

A woman with long, wavy brown hair and a serious expression stands in a field of dried, golden-brown corn stalks. She is wearing a white, off-the-shoulder dress with lace detailing. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The corn stalks are tall and thin, with some dried leaves and husks visible. The woman is positioned in the center of the frame, looking directly at the camera.

Completely Human

Kiera Faber

Surrounded by browning, empty corn stalks, the woman stares directly out of the photograph. Her penetrating glance acknowledges the camera and by extension, the viewer. Wearing a simple white slip, one strap has fallen off her shoulder and comes dangerously close to freeing her right breast. Recalling traditional, simple nightgowns, the clothing brings to the image a sense of innocence, childhood, and purity. In Kiera Faber's *Corn* (2012), the subject appears out of place with her pristine white nightgown, dark wavy hair and piercing gaze amidst the desolate environment. Yet she is not young, nor is she innocent, as the series to which this work belongs to attests. Faber uses contradictions, pushing and pulling the viewer in different directions, complicating an easy understanding and reading of her photographs.

The series *Completely Human* (2012), which *Corn* is from, challenges not only the way that sexuality can be represented, but also questions who controls the way that female sexuality is interpreted. Faber's work showcases pleasure and pain simultaneously. She often creates uncomfortable scenes and environments that confuse the boundary between sexual availability and assault. For example, in *Corn*, where Faber has isolated her body in the environment, the fallen strap and the abandoned cornfield recall generic scenes from horror films where the young, beautiful woman meets her untimely end. But this is not just a hired model, the interpretation of these works is altered upon the realization that these works are actually self-portraits.



The emotional torment present in Faber's works potentially stems from her interest in psychology, of which she earned her degree at the University of Rochester before getting her MFA at the Visual Studies Workshop in 2007. She now lives and works in St. Joseph, Minnesota, which provides a drastically different setting and pace than New York. Her works engage this new environment, as she seeks out isolated and deserted spaces as visual metaphors for her own feelings about relocating to the Midwest. Prior to *Completely Human*, Faber often worked in video, and her short film *Evils* (2006) enters into the realm of nightmares. The short black and white film focuses on Faber in various stages of undress performing odd variations on mundane acts. After eating and destroying various types of fruit, the piece culminates with Faber sipping tea next to a large cardboard monster. The miniature tea set and the childish-drawn monster recall childhood nightmares, while actions performed by the frequently nude adult woman

including close shots of her violently eating, spitting out food, and destroying other objects make this work about more than just a child's bad dream.

This idea is further developed in her stop-motion film *Living Organics* (2009). A blocky, mysterious figure haunts the protagonist, a human female-bird hybrid figure who is busy tending to bees as if they are her children. Various plant-like and flower forms take over the environment, as the nightmare figure draws closer. The protagonist then moves from one room to the next, each filled with abandoned limbs and abandoned doll torsos, as if she is on a quest to replace her bird-like claws with idealized, human ones which would make her better equipped to defend herself. Like *Evils*, Faber combines seductive beauty with fearful scenarios in an attempt to merge the two. At once repulsive and desirable, Faber has also produced photographs from this film, isolating moments that recall similar themes. Neither *Evils* or *Living Organics* has a clear resolution; rather, Faber relies on the lack of a conclusive ending to leave her viewer both wanting more and uncomfortable with what they have witnessed.

It is in fact, these images that led Faber to *Completely Human*. While she transitions from a porcelain doll modified with bird features to using her body, the themes remain the same. Isolation and neglect figure prominently, as she focuses on abandoned and disconcerting environments. Be it a tea party with imaginary figures or abandoned construction sites or vehicles, Faber seeks out dilapidated settings that create an uncomfortable or unsettling mood. This is the world slightly off, one where construction is unfinished, buses are left to rot, and women are tied up.





