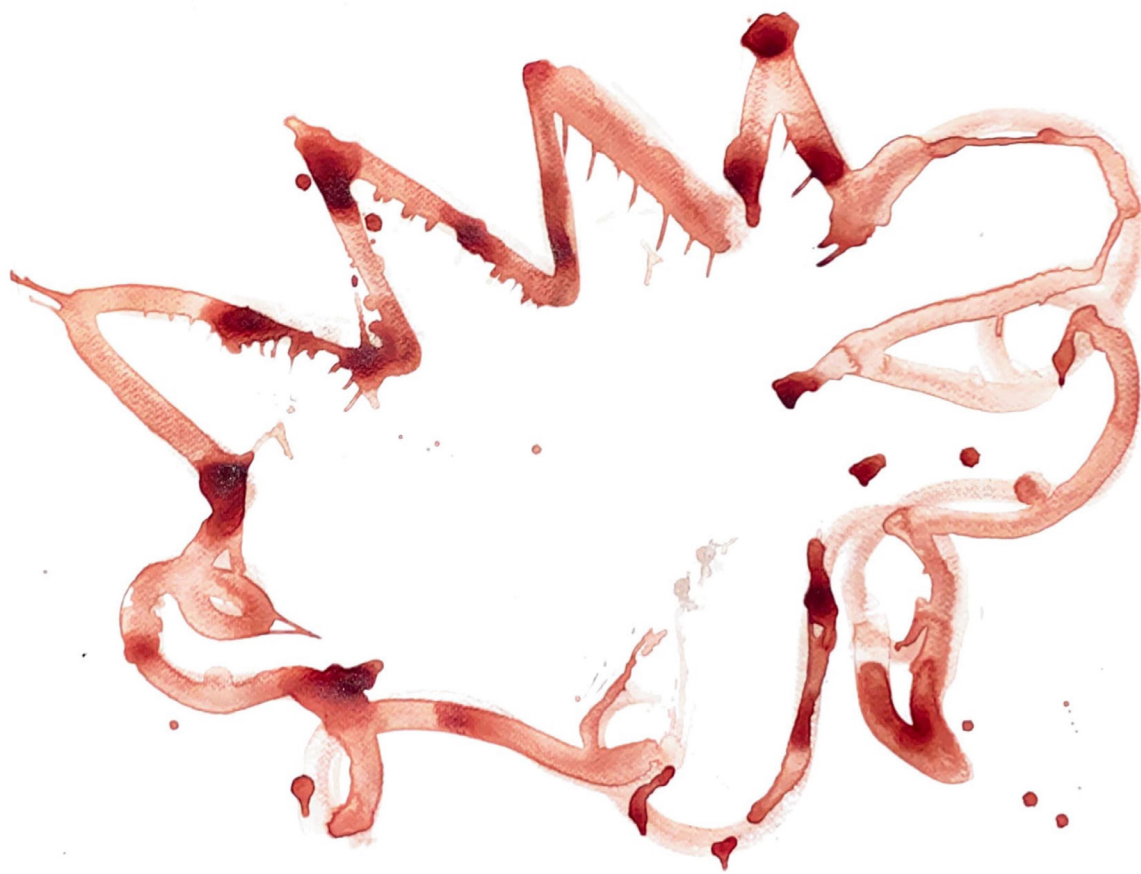


The Series and **Mindscape:** **An** **Essay** **and**
Reclaiming **the** **Uterine** **Body**
Exposing **Politics** **of** **Disgust**



Essay **and** **Series** **by:** **Cortney** **Connolly**

“13.12.2021”
Menstrual Blood on Paper
18 x 24

Author Note:

Writing this essay, The Supreme Court overturned Roe vs. Wade (June, 2022). While I had already been working to present *The Mindscapes*, this news created a deeper sense of urgency and relevance to speak up.

It is important to note that not all women menstruate, and not just women menstruate. This is not just a gender issue, but a biological one. Reproductive rights are defined by one's sex. Therefore, I will be referring to those who menstruate as the uterine body.

Introduction:

“Mommy, what are these?” I questioned as my mother's face crinkled at the sight of the unused tampon massacre strewn across the bathroom floor. “Oh, Cortney, why did you do this?” she said as she began to throw the wrappers, plastic applicators, and cotton wads into the garbage. “But, what are they?” I persisted since my curiosity could not be hindered by my mother's clear annoyance. “Well, I guess you are going to find out sooner or later. Are your friends at school using these yet?” she asked. I shook my head no. Then she sat me down and gave me THE TALK.

