A) presents an image of middle age that serves as an alternative to that usually seen in the popular media. The face, with its ambiguous gender, may be read simultaneously as vulnerable, strong, and experienced. It is these qualities of middle age – vulnerability, strength, and experience – that I hope are conveyed in my body of work, *Age is Written on the Body*.

## Conclusions

Almost two years ago I began my investigation into the ways that men and women experience and understand middle age. Based on my personal experience – situated myself in this life phase – and on my research and interviews with people in Toronto, Canada, I wanted to understand what this time of life means to men and women, physically and cognitively, and what I could identify as the real-life characteristics of middle age. I wanted to explore whether there are characteristics of middle age that are common amongst people or whether individuals experience this life phase in unique ways. As a practicing visual artist, I thus sought to find visual forms that could integrally portray this odd in-between age that I, and many of my friends, continue to experience. In addition, I wanted to talk with younger people to alert them to this life event that is coming towards them.

My investigation has been framed by ideas about the body both in the social sciences and in artistic figurative representations. By interviewing middle-aged people about their personal experiences of this time of life and by subsequently transforming their narrative responses into visual statements through my own subjective lens, I feel I have named or more firmly identified a hidden part of our lives. With regard to such body representation, Nicholas Mirzoeff (1995:6) asks, whose body is shown, what is a normal body and what is hidden? As I have argued in this paper, the middle-aged body is not the physical form that is customarily portrayed in popular media representation. In response to this media norm, I have thus used my practice to bring to light the often publically-invisible middle-aged body. In so doing, I have framed this body in the cultural context

within which it has been socially constructed or written by the very people experiencing this stage of life. As my art installation demonstrates, middle age is written on the body from both within and without.

My research is built on understanding people's personal narratives of their experience of middle age. This includes the tension men and women feel as they navigate between biological constraints – the inevitable effects of age – and how the popular media negatively portrays middle-aged people and the vibrant and integral lives men and women in mid-life continue to lead. Indeed, critics such as Margaret Gullette (1998), are critical of research and media messages that use the “fallback norm” of deterioration – both physical and cognitive – when speaking of middle-age. Instead, Gullette (1998:9) posits, “that everything that underlies the construct “midlife decline” is learned. Not just beliefs, explanation, and narratives, but our very feelings depend on culture.” Thus for men and women, although we are indeed challenged by biological constraints – the inevitable process of aging – we have the agency to recast the experience of mid-life according to our own vision, rather than that of the “decline narrative” continually promoted by the popular media. In this light, my research is invested in understanding the beliefs, narratives, and feelings of myself and the people I interviewed to make visible the multiple experiences of middle aging bodies despite popular depictions to the contrary. We are tangible, corporal beings constructed by our cultures but from which we can actively choose what narratives or portrayals to accept and what ones to reject. We subjectively undergo a lived body experience manifested in multiple and personal ways

regardless of how some aspects of the popular media repeatedly choose to depict this life phase.

It is this lived body experience that I am interpreting through my visual work on the subject of middle age. Penny van Esterik (2011:127) says of Eve Ensler's well known performance piece, *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), "Such performances challenge silences about the body in ways that academics seldom can." My installation, *Age is Written on the Body* (2013) is challenging silences about middle age.

Middle age offers us the opportunity to know or confront our own mortality in a profoundly physical way – body knowledge, not the knowing of mind. Although, as one of my interviewees, Oriah House, said "Lots of people are in denial about aging – some can still do that depending upon their physical shape." However, if one does choose to pay attention to mortality's knock on the door, there is a bittersweet acceptance that can come with it as Corrina Ghasnavi (2003:51), interpreting Suzy Lake's work on age, suggests:

For the meaning of life may also be found in the fact of accumulation, the gathering of insight and courage. It is to accept the passage of time without obsessing on the reality of decline and decay, to know that there is a richness in aging, however difficult it is, that strengthens one's resolve rather than weakens one relevance.