It is her bound figures that are perhaps most unnerving, in which the artist is wrapped in red rope leaning against a tree (*Woods*, 2012) or covered and restrained by various clear tubes (*Tubes 2*, 2012). In her incapacitation, Faber ominously suggests the presence of another person, but more specifically, she implies the presence of another person who has restrained and/or violated the figure in the photograph. There is not enough information in the photographs to determine if the woman is complicit in the act shown, as Faber forces the viewer to question who is the audience for these photographs. Is it the perpetrator? Is it the voyeur? Is it someone who can potentially save her? Additionally, Faber puts her viewer into an uncomfortable and compromising position. Yet unlike performances of Chris Burden or Marina Abramović, where the often compromising action takes place directly in front of the viewer, Faber's scenarios have already happened.¹ No interfering can take place; rather, the viewer is rendered entirely helpless.

This idea is complicated even further when another figure accompanies Faber in works like *Field 4* or *Bus* (both 2012). In contrast to Faber's smooth arms, the broader, more muscular, hairier arms emphasize masculinity. A male enters the frame only as fragments: grabbing the woman's arms, sitting or stepping on her, or holding her. He prevents her from moving, creating a palpable tension between the figures. Again, Faber presents an ambiguity - is this figure her partner? Her captor? Her rapist? Her savior? The effect of these images with the male figure trickles into the

way the other images in the series are read. This figure becomes connected to the images where Faber is isolated or tied up, often causing those photographs to be seen as more unsettling.

The violence in these photographs is often understood, and not directly shown. By comparison, Ana Mendieta's has recreated a horrific rape that happened while she was a student at the University of Iowa in her iconic *Untitled (Rape Scene)* of 1973. Mendieta stages the remains of the violent acts: dishes are broken, her body is tied to the table, and blood is everywhere.² Faber does not include blood, nor does she show conventional marks of restraint like bruising or rope marks. Instead, she presents herself tied up or inactive, often with very little clothing, as she prefers smaller movements that could be read more universally.

Faber focuses on submission, through the grip of a man or the restriction by ropes and tubes, in a very different way than the later works of Mendieta or Francesca Woodman's self-portraits. These two artists play with mirrors and glass to morph and distort their bodies for photographic effect. Mendieta and Woodman often maintain their own agency and control, as they often include the ways that they are manipulating their bodies themselves in the picture.³ In wrapping her body entirely up, Faber cannot move, so she cedes control over to what happens to her. In fact, this question of agency is a pivotal one in Faber's works. Often we think of violence perpetuated to women. But here, the artist is doing it to herself. While she may include a male figure as an intermediary, she is still the one arranging the image and taking the picture. Furthermore, she frequently dissects her body. In some images, she does not show her head, and in others she does not show her arms or her legs. While as photographer she maintains control over the end result, as model she subjects her to these uncomfortable situations, essentially committing the violent acts on herself.

With such a wide variety of violent acts against her body, Faber draws attention to issues of rape and violence against women. The images come at a time when they are most needed, as rape culture continues to exist, if not thrive at this moment. Characterized by the normalization of sexual violence against women, rape culture is perpetuated by the media through the objectification of women's bodies, the excusal of sexual violence, and misogynistic language, as well as other discriminatory acts and statements. Describing the current climate, Emile Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher and Martha Roth elaborate, "Rape continues to be a pervasive fact of American life. . . . Both the victims and their attackers carry the fact of rape and sexual violence through their lives and, one can argue, through their families' lives as well. We will continue to live in a rape culture until our society understands these facts and chooses to eradicate the beliefs and practices that beget sexual violence in this country."⁴