My cheeky smile turned into a mannequin stare, I tried to play it cool as I admired my neon pink nail polish (a very popular color amongst my Y2K peers). I remember sitting on my mother's bathroom floor, a little antsy, a tad annoyed, but mostly caught off guard. The concept of puberty hit me with complete and utter surprise. My mother told me that not only would my body change, but soon my emotions would become hard to understand. “Sometimes I cry for no reason at all, but sometimes there is a reason. It's all okay, it's all normal. It means our bodies are doing their job” , my mother cracked a smile and rubbed my knee. “Some days might be better than others, but each month it varies,” she added.

When she spoke the word, period, my imagination connected blood to the moon, reproduction with magic: an ability to create. It brought me to my feet, and I began to dance around the

bathroom. I knew it! There was something special about me! It felt like one of those movies where the girl finally discovers her superpower.

I didn't realize that getting one's period can be a horrifying event until my best friend in sixth grade got hers. One day in the middle of lunch, she grabbed my hand, and her eyes began to flood with tears as she took me to the bathroom. "I'm bleeding! Oh my god is this my... it won't stop! What do I do?" I smiled and she couldn't understand why. "Hasn't your Mom told you?" I questioned. "It's your superpower!" I said. She gave me a death glare as tears began to stream down her cheeks. "You can't tell anyone," she said. I was startled and asked, "Why?" She bolted out of the room saying "It's disgusting! We are disgusting. Don't you get it?" My friend and I never talked about the incident again.

Middle school not only taught me elementary Spanish and intro to geometry, but that puberty, menstruation, and fertility felt taboo - our body's expression of such capabilities forced us to fear and embarrassment. No one warned me when my uterine body became a societal playground - I just lost my innocence. My friends and I could no longer run and play freely. Invasive wandering eyes from male individuals, sexual innuendos, and emotional invalidation became our waking reality. We were conscripted to a life of secrecy as Sex Ed. only taught us how to hide our tampons in our sleeves, and to stress continuously about bleeding through our clothing. The bud of a uterine body's capability meant it was now a commodity to be regulated, censored, sterilized, and disgusted by.

High school marked my emergence into adolescence. A stage of my life that taught me that my emotions or opinions were irrational and invalid. Adults, friends, boyfriends, and teachers' reactions to my emotions and opinions forced me to feel like a defective computer that was constantly mistranslating stimuli and inputting irrational responses. I was never enough, or worse, I was too much. I was taught that my emotions and actions needed to be palatable; if not, I would be the hysterical girl, the outcast, the one to be overlooked. They wanted to tame me and it worked... at least for a few years.

Every social interaction led to bouts of self-isolation where I would relive the sequence of events and disprove any anxiety that I had experienced. Surviving was exhausting. This cycle created deep-rooted repression of self where my emotions and state of consciousness were framed in hysteria - just as society had taught me.

In October of 2021, I first started to hear rumors regarding the overturn of Roe vs. Wade. It was all I could think of. I had just begun working on the inaugural edition of *FreeSwim: The Postmodern Grotesque*. In my interview with Karen Finley, we discussed her history with censorship and how it was used to silence her feminist art pieces. Finley notoriously uses her body in performance art as a medium of reclamation. I realized this was a trend, whether it be having control of one's reproductive rights, expressing gender, or vocalizing violence against women our society was built to maintain patriarchal power.

Finley's interview left me inspired. Our conversation about her work reminded me of my own story of mental health and sparked an artistic obsession where I wondered how the uterine mind and body's existence had now become so political. How did a male-dominated society perform oppressive practices on the uterine mind and body? Finley motivated my pursuit of reclamation - and so *The Mindscape* began.

The Mindscape: Healing and Artistic Practice:

I started to research female hysteria, invalidation of emotion, and the politics of the uterine body. This simultaneously began my ongoing journey to healing the continuous conflict between my emotions and those I interacted with. While mental health is based on a variety of factors, the suppression of emotion I have experienced is a product of my environment. My loss of autonomy began when my body blossomed. My emergence into adulthood was met with paralyzing anxiety and prolonged bouts of dissociation. I went to doctors and therapists in search of treatment. I was normally diagnosed with 'female troubles'.



