



## When Leaves Trace Skin – exploring the Expanded Feminine

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This essay is a response to the exhibition *When Leaves Trace Skin*, and will explore the idea of an expanded feminine within the art works and feminist philosophy. Traditional notions of femininity will be critically analysed within the context of patriarchal violence against women<sup>1</sup>, and the effects of trauma. This essay will reveal some of the intentions behind the work, while also foregrounding that this experiential artwork moves outside the boundaries of language. The title, *When Leaves Trace Skin*, refers to a space of relation between the self and the world, which will also be explored in relation to feminist philosophy, and ideas of relation and becoming.

Considering the porous borders between writing, making and living, my interest in the feminine as more than part of an oppressive system was driven by personal experience and philosophical curiosity. Femininity as an oppressive construct enabled me to recognize my own condition as a body both partially validated (as white) but also as an object of ownership within a patriarchal, colonial and white supremacist society. Within this context of learning how the world was both personally and publicly defined and ordered in different ways by femininity and gender

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<sup>1</sup> In all cases in this text, 'women', 'woman', and 'female' is inclusive of all female-identifying people including queer and transgender identities.



roles more broadly, I began to explore feminist philosophy on this subject. I became especially interested in the work of Luce Irigaray, a feminist philosopher who focuses specifically on redefining the world in a way that includes female experience, and incorporates the idea of an expanded femininity. Irigaray's understanding of femininity is as a hidden source of knowledge and power, and an essential aspect of women's becoming and being in the world. This notion of the feminine opened up new possibilities for defining and interpreting the world through a feminine lens, with a specifically female gaze. This step in re-orienting perspective is central to Irigaray's project, as stated by Jones, (2005) "For Irigaray, to pursue a feminine becoming is not only desirable, it is absolutely necessary, unless women are to remain the trajectory for men's becomings."<sup>1</sup> Interpreting Irigaray's work in this way meant returning to forgotten and disparaged themes such as the feminine, the emotional and natural world, through an expansive understanding of becoming.

With this context in mind, the work for *When Leaves Trace Skin* began with filming the natural world, through physical movement that centred the body as part of the gaze and not an object within it. Here, in an inner, personal space of interpreting the world through framing and movement, I could construct a kind of reality that held the ideas discovered through language. Some footage of the upper branches of trees moving in the wind gained particular significance for me as an unreal landscape, which only existed by pointing the camera upwards into the sky, not as a liveable space somewhere on the ground. The

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, R 2005, Neither Fused nor Rejected, published in 'And the One Doesn't stir without the Other', Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast, 2005.



footage became a dreamy symbol for nature, expansive and open-ended, and I used it in different installations for that symbolic purpose. When creating the central image in *When Leaves Trace Skin*, this footage was again repurposed, frozen and reversed to make another symbolic space of two realities. The image in this way created two worlds (or two perspectives) that existed simultaneously within the same space.

There are some philosophically useful aspects to this vision of two realities co-existing in the same space that relate to Irigaray's work. Irigaray repeatedly discusses a culture of two, and how creating a shared space of relation between two subjects is fundamentally important. Irigaray (2012) describes this fluid space of relation as essential for creating equality within the world:

