

## Vulnerability and Strength in Gwen Hardie's Charcoal Fragility Drawing

Francis Ankyiah<sup>1</sup>, Robert Amo-Broni<sup>2</sup>, Isaac Joe Swenzy Dadzie<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Art Education Department, University of Education, Winneba, Box-25, Ghana.

<sup>3</sup> Komenda College of Education, Ghana.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores Gwen Hardie's fragility "Untitled, 1987" drawing through an integrated art historical, visual, and narrative perspective. Hardie's art, from a historical point of view, corresponds to the late-20th century feminist and process-art emphasis on the "anti-monumental," the use of modest materials to subvert the idealized portrayal of the body. The visual investigation uncovers how her method is instrumental to the message: the delicate paper support imitates the vulnerability of the skin, whereas her brilliant smudging and erasure of charcoal call to the body's transient, fleshly side. Such a material engagement gives rise to a narrative not of events, but of the lived body, a story where the concert of one's impermanence and vulnerability is where true strength lies. In the end, Hardie's art is an effort to make real, to the senses, the most basic, yet indubitable, fact that the physical body is the foremost, incontestable place of identity.

**Keywords:** Body, Vulnerability, Gwen Hardie, Charcoal, Fragility, Drawings.

### I. INTRODUCTION

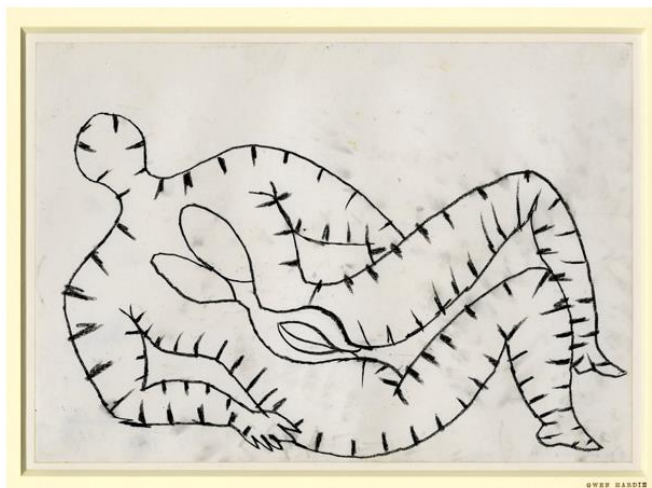
Gwen Hardie's highly detailed charcoal drawings of human figures (fig. 1) are impressive but the artist does not use bright colours or make a loud announcement to attract attention, rather through a deep, somewhat mysterious contact they manage to touch one's heart. The emotions stirred by her fragility drawing are so strong and direct that without words one feels that these are actually physical dialogues with Hardie's shadowy, blurred figure of a torso or limb portions that have been painted at a scale that surprisingly combines the size of a human being with grandness and at the same time is void of any kind of classical heroism. The picture appears to be not only coming out of the untouched portion of the paper but is also going to disappear back into it, thus leaving a tension between the foreground and the background, the real and the ephemeral one that can almost be felt between presence and absence, solidity and evaporation. This first, palpable layer of meaning leads directly to the artist's profound inquiry of the first and last common ground of all human beings: the human body.

Hardie, a Scottish artist born in 1962 has, over the span of her artistic career, almost entirely focused on the highly detailed investigation of the human figure which is very evident in her fragility drawing culminating this unwavering dedication. The

drawing is a collection of extremely detailed, up-close, depictions of human body parts, in many cases the artist's own, done in the most basic of materials like charcoal on paper. Looking away from the bright, long-lasting and rich oil on canvas surface, Hardie intentionally opts for very unstable and modest support and medium. The deliberate act of insisting on these materials is not a drawback but a core conceptual aspect of the artist's work, as it establishes a very direct material parallel to the physical state she is depicting.

