

# I FELT THAT

CURATED BY JOSEPHINE BAILEY

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## An interview with Louise Benton



**Q: Can you introduce yourself and your practice? How did you start making art?**

A: I'm not sure exactly when I started making art it's been ticking away for as long as I can remember. I've just finished a big series of work titled *Milady's Boudoir*, in which I explored female private space, and how this is sexualised under society's gaze. My aesthetic is quite ornamental and girly, using predominately pinks, which interests me as a means to comment on more complex, sometimes darker, experiences of women. Through the research completed during my undergrad degree in History of Art, I became really interested in how different concepts of reproduction have been used by artists to illuminate notions of domesticity, concentrating on the reproduction that takes place in the domestic sphere. Theoretically, this is based on Marxist ideas surrounding the reproduction of labour power: the unpaid and undervalued domestic labour of the housewife in the private domestic sphere. I see my work as an investigation into societal expectations of women as 'good girls' and by contrast their realities as fetishised sexual entities. More expansively, I'm interested in 'reproduction' as a collective female experience- encompassing social reproduction, biological reproduction (and the concept of sex as work), as well as more literally, the reproduction of form, in print or pattern. As well as private space as a space for women's domestic labour, I am intrigued by the eroticism of the woman within this space, for example the concept of the boudoir, a plush, kitsch sex den interior perpetuated by French literature of the 18th Century, against the exterior stringent moralism of the Catholic Church in which it is contextualised. I look to the visual language and symbolism of catholicism a lot in my work, which relies heavily on opposing guilt and sin with the saintly and divine, as a means to contrast the ornamental with the erotic. The contrasting narratives and motifs of the classical and antiquity, styles harnessed by the church to denote order, but art historically a form in which women are openly depicted as erotic, feature centrally to my practice. Ceramics and urns, that would serve as interior decorations, become subverted as canvases for stories of tinder dates or sex toys.

**Q: Why did you apply to I felt that?**

A: Following the hysterectomy of someone very close to me, I had some really open conversations around reproductive health which opened my eyes to how much of how my body works and ages is shrouded in taboo and secrecy. I was initially outraged by this, but also fascinated by whether this is because of an educational blind spot, or shame surrounding women's bodies, particularly when they are not behaving as they should. I started to have more conversations with friends, sharing our experiences talking to doctors about reproductive and sexual health, and found that we'd predominantly had negative dealings, particularly when we were younger and most vulnerable. I discovered a lot of us have suffered from the same ailments, weathered the same procedures, but not felt we could openly talk about it at the time, so had done it alone. We'd all felt shamed and undignified, and often a lot of pain. This invisibility of stress and insecurity surrounding women's health is bizarre and appalling to me. As one of the driving interests that I explore in my practice is making the private and invisible realities of women visible and demystified, and having looked at 'reproduction' more broadly, health and conditions surrounding this biologically seemed like an important avenue for my research. This project came at a time when I was looking to push this further and consider the invisibility of the fundamental states and struggles of women under not just a male gaze, but a systemic patriarchy.

**Q: Your work manages to straddle playful and serious modes of understanding, both in your use of colour and your references. How did you come to land on this pretty distinct visual language?**

A: A lot of my practise is formed around the subversion of largely male methods of storytelling, such as friezes that would show epic battles, or urns that tell stories of gods and hero's. I think there is humour in turning that on its head and satirising languages we are all familiar with and immersed in. I love the use of girlish 'feminine' pinks and decorative styles to tell darker taboos or unpalatable tales because it evokes the same contractions I see in how women are perceived; Madonna or Whore, career bitch or wife goal, girly girl or tomboy. I also think women are so adept at offsetting their pain with sarcasm or humour, that it feels realistic to be grappling with discomfort or pain but to still be finding a way to frame it as cute and sexy. The very fact that we feel like we need to do this is what I want to confront in my work, as it is usually done to put others at ease (lest, God forbid, they be made uncomfortable by discussion of wombs, ovaries, cysts or blood) but I think the dark humour I try to find is one of the things that makes it more relatable.

**Q: You draw on themes of Catholicism also in your work, how did you find that in this project, given that quite often we discussed the negative impact religion sometimes had on female bodies and representation?**

A: The visual language of Catholicism in some ways is formulated to convey pain- it has a library of poses, symbols and expressions designed to maximise the impact of this representation, particularly post-reformation when art is so reliant on emotional impact to keep catholics engaged and devoted amid a lot of uncertainty in the church. I think about decontextualising and repurposing symbolism a lot in my practice. You do see female martyrdom in catholic art, but the form of the suffering Christ or male saints martyred, where artists don't have to grapple with indecorous representation, are more prominent. Pain for women is largely bypassed- Mary is gleefully assumed in to heaven and coronated, for example, there's no indignity or illness in her passing. It felt important to me to nod to this stoicism which I think culturally surrounds Catholicism (after all, what is your suffering when Christ has been crucified? Your rewards await you in heaven) so in *Martyrs Palm*, cherubs descend with the palm, a symbol of suffering for your faith, and the IUD (also in my mind a symbol of suffering), as if presenting it as a crown. IUDs, amazingly, are administered without anaesthetic and while they are a great option for a contraceptive method with minimal hormonal intervention, these benefits can only be enjoyed following the endurance of an invasive and painful procedure. I don't

know if its blasphemic to liken this experience to torture in pursuit of an eternity of heavenly bliss, but I'm putting it out there. We touched on shame surrounding female bodies a number of times in our meetings and how this can perpetuate silence around suffering, particularly around sexual health, and I think the only way this will be taken more seriously is through more air time.

**Q: Can you talk about your work that you are exhibiting?**

A: *The Twelve Labours* subverts the Classical Greek narrative of the twelve labours of Hercules, in which Hercules undergoes all sorts of trials to fulfil his deistic destiny of immortality. I wanted to reframe the assorted struggles of menstruation, which media goes to great lengths to convince us is absolutely no biggie and should have minimal impact on day to day living, as the heroic effort that it is. I took twelve motifs of tampon and sanitary towel adverts in which women are doing ludicrous activities, and arranged them around an urn. In one of the really early meetings of this project we discussed how damaging these representations of women in pain are, because by showing them as unaffected and 'free' it perpetuates a culture of silence and stoicism, in which monthly pain has to be silently endured. *Martyrs Palm* similarly takes the accepted visual language of male battle, just using motifs of the classical. I hope with both works that female suffering considered mundane is reframed with the same grandeur and gravitas awarded to the physical displays of a hero's trials or a martyr's resilience.



*Louise Benton, 12 Labours, 2022, Glazed Earthenware, 50 x 33 cm*

**Q: How have you found the process of working collaboratively?**

A: I've found myself educated in so many unexpected ways from having the opportunity to listen to experiences and thoughts of this amazing group of artists. I feel really privileged to have been a part of such a supportive and thoughtful group, who's empathy and understanding has really formed the work for this show. Particularly after quite an isolated studio practise over the past couple of years with lockdowns etcetera, working collaboratively has felt really energising and refreshing.

**Q: Do you feel that your work will engage with these themes after the project?**

A: There are so many things we discussed through the meetings that felt so untapped, and I feel really strongly that there are so many narratives and experiences surrounding reproductive health in particular that need to be more prominent in conversations in order to educate and demystify. The more these barriers are broken down, the less shame will surround the topic and that feels really pertinent to the direction my work is moving in at the moment.