My exploration of how men and women experience this midlife stage and what it means to them, has revealed, as Lake and Ghasnavi suggest above, that with acceptance can come a richness in aging. Knowing in one's body what is coming makes the moment fuller. As my interviewees' narratives revealed, armed with this "knowing" one accepts limitations more easily and then gets on with whatever life has to offer.



The inquiries I have pursued through my MFA project have enriched my personal knowing while opening new windows to seeing and understanding the processes and experiences of middle age. In addition, however, my intent is that this research and its visual realization will, in turn, speak to a broader audience. I suggest then that health professionals, cultural critics doing work in understanding age and disability as well as artists looking at body representation will find my research relevant to their own inquiries and concerns. Indeed, my sculptures have already provoked conversations among young and middle-aged people about aging, menopause, decline, experience, andropause, confidence, sex or lack of it, wisdom and the nature of life. I am a teacher as well as an artist, and I am pleased that my work educates as well as offering visual engagement.

Yet, there is more work to be done in this area. When I view the six neck sculptures in my work *Nexus* (2013) as they hang on the gallery wall, for example, I immediately want to construct new pieces that contrast these older necks with six younger necks. This research and my culminating paper and exhibition have provided an entry for me to continue to investigate the multiple demarcations across age.

Evan Penny (2013), in my interview with him, said, “We imagine through images.” It is through images of middle age that we can tell the many stories that construct our sense of selves. It is this sense of the multiple narratives of the middle-age self that I have been investigating, and may continue to address, through my research and practice.

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## Appendix A: Figures

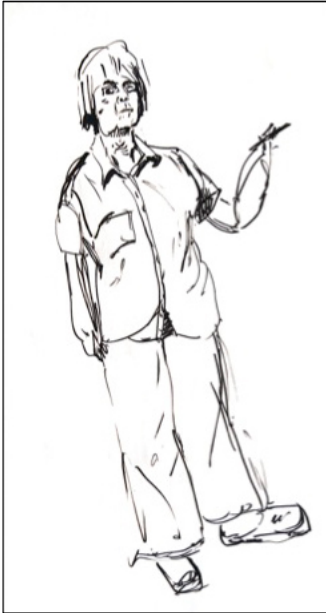


Fig. 1. *Middle-Aged Sketch*, 2011, 8"x 16.5", Ink.

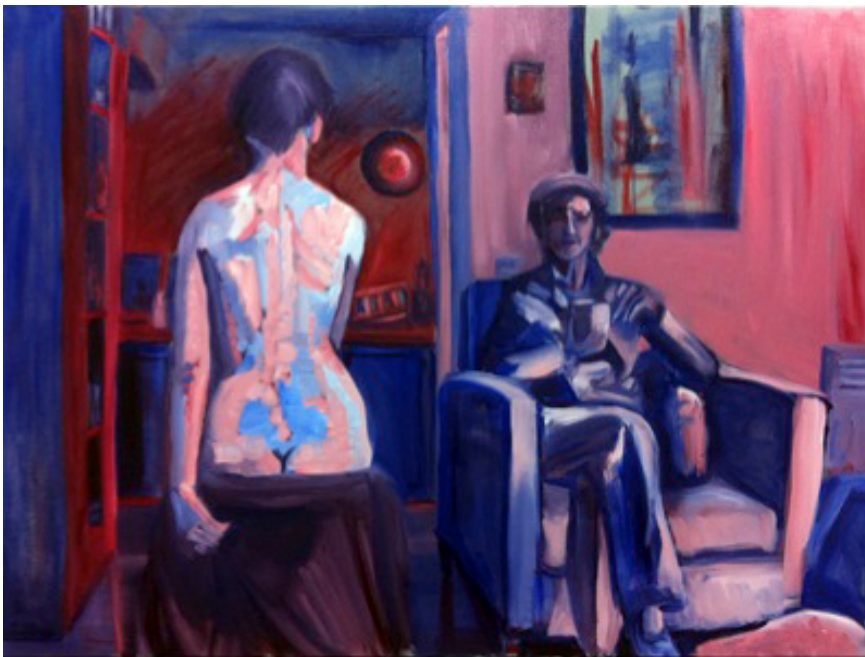


Fig. 2. *Youth 'n' Age*, 2012, 40"x 30" Oil.