This article claims that, in Hardie's fragility drawing, the physical aspect of the work is not just a carrier of the Representation but in fact, the main source of the artwork's meaning. The fragile, rough paper and the impermanent, easily soiled with a smudge, charcoal nature are not the work's side-qualities; they are the main metaphor of the piece. With this intentional blending of the artwork's subject and its medium, Hardie not only changes the concept of the human body as a place of simultaneous vulnerability and strength but also makes it a vehicle for these oftentimes very vague ideas of corporeal impermanence, permeability, and visceral reality. She does not falter from the idea that identity is fundamentally connected to this precarious physical life. The article then further outlines that the team of analysts

employ an integrated framework comprising three critical lenses in order to thoroughly deconstruct this notion. The first lens, historical analysis, defines Hardie's work as part of a continuum of feminist and process art, especially the "anti-monumental" tradition, which, according to the description by the critic Lucy Lippard (Lippard, 1995), employs modest materials to subvert idealized forms. The second was a visual analysis which aimed at obtaining a closer understanding of Hardie's art by examining her technique and discovering how the artist's use of charcoal in her works by methods of smudging, erasure, and layering not only depicts but also directly stimulates the listener's experience of flesh. Finally, the narrative analysis was employed to comprehend these elements as the foundation of an embodiment story, which is non-linear in nature, where the characters become strong as a result of their acceptance of their vulnerability. A multidisciplinary approach is necessary to the extent that it facilitates the comprehension of Gwen Hardie's works as her profound reflections on the given universal condition of being embodied.



**Figure: 1.** Gwen Hardie (b.1962), *Untitled*, 1987, Charcoal on thin white paper © The Trustees of the British Museum. Reproduced by permission of the artist. British Museum, London

## II. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT BREAKING FROM TRADITION

To entirely recognize how radical Gwen Hardie's fragility drawing is, one has to initially compare her drawing with the main Western tradition of depicting the human body, the female nude in particular. The nude from Renaissance to Neoclassical period was mostly an idealized form, thus a way of showing the divine perfection, the heroic virtue or the abstract beauty. Artists such as Michelangelo and Ingres showed anatomies of almost unbelievable harmony and with a marble-like smoothness thus the bodies were practically of

the gods and usually for the pleasure and the intellectual amusement of a male viewer (Berger, 1972). These were figures of eternity, firmness, and remoteness towering over the viewer as abstract rather than concrete experience. Hardie's work is actually a revolt against this legacy. Her figures are not stereotyped ones but have a real flesh and blood kind of existence. They are gentle, frail, and vividly alive people, brought with a kind of bare familiarity which is completely at odds with the objectifying and heroic zing stare of classical art history. While traditional nudes tried to negate the shortcomings of the body, Hardie's drawings force the viewer to confront the body's inescapable physical reality.

### Alignment with Late 20th-Century Movements

The fundamental criticism of Gwen Hardie's method comes from the revolutionary art movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, which were aimed at toppling the hierarchical structures of and ways of representing the world that had been taken for granted.

Her practice is profoundly consistent with the main endeavours of feminist art, which attacked the patriarchal perspective of art history and mass culture (Ankyiah & Bamfo, 2023; Ankyiah, 2023). The pivotal question raised by art historian Linda Nochlin was not only the absence of women artists but the very "structure of the institution" and the "nature of its history" (Nochlin, 1971). Feminist artists like Joan Semmel and Sylvia Sleigh took back the female gaze, representing the body from a subjective, lived perspective instead of just being an object for consumption. Hardie is involved in this work; her gaze is internal and empathetic, delving into the body as both a personal and universal site of experience. Besides, her own body as a subject in the art of the world further connects her with such artists as Hannah Wilke, (fig. 2) and Ana Mendieta, (fig. 3) who through their own physicality explored themes like identity, vulnerability, and mortality. In the same time, Hardie's focus on the physicality of the material and the performance of the drawing connects her to the principles of Process Art. One of the main points a move led by such artists as: Eva Hesse and Robert Morris, made was the turning of the spotlight from the final, most valuable art piece to the very process of its creation. Also, the subject became the actual material with its intrinsic features, its behaviour, and its changes brought about by the artist's hand. To exemplify Hesse's use of latex, fiberglass, and rope, (fig. 4) was a kind of celebration of impermanence, frailty, and the sensual side of the chosen media (Lippard, 1976). In the same vein, the choice of the easily damaged paper and the unstable charcoal by Hardie is at the core of her work's explanation. The same narrative is not covered with the smudges, the

fingerprints, and the erasures but they are the main characters, they tell the story of the drawing as a physical struggle and a consummation, the part of the very flesh and blood being depicted which is the mirror image of it.