"03.02.2022"
Menstrual Blood on Paper
18 x 24

After years of mistreatment, I took healing into my own hands - through mood tracking, I realized how I had been framing my responses and feelings as hysterical since the beginning of puberty. Then, I learned that I was not alone. Researcher Jennifer M. Eastbrook in her study: *Internalizing Symptoms in Female Adolescents: Associations with Emotional Awareness and Emotion Regulation* concluded that girls between the ages of 9-16 are more likely to invalidate and internalize their emotions. This phenomenon has detrimental effects on the development of mental stability and self-awareness.

Since I was 16, drawing and painting was my outlet. Through the years, my artistry became the primary way to research and find the cause of my trauma. The stroke of my hand became connected to each passing thought as I tracked my mood through physical impulses. When I began my research for FreeSwim, I realized that I had doodled these 'particles' in my notebook for months. I never thought anything of it until one day it all made sense. I realized that I subconsciously drew parts of my mind's landscape - when I was processing memories I drew the mind cycle. When I had panic attacks, I drew the anxiety particle (and so on with the rest of the particles). My artistic impulse wondered what would happen when I put them all together on the same plane - and The Mindscape was born. My thought process could now empty itself on paper, allowing me to recognize and validate the previously repressed ideas and emotions. Each composition is a collection of particles that create my thought process and each of the paintings is made up of individual particles symbolizing different conscious experiences such as anxiety, trains of thought, and memories.

It was just experimentation with pen and paper until one day I decided to paint. I knew traditional paint would not suffice-- to authentically present myself, I needed paint that was my body. So why blood? No, it's not for shock value, but rather menstrual blood was the most obvious paint; it presents my uterine experience most authentically.

Here is my reasoning:

1. Menstruation is used by patriarchy to invalidate, suppress, and control the uterine body through the lens of hysteria.
2. Menstrual blood is a byproduct of my body, therefore an expression of autonomy and capability for reproduction.
3. Blood contains my DNA and thus a medium that is unique to me.
4. Menstruation is the only situation where the body voluntarily releases blood to maintain healthy bodily systems to ensure the reproduction of life.

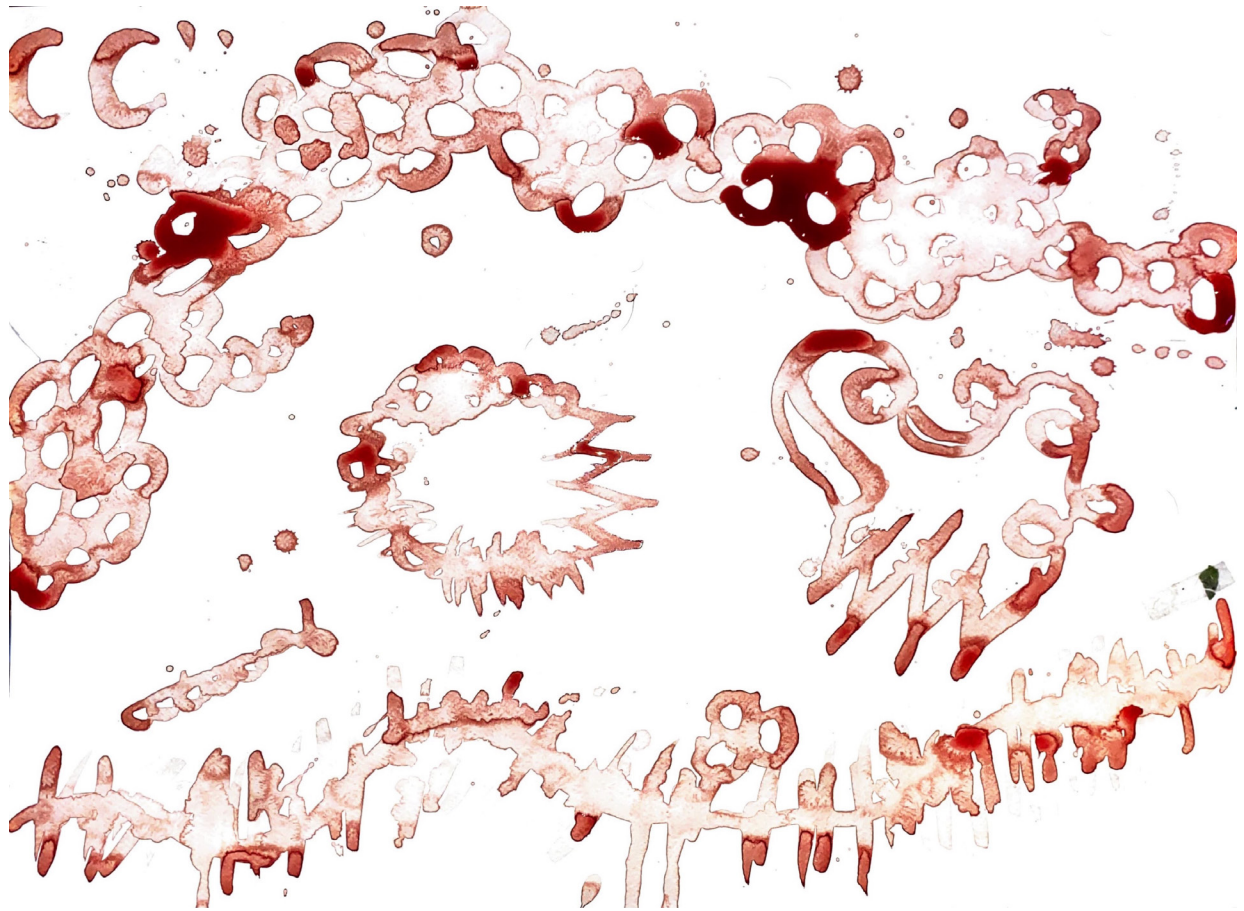
After the blood was collected, I was ready to paint.