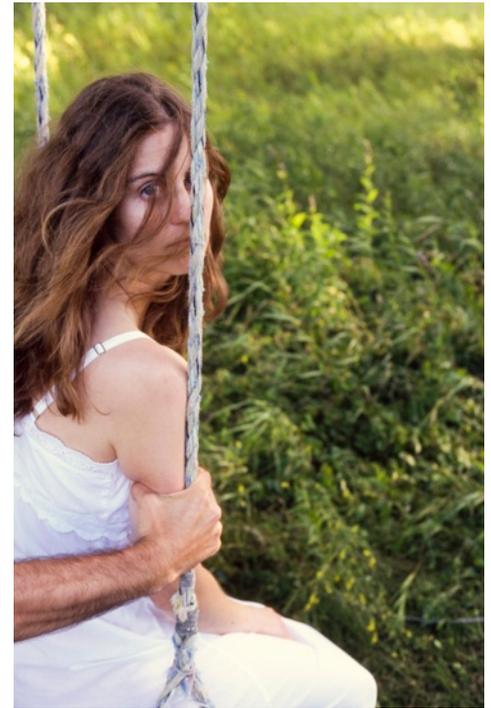


Like her use of ambiguity in these works, they can be seen as speaking to man issues not just male- or self-perpetuated violence. Faber brings up the violence done to society perpetuated by the media. In her inclusion of red lipstick or nail polish, high heels or dainty, white clothing, she illustrates the products marketed to women to improve the way they look. Simply put, she is articulating the idea that a female body is not good enough on its own, and must be altered. Those choices are then further complicated by the sexual content. The make-up and clothing seem to play a role in the situation, as if they might have encouraged the violent act to happen; which is, of course, a common justification for why women are raped.⁵

In addition to the make-up and high heels, Faber repeatedly shows herself nude, often tantalizing the viewer with that fallen shoulder strap alluding to a sexual availability. The tension created by the images where a man grasps or holds the body carries over into the other images, so that the beautiful, sexy woman becomes connected to the violent acts. Faber links violence and sex in a complicated manner that causes both distress and arousal. Not unlike the development of sadomasochism, Faber taps into our subconscious by drawing attention to feelings we might not want to acknowledge.

Furthermore, Faber's work blends society's deepest fears and desires about female sexuality. At once, Faber creates images where she owns and controls her sexuality. She shows off her body and dresses in a manner to draw attention to her figure. Yet, her sexuality and her availability potentially opens her up to being made a victim.

While images which graphically address the combination of violence, sexuality and women are uncommon, they are a necessity. Even as the world has changed, and feminism has altered the lives of women for the better, there are still systemic problems in society. As Anna Chave articulates, "No matter how indispensable optimism has been to feminism--including visions of a world where feminism truly could be extraneous--there is a difference between optimism and denial; and however women undertake to re-theorize feminism, we must not deny its bedrock in the injuries done to women: wrongs and damage, that, however socially or culturally manifest, were and are always also sustained bodily."⁶ Chave insists, and I would agree, that art and writing that addresses wrongdoings and violent acts against women must continue to be made and written, because these acts continue to exist. Women continue to be abused and raped; feminism and twenty-first century ideals have not prevented this from happening. Faber's photographs, in her brazenness and her willingness to make the viewer uncomfortable and unsettled, serve the important job of continuing to start these conversations, even if the public does not want to have them.



Emily L. Newman holds a Ph.D. from The Graduate Center, City University of New York, and is currently Assistant Professor of Art History at Texas A&M University – Commerce. Often exploring the intersections between popular culture and art, her research focuses on the way contemporary artists have addressed female body image.

1 For more information on the interaction between these pieces and the viewer, see: Frazer Ward, "Gray Zone: Watching 'Shoot,'" October, no. 95 (Winter 2001): 114-30; and Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

2 For more information on this piece, see Olga Viso, ed. *Ana Mendieta* (Washington, DC: Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004): 152-7.

3 Mendieta's photographs with her body pressed on glass among other self-portraits are featured in Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta* (New York: Prestel USA, 2008). Woodman's self-portraits have recently been published in depth in two monographs: Chris Townsend, *Francesca Woodman* (New York: Phaidon, 2006); and Corey Keller, ed., *Francesca Woodman* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc. and San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2011).

4 Emile Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher and Martha Roth, "Are We Really Living in a Rape Culture?" in *Transforming a Rape Culture*, rev. ed., ed. Emile Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher and Martha Roth (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2005): 8.

5 For more on this reasoning, see: Lynn Henderson, "Rape and Responsibility," *Law and Philosophy* 11, no. 1/2 (1992) 127-178; and Julie A. Allison and Lawrence S. Wrightsman, *Rape: The Misunderstood Crime* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1993).

6 Anna C. Chave, "'Normal Ills': On Embodiment, Victimization and the Origins of Feminist Art" in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, ed. Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 137.