**Figure: 2.** Hannah Wilke, *Untitled*, 1960s, pastel and graphite on card, 11 x 15 cm. Courtesy: Alison Jacques Gallery, London and Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY/ DACS, London



**Figure: 3.** Ana Mendieta, *La Venus Negra*, 1981/ 2018 [The Black Venus] Black and white photograph 39.25 x 53.5 inches (99.7 x 135.9 cm) (GP3515). © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



**Figure: 4.** Eva Hesse. *No title*. 1970

### The Concept of the "Anti-Monumental"

The merging of these points of influences leads to a phenomenon that critic Lucy Lippard called "the anti-monumental". This is not a style but a strategy a deliberate denial of the grand scale, the permanence, and the impersonal authority of the traditional monuments. Rather than that the anti-monumental art resorts to intimacy, transience, modesty, and what is personally significant as the means for dealing with the deepest human themes (Lippard, 1995). Hardie's drawing is a perfect example. Her pictures may be large in scale but to say that they are anti-monumental in the sense of their material vulnerability is more accurate. A charcoal drawing on paper is something that is very susceptible to light and touch, and hence requires a quiet, private kind of looking, while a monument is something that is made to last for centuries in public space. By addressing the human condition, which is a timeless subject, through such a short-lived medium as she does, Hardie is going against the monumental tradition. She maintains that the real depth and the power cannot be found in the imposition of the unchanging and the unyielding, but rather in the truthful and brave recognition of the fragility, the alterability, and the fleeting character of the embodied existence.

### III. VISUAL ANALYSIS

In Gwen Hardie's fragility drawing, the medium is the message. Her decision of the materials is not an indifferent one but a purposeful, conceptual strategy where paper and charcoal are no longer the passive supports and pigments but the active, metaphorical protagonists of the work's meaning. This visual analysis breaks down how the nature of these materials and Hardie's use of them create a powerful metaphor for the vulnerable, physical body.



## The Support

Hardie's choice of paper as the main support is the most basic and most significant part of her material metaphor. Contrary to the stiff, primed canvas of the conventional painting, paper is a delicate piece by nature. It is capable of being torn, creased, and permanently marked; it ages and can also be damaged by light and moisture. The work produced on paper requires a constant negotiation with their environment, for its very fragile state that reflects the body's own vulnerability to time and external forces. This impermanence is a visual and conceptual equivalent to human mortality. The paper ground is not the illusionistic window onto a world but is actually the skin-like surface the image is built on, a membrane that is both the place of representation and a real, vulnerable object of a similar kind. Any faint crease or inherent flaw of the paper is no longer a defect that has to be hidden, but a witness of its and thus, our material existence.

## The Medium

Where paper is the skin, charcoal is the flesh. Its very form is central to its meaning.

Charcoal is basically an organic material, made of carbonized wood a product that is basically ash and dust. It is one of the most ancient and basic drawing materials, traditionally used for life drawing to record the immediacy of the form. Its character is very much unstable and transient; it does not fix itself permanently on a surface in the same way as paint and is also very easily smudged. This very weakness of the material makes it the perfect expression of the body's own impermanence. As long as they are of a certain type, materials, as argued by art historian David Summers, can have a "humoral quality" that brings to mind bodily states and charcoal's dusty, easily changeable nature is the best possible choice for representing the corporeal and the mortal (Summers, 2003, p. 122).