**Fig. 3. *Frag-Man*, 2012-13, 5'x 5'x2', Plaster and Acrylic**



**Fig. 4. *Centering*, 2012-13, 5'x 2'x2', Plaster and Acrylic**



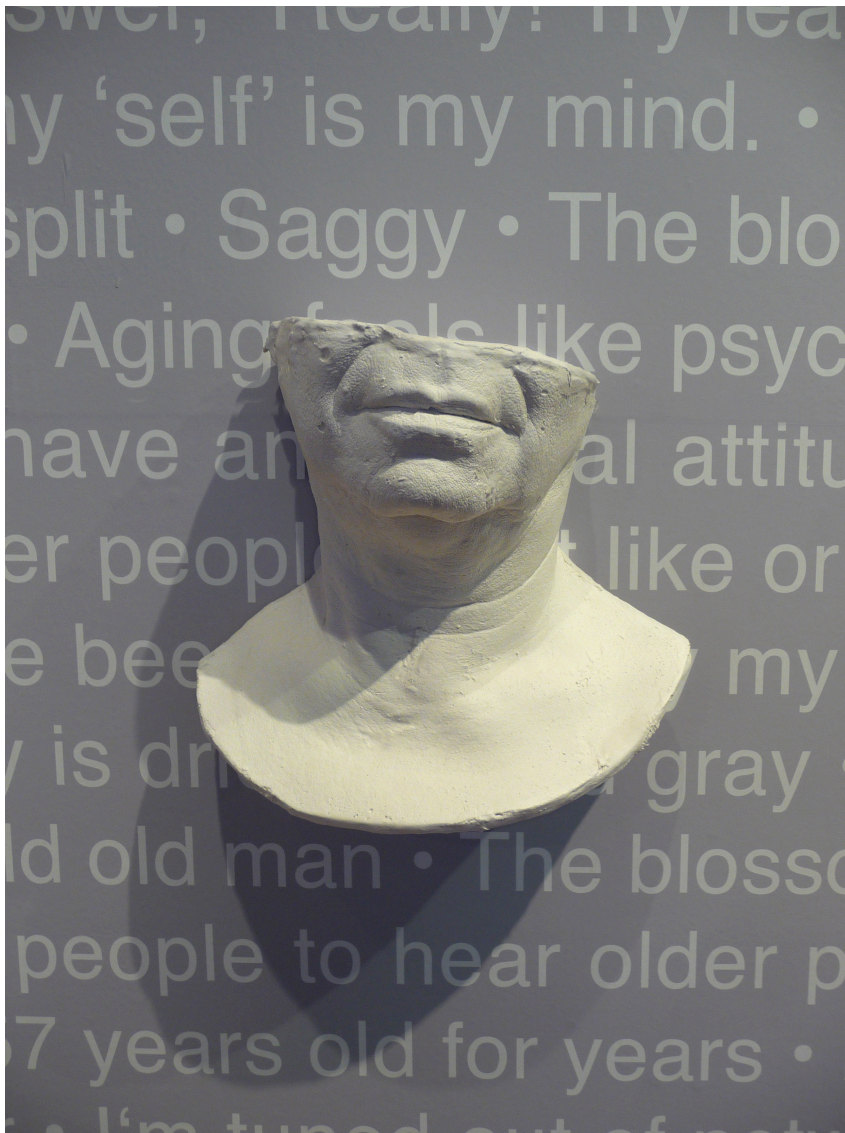
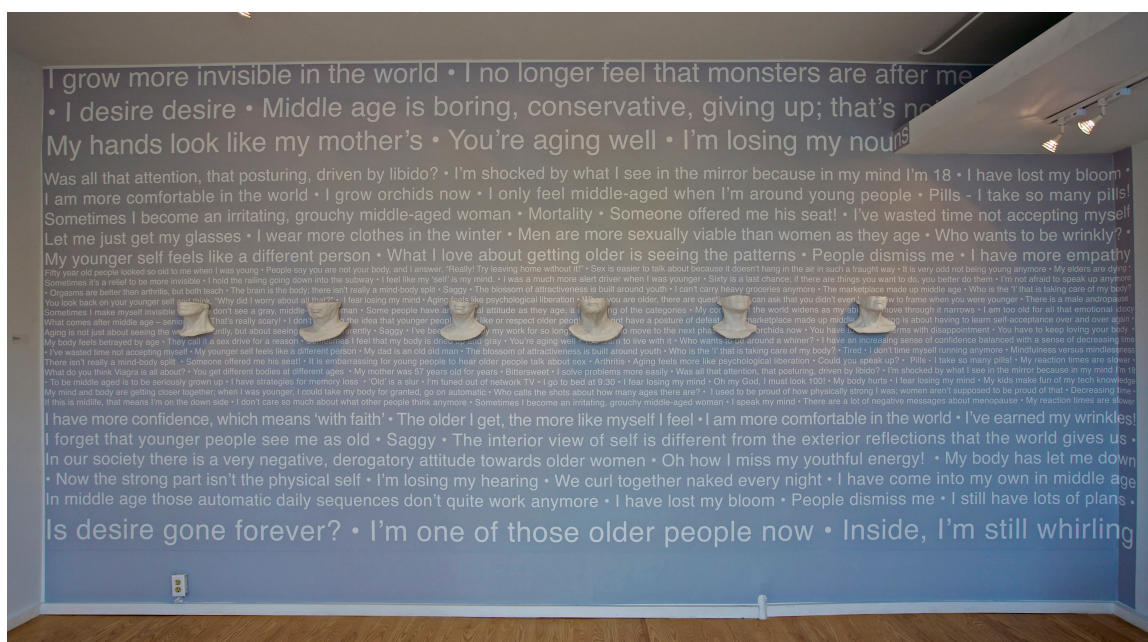