The Mindscapes: Process

First, is the placement of the mind cycle, a symbol that represents self-awareness and memory. The mind cycle in a Mindscape holds the same authority as the nucleus does to the cell. It is the foundation of consciousness. The particles document my thought process and how it is affected by anxiety, reoccurring thoughts, and environmental triggers. The medium and form work in tandem express my consciousness and body's collaboration.

Next, I paint how anxiety affects me— the size and number of the anxiety particles represent how large of a role they are playing in my consciousness (mind cycle). When painting anxiety, I always ask myself the following questions: How is anxiety interacting with the mind cycle? Do they cloud my thoughts? How many anxious thoughts am I experiencing?

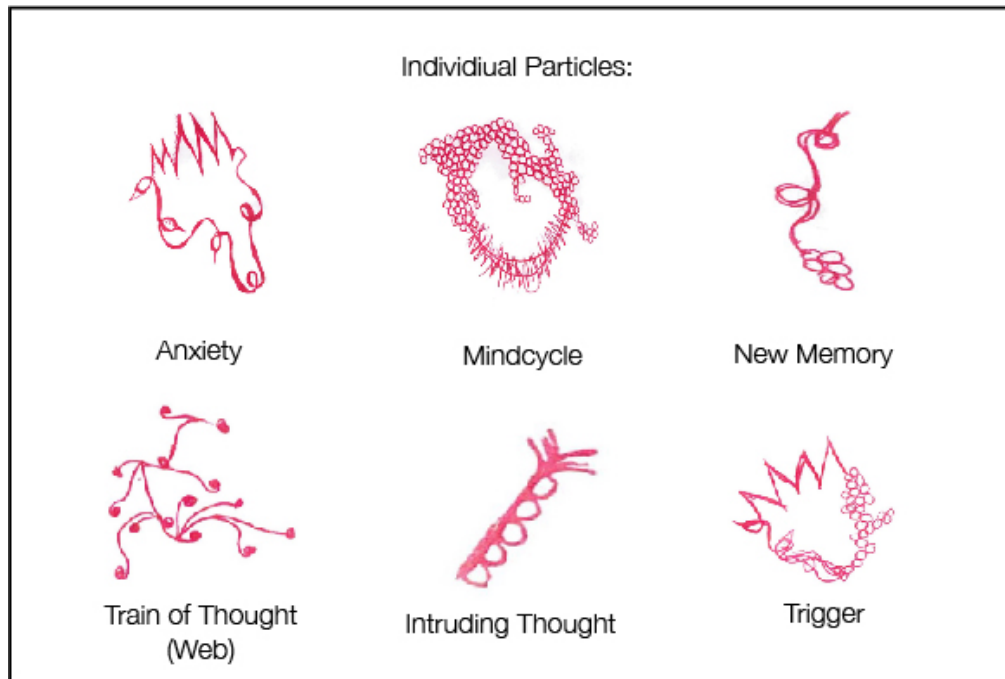
Lastly, I analyze and apply the other particles in the same method as anxiety. The particles' design represents how they feel



“02.03.2022”
Menstrual Blood on Paper
18 x 24

when passing through the brain. For example, the circles represent centeredness and peace, while the sharp edges and lines induce anxiety.