Hardie's brilliant performance uses these properties to the maximum of their expressive potential.

Hardie does not resist the charcoal's inclination to smudge; she uses it. By employing her fingers, cloths, or stumps, she merges the powder into gentle, smooth transitions which depict the rounded surfaces of a shoulder or the hollow of a back. This method is devoid of any hard, definite lines. To the contrary, the forms look like they can breathe, disappear, and be in a constant state of change. The body is not portrayed as a solid, impenetrable mass but rather as something that is permeable, unstable, and can be felt still, though fleeting.

The use of erasure is not limited to that of mistake correction only, but rather, it serves as a positive mark-making means. Removing charcoal from the paper is an activity that leaves behind very faint, almost invisible, incomplete, and ambiguous areas. These erasures are like memories or past presence

traces, which lose their visual correspondences and speak through the language of loss, history, and the body's store of experience. They are the visual counterparts of a phantom limb - a presence defined by its absence.

Hardie's tonal values are very different and she dramatically moves from one extreme to another. On one end, there is the stark, untouched white of the paper, and on the other, deep, soft blacks that seem to swallow light. Besides creating a volume illusion effect, this contrast is also responsible for a very deep and large inner space feeling. The darkest parts are not only silhouettes but also the gut-wrenching, animal-like inner world of the body, muscle, bone, and the life that is not visible but inside. The white of the paper does the highest highlight work most of the time, but it can also be the void from where the form comes or the one it is going to dissolve into.

## Scale and Viewing Experience

The final and most important part of Hardie's visual strategy is her scale. These are, by and large, not the small, sketchbook studies but the huge works, generally of life-size or even larger. The way the viewer interprets the pieces is thus changed from one of mere looking from a distance to an immersive, intimate, and confrontational experience. One does not just see the body but actually is put in a shared space with a body. This leads to a strong phenomenological effect, as critic Michael Fried puts it, where the extent of the work directly influences the viewer's bodily awareness and sense of relation to the artwork (Fried, 1998). The big, susceptible area of delicate paper and charcoal that has been smeared calls for a silent, thorough look, the kind of look we would give to our own or a dear one's body. It is an experience which, by way of its very existence, is overpowering and, at the same time, humbling in its nature of being fragile, thus sharing the qualities of corporeal existence which are divided into two great categories.

## IV. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Gwen Hardie's fragility drawing powerfully communicate a narrative that is not one of sequential events or external drama. Instead, these works tell a story about the state, a very deep and intense story about what it means to be-in-a-body. This story is not told through symbols or characters (Ankyiah, 2024), but through the actual material language of the works inviting spectators to see the marks of process and form as the proof of being embodied.

## Beyond Literal Narrative

Conventional narrative in art generally entails a series of events, a time before and after. Hardie's artwork intentionally opposes such a temporal framework. There is no suggested movement, no mythological or historical reference. The narrative here is phenomenological, it is about the very immediate, lived experience of one's own body as something coming from within.

This is in line with the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea of the "lived body" (*le corps vécu*), which sees the body not as something we have but the very means by which we live and comprehend the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Hardie's sketches serve as a kind of map of this existence. The narrative is the silent, always present reality of living in a physical form, a story of weight, texture, vulnerability, and presence, not one that develops over time, but that comes into being through the moment of the viewer's encounter with the work.

### **Narrative of Vulnerability**

The main line of this embodied story is one of vulnerability, told most clearly through the Hardie's artistic materials' behaviour. The fragile paper that looks like it might tear at any moment is the body's vulnerability to harm and aging that tells. The charcoal that has been smeared and which can be totally removed by a single, somewhat careless, finger stroke, talks about impermanence and the body's final return to dust. The erased areas and the faintly visible marks on the paper's surface serve as memory and loss narrative elements, being like scars that speak of the times when one was there and traumatic experiences.

The art theorist Griselda Pollock, while referring to psychoanalytic theory, describes how certain art practices can record the "encrypted trace" of experience that is too deep for words (Pollock, 2013, p. 89). In Hardie's art, it is the material that turns into this encrypted trace, telling the story of being exposed to time, gravity, and the inevitable processes of aging and dying.