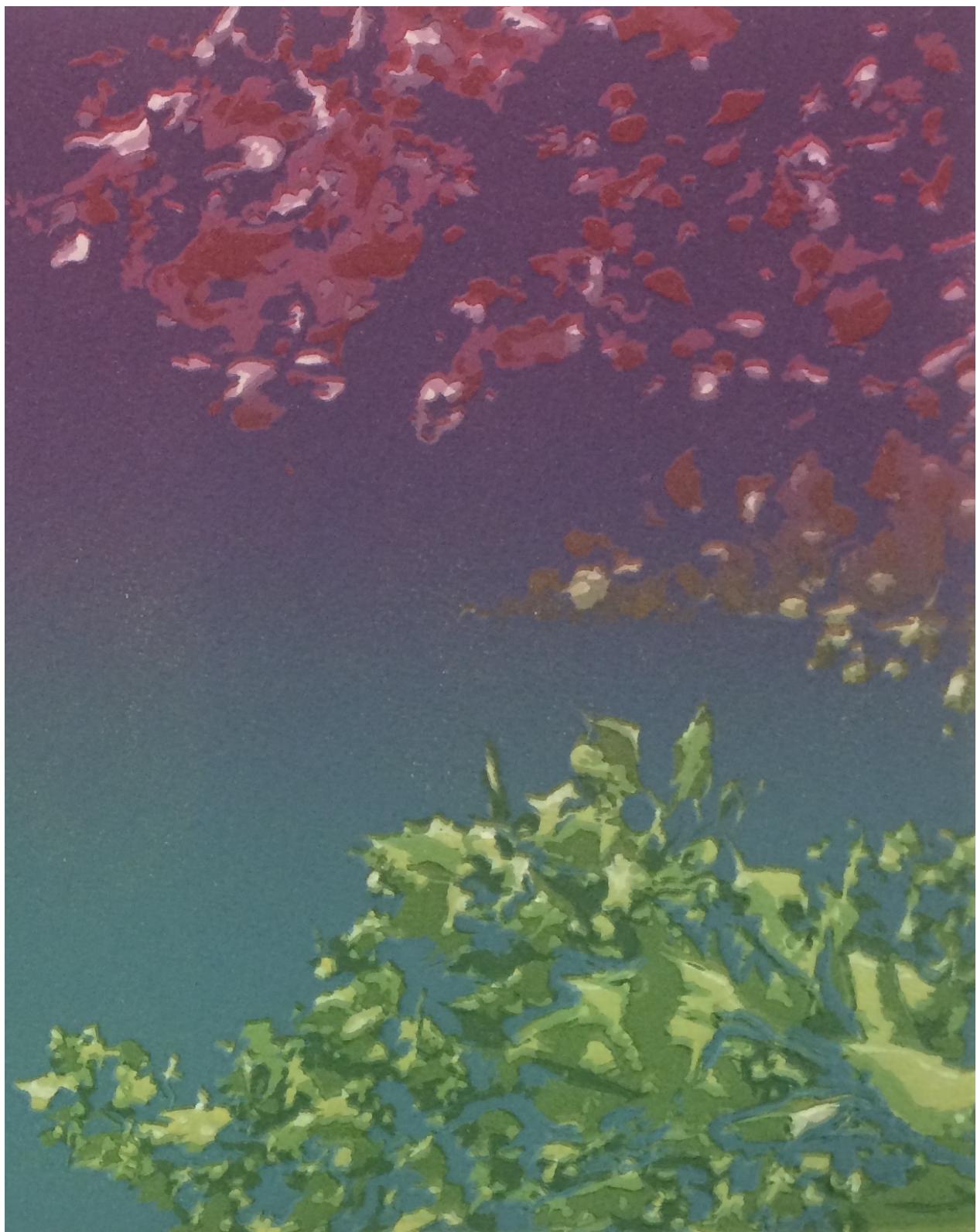
“Desire as such is wanting to enter into relation with the other. Desire is never wanting to possess or appropriate the other, which amounts to a real or imaginary need to reduce the other to myself or to my own.

Instead it is a question of establishing, keeping and cultivating the between-us.”<sup>1</sup>

The idea of creating a shared space of relation between people seeks to redefine the way we relate to each other, and offers powerful possibilities. Irigaray's work often reveals new paradigms without concrete explanations of how they might play out in the real world. This is a strategy that could be perceived as avoidant and politically naive. However I would argue from my own experience of making work in response to her ideas I have found ways they could exist in the world and be productive. In *When Leaves Trace Skin*, an in-between space of relation was explored, within the visual image and the way the

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<sup>1</sup> Irigaray, L 2012, *In the Beginning, She Was*, pp. 18, Bloomsbury, 1<sup>st</sup> edition.



