Catriona Grant
The Examination Room

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"The life of any organism depends on the possibility of its maintaining its own distinctness, a boundary within which it is contained, the terms of what we would call its self-possession."[1]

In *The Examination Room* series, Catriona Grant constantly seeks out this point of 'distinctness' by exploring the limits of one property in relation to a given other. The boundaries between the individual and space, presence and absence, object and subject, physical and psychic, are contained within this series. However, Grant creates this interplay of dynamics in order to dispossess rather than maintain. All boundaries are consistently blurred, transgressed or transcended to the point that the photographs establish a liminal space.

This liminal space is most clearly defined by the doorway, a repeated device that appears in each photograph, framing the scene. The open door provides a subjective viewpoint, actively and complicitly involving the viewer by placing them on the threshold. If the women we see are the 'patients' in the examination room, what role do we automatically assume? Cleverly, our very positioning disputes any claim to optical power[2] and therefore control as, "in every [building] there is a point of maximum tension and it always coincides with a threshold or boundary".[3] Holding great psychological resonance, the doorway acts as a signifier in literature and film, establishing the exact point for a character to pass from one state to another. The threshold operates in duality - between safety and danger, past and present, known and unknown. In *The Examination Room* series, as the observer inhabits the threshold, they are potentially as exposed and as vulnerable as the occupant.

This skewed duality is also explored through the altered functions of the objects and architecture of the institution. Those objects that should offer sight are sightless. The windows do provide the only source of light in the photographs but their white opaqueness blocks out any view of an exterior. Our gaze is always returned to this heightened interior territory. The only mirror above a Shanks utility sink is streaked in runs of dirty grey. In the absence of the mirror's reflection, it is the other surfaces that validate human presence. Buffed linoleum, the gloss varnish of the plywood doors or the cold sheen of the cubicle wall mutely record a reflective trace of occupant.

The women, due to the long exposures of the photographs, are ghostly apparitions. Their unclothed bodies lose corporeality as they merge with the surroundings. The architecture of the body is directly translated into the substance of the room: the sharp edge of a table delineates the spinal column of one prone female. The limits of the figure become indistinct in places as skin tone fuses into the utility shade of the walls. From the indeterminate hidden figure 'on all fours'[4] in the attic, revealed to Jane Eyre as Rochester's first wife, to the woman literally consumed by her surroundings in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 novel *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the invisibility of women within a domestic interior has been inextricably linked to madness. Yet, the invisibility of the women within the series *The Examination Room* does not point to any descent. They are contained but not devoured by these stark, unnamed interiors. Although without privacy in a relentlessly public space they maintain their distance. These women are self-possessed, retaining their own distinctness within the mechanisms of the institution.

Furthermore, the woman dissolved could be read as an allegory utilised in Feminist art practice and theory, in reference to the misappropriation of the female nude by a dominant male gaze, as put succinctly in the text book *Feminist Visual Culture*, "The physicality of the female body began to disappear under the weight of its own history".[5] However, these bodies do have a sense of weight and gravity with a defined point of contact with the surface they stand or lie on. And it is *our* presence and gaze which is superfluous. Their faces remain resolutely turned away from us as they continue to wait.

Ultimately, *The Examination Room* series plays against the definitions of what Rosalind Krauss coined 'straight photography'. There is no decisive moment captured, no 'pure presence'.[6] In terms of a narrative within the sequence, there is never a denouement offered. The figures continue to wait. The rooms continue to lead to other rooms rather than any exit. Both individual and institution are located within a time that can be fixed neither as beginning or end.

1. Roger Caillois, 'Mimétisme et Psychasthenie Legendaire', p8-9, *Minotaure*, No 7 (1935). As cited by Rosalind Krauss, p.74, Corpus Delecti, *L'Amour Fou*, Cross River Press Ltd. (1985).
2. Modernists such as Le Corbousier believed in the optical power of the beholder, and that the order of everything radiated from the eye. *The Split Wall; Domestic Voyeurism*, Beatriz Colomina. p.56, *Sexuality and Space*, Princeton Architectural Press (1992).
3. Ibid (p.95.).
4. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. Nelson Doubleday, INC, Garden City, New York (Third Edition, 1848) (p.299).
5. *Feminist Visual Culture*, edited by Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, Edinburgh University Press. (2000) (p.62).
6. *Photography in the Service of Surrealism*, Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour Fou*. Cross River Press Ltd (1985) (p.28)