### **Narrative of Strength**

Most importantly, Hardie's story does not finish with vulnerability. Rather, she builds a more intricate and powerful one where strength is not redefined as lack of vulnerability, but as the brave acceptance of fragility. The image's very, unwavering existence, its big size, its good workmanship, its strong visual appeal very well a powerful resistance. The performance of thoroughly depicting a fragile entity on a similarly fragile piece of work is undoubtedly one of profound confirmation.

This reflects the ideas of scholar Judith Butler about precariousness, where she claims that recognizing our shared vulnerability may turn into the grounds of an ethical bond and a source of political strength (Butler, 2004). According to

Hardie's visual language, the power is in the fearless look, the patient hand, and the choice to leave a lasting trace no matter how transient the materials of a vulnerable state are. The narrative is one of survival: the body, similar to the drawing, is still there, and thus, it is powerful.

### **The Body as the Primary Site of Identity**

The non-linear narrative of this story ends with a very strong statement about identity. Hardie's art is a strong argument for the self not being a disembodied consciousness but being essentially grounded in the "raw, physical, and visceral reality" of the body. The story that is made out of the smudges, erasures, and fragile paper leads the spectator to the idea that all of our experiences, memories, and even our very being are through our bodily existence.

There is no dividing line between the mind and the body; the latter being the main text on which identity is the writing. The body, as the feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz puts it, is "the irreducible, untheorizable, and unstylised ground of all that is" (Grosz, 1994, p. 124). Hardie's fragility drawing does exactly what this theoretical argument does: it provides a concrete visual narrative, thus, to be able to understand who we are, we first have to face the vulnerable, strong, and indisputable fact of our physical selves.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This essay demonstrates that Gwen Hardie's fragility drawing can be fully understood only through an integrated approach where historical, visual, and narrative perspectives are combined to shed light on her central thesis. The art context of feminist and process art helped to uncover her intentional move away from the idealized, monumental nude, thus situating her within the "anti-monumental" tradition that derives its depth from ordinary and unpretentious materials. The visual analysis explored how this philosophical idea is carried out physically, revealing that the delicate paper and transient charcoal are not simply mediums but the very material of the metaphor that portray the body's fragility and matter in a joltingly direct way.

Moreover, the narrative analysis brought forth that her material choices narrate a persuasive story of embodiment, a narrative of state that celebrates the power of fragility through its recognition. These different approaches put together create a comprehensive argument that Hardie's work is a deep reflection on the lived body, where shape, matter, and sense are closely intertwined. This paper concludes by stating that Hardie's material intervention should be seen as a philosophical

investigation. By the simple yet powerful method of combining paper and charcoal, she carries out an utterly radical translation: she makes the abstract, often uncomfortable concept of bodily existence intensely, even painfully, real.

The art does not merely give an image of the body; rather, it becomes a body-analogue, thus allowing a phenomenological experience which goes beyond intellectualization and speaks directly to our embodied senses. What Hardie has managed to do is nothing less than to create a visual language where a smudge is never just a smudge, but a nerve ending; where a crease in the paper is never just a defect, but a wrinkle of time on the skin. In this world that she has brought into being, things are fundamentally metaphysical.

Gwen Hardie's fragility drawing is most certainly one of those works which stays with the viewer long after the initial encounter and invites the viewer to contemplate it over again and again. It posits that art's deepest power may not be in the capacity to build monuments that defy time but, in the capacity, to produce fragile, honest objects that truthfully testify to our experience within it.

Instead of trying to conquer impermanence and vulnerability, which have been the major themes of most of art history, Hardie on the contrary embraces these very qualities to disclose a strength which is not only more genuine but also more intricately connected with life's rhythm. Her works are the embodiment of the idea that vulnerability is not a characteristic of weakness but instead authentic and courageous life, thereby standing as silent yet mighty affirmations of this notion.

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