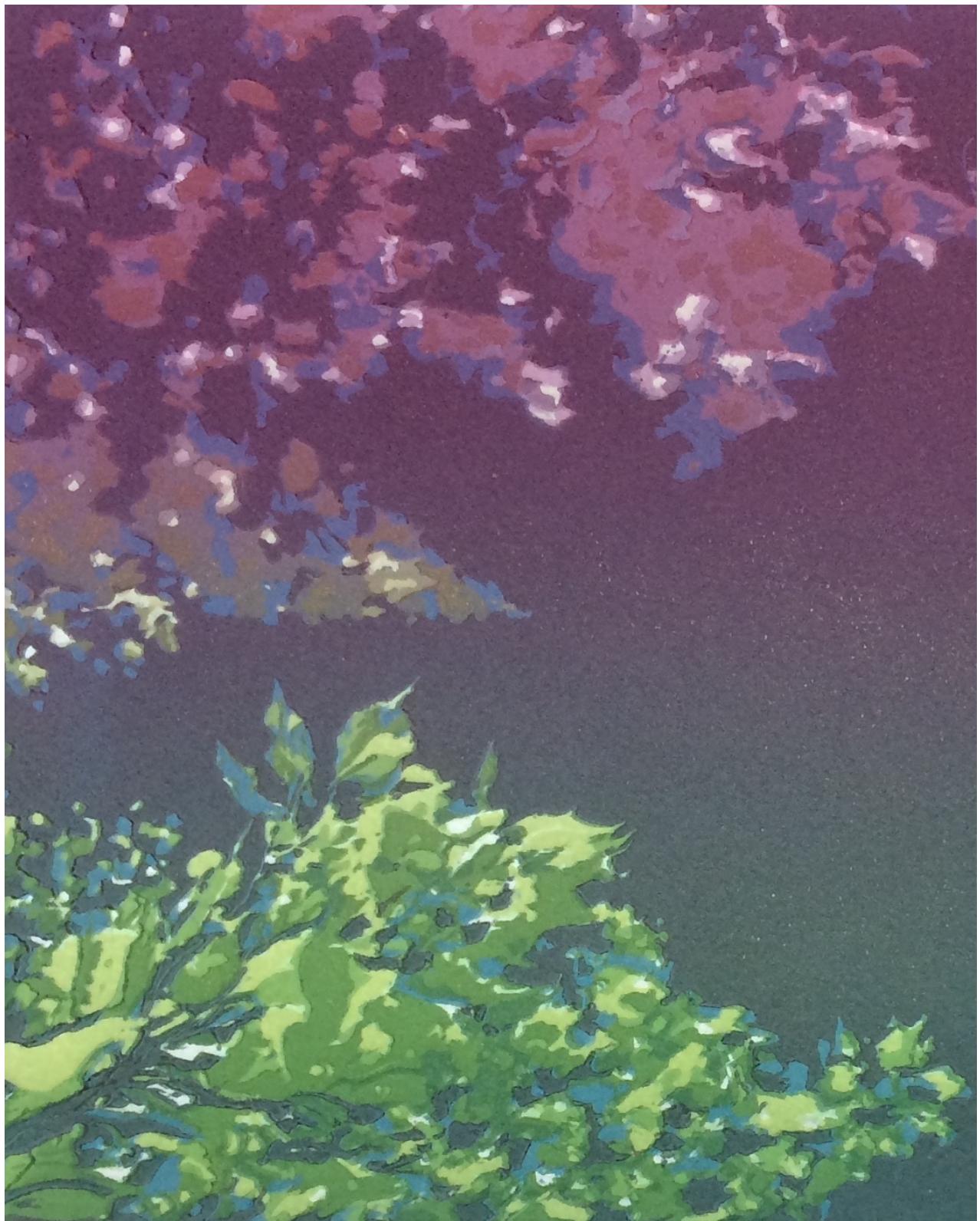
installation operates in space. The physical qualities of the prints, and their material presence in the gallery space offered further explorations of an expanded feminine and space of relation.