Fig. 5. *Nexus#2*, 2013, 12"x 7", Plaster and Vinyl.

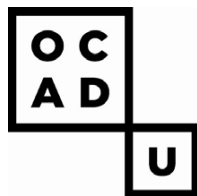


**Fig. 6. Nexus - Installation, 2013, 20'x10', Plaster and Vinyl.**



**Fig. 7. In the Face of Experience, 2012, 36"x 48", Mixed Media Digital and Acrylic.**

## Appendix B: Research Ethics Board Approval Letter



### Research Ethics Board

April 13, 2012

Dear Diana Meredith,

**RE: OCADU 49, 'Age is Written on the Body' REB Review**

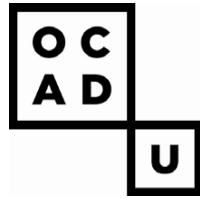
Thank you for submitting an application for ethical review.

The OCAD University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named submission. Any concerns and requested revisions have been addressed to the satisfaction of the REB. The protocol dated April 13, 2012 and the consent form dated April 13, 2012 are approved for use for the next 12 months. If the study is expected to continue beyond the expiry date (April 12, 2013) you are responsible for ensuring the study receives re-approval. Your final approval number is **2012-08**.

The REB must also be notified of the completion or termination of this study and a final report provided.

Please note that before proceeding with your project, compliance with other required University approvals/certifications, institutional requirements, or governmental authorizations may be required. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research.

OCAD U Research Ethics Board: rm 7520c, 205 Richmond Street W, Toronto, ON M5V 1V3  
416.977.6000 x474



## Research Ethics Board

If, during the course of the research, there are any serious adverse events, changes in the approved protocol or consent form or any new information that must be considered with respect to the study, these should be brought to the immediate attention of the Board.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'Tony Kerr'.

Tony Kerr  
Chair, OCAD U Research Ethics Board

OCAD U Research Ethics Board: rm 7520c, 205 Richmond Street W, Toronto, ON M5V 1V3  
416.977.6000 x474