Using fabric partially operates as a feminine signifier but also as a fluid form of architecture, further exploring this space of relation. The fabric is called glass organza because its fine mesh fibre and sheen appears like a sheet of glass when hung in space. Working with a material that appears like another, a 'glass' that is porous and moveable with air and breath in a space of relation to bodies, is directly responsive to Irigaray's definition of a fluid space of relation.

It also places the horizon of the image in a unique and experiential space particular to how viewers may direct themselves through the gallery.

The horizon is revealed according to their own direction through space, their ability to move closer or remain distant. The video footage once stilled to create a static image causes motion in space, in a reversal of roles. Rather than placing the viewer in the darkness of a film-screening space, the viewers enter into immersion by their own choice. The image shifts according to the unique engagement and perspective of each viewer, creating an infinite horizon of becoming within an equal space of relation to others.

Further expanding on the idea of an infinite horizon, working with the medium of printmaking meant creating multiple versions of the same image, infinite variations. The technique of reduction lino requires layering and then removing each colour from the block after printing, a kind of emergence through erasure. This aspect of making the work meant each colour alone was not an image, only an abstract shape or form, a blank space without its other parts. And each form was then



partially covered over to make space for the next form. The notion of emerging through erasure, through disappearance, has an important relation to the experience of trauma and its effects on the mind and body. The experience of disassociation is often described by survivors as the feeling of leaving the body, being apart from the physical experience that is traumatic. This creates fragments of moments in time that are erased, and then put back together slowly through recovery. The printing process of reduction linocut essentially mirrored this lived experience. Creating an image through disassembled parts and forms of colour was both therapeutic and enlightening.

As a survivor of trauma I know that there are also multiple moments when this experience of separating from my body occurs, for example when I am treated as an object to be owned or abused within daily life as a woman. The constant knowledge or even fear of being harassed or assaulted just for existing in a world that offers you less value. This is also intimately tied to the use of femininity as an instrument of oppression, to the lessening of my status as a human being. Importantly, this exhibition seeks to draw a clear line of distinction between the damaging toxic femininity and masculinity as tools of patriarchal oppression, and the expanded feminine that the works explore. The expanded feminine within the works seek to counter those negative connotations of femininity by presenting aspects of femininity as powerful and carrying important knowledge such as a the shared space of relation.

The distinction between these two versions of femininity is not discrete, more of a porous border that is often blurred. That blurring often occurs when different variables such as race, class and gender privilege come



into play. Here it is important to raise that Irigaray and myself both write from places of privilege including whiteness and class privilege.

Understanding the aspects of Irigaray's work that make it inaccessible and detached from reality is crucial to forming an interpretation of her work that is useful to others. Irigaray's work holds a certain distance from current political issues, not because of lack of concern but perhaps because that which she seeks to unravel is not easily parcelled into one particular issue. I interpret Irigaray's perceived detachment as important to her project of defining a future through reinterpreting the past. This is problematic from her position of privilege, but it is not a reason to completely ignore her ideas. Over time Irigaray's work has become more valuable to me as my understanding of these issues has expanded and especially since I became interested in redefining terms we take for granted, such as feminine or masculine. Utilizing Irigaray's ideas for an artwork proved to be revealing and productive because it manifested those ideas in a physical form within the world. This led to those ideas revealing new perspectives on trauma and creating artwork in response that is therapeutic and seeks to be socially productive. I believe that feminist philosophy is only useful if it can be physically produced and explored within the world, and experienced by communities both individually and collectively. Making work about or in response to philosophical ideas creates another link and space for those ideas. It creates a space with porous borders, where language is evolving and open, and new interpretations may hold keys to the future.