Each Mindscape works as a camera lens zooming in and out of my thought process. All paintings in the series differ in scale. In some, one can see the entire mind cycle, while in others one can only see a portion. It depends on the moment of creation to determine the frame of mind I am led to focus on. All paintings are created in one session to properly document and present both body and mind in a moment. To interpret a Mindscape and comprehend the emotional state within its creation, one must use the language and composition of the particles (refer to the legend below).



The Social Condition of The Mindscapes:

When creating *the Mindscapes*, autonomy or the right of self-governance came to mind. I live in a country ruled by a patriarchal power that manipulates and invalidates uterine emotion through disgust and contempt. In America, our society works not only to invalidate uterine minds but our bodies too. In June 2022, The United States Supreme Court overturned *Roe vs. Wade* a constitutional interpretation which granted the federal right of

abortion. By overturning the U.S Government gave each state the power to decide whether or not a uterine body would have the right to make autonomous decisions. Currently, almost 50% of the United States has altered their laws to ban and/or restrict abortion. This contradicts constitutional principles with regards to the right of self governance and privacy. The United States of America is in a crisis.

The Audience' s Reaction as a Mirror to the Social Condition:

In December 2021, I began to take *The Mindscapes* seriously and developed them into a six-part painting series. During initial rounds of critique with trusted friends, artists, and collaborators, *The Mindscapes* created a visceral reaction of fear, disgust, and repulsion. I was shocked, why did the people I thought to be the most open-minded feel so disgusted by my work? This forced me to question how the world would view *The Mindscapes*—especially when they lacked context regarding my personal life and work history. I also wondered how the *Mindscapes* would stand as a symbol in this performance of oppression regarding the uterine body.

The *Mindscapes* are not just a method of therapy, but the audience' s reaction is evidence of societal uterine oppression. When creating the series, I was heavily inspired and motivated by my research for *FreeSwim' s* inaugural issue: *The Postmodern Grotesque*. I think one can say I was obsessed with the power of using emotions of the abject and disgust in artwork to incite activism and societal confrontation. I threw myself into research. According to the *Anatomy of Disgust* by William Ian Miller, I learned disgust is a learned emotion (Miller, 11); its physiological purpose was to avoid bodily threats such as disease and infection. The application of repulsion determines social order and hierarchy: “Civilization raised our sensitivities to disgust to make disgust a key component of our social control and psychic order.” (Miller, 5). As society developed, disgust was manipulated and redefined to uphold current Western power structures.

I knew painting with my period blood wasn' t going to be the most accepted artistic process. However, the medium was the obvious

choice to properly represent my body and even further: demonstrate my social condition. Menstrual blood implies a certain type of repulsion that other bodily fluids (saliva and tears) do not. In her essay, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva suggests that disgust is triggered in the recognition of a biological danger:

“Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual). It threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (Kristeva, 71).

Unless previously infected, menstrual blood does not foster the same biological hazard as feces or other excrement-related substances. The audience’s application of repulsion forced me to realize how deeply controversial and political menstruation is. The response of disgust and contempt shows Western Culture’s societal environment, a situation where the female body is inferior to patriarchy (Miller, 207). When my audience views each Mindscape, I urge them to question their response. If it is disgust or repulsion, ask why?

If disgust is meant to avoid biological hazards then menstruation should not inspire repulsion. Rather, The Mindscape’s reaction of repulsion is not rooted in ‘danger’ but, underlying fear and contempt toward the mother and uterus. The menstrual cycle evokes fear in a patriarchal society due to the fact it cannot be erased or stopped by the hands of men (Kristeva, 13). The audience’s reaction to The Mindscapes demonstrate how disgust is applied to the uterine body to maintain order and uphold patriarchal power structures. The application of disgust triggers a reaction that demonizes, censors, and invalidates the uterine body. Therefore, the oppression that I and many other uterus owners experience is a product of a social condition - the audience’s reaction to *The Mindscapes* is its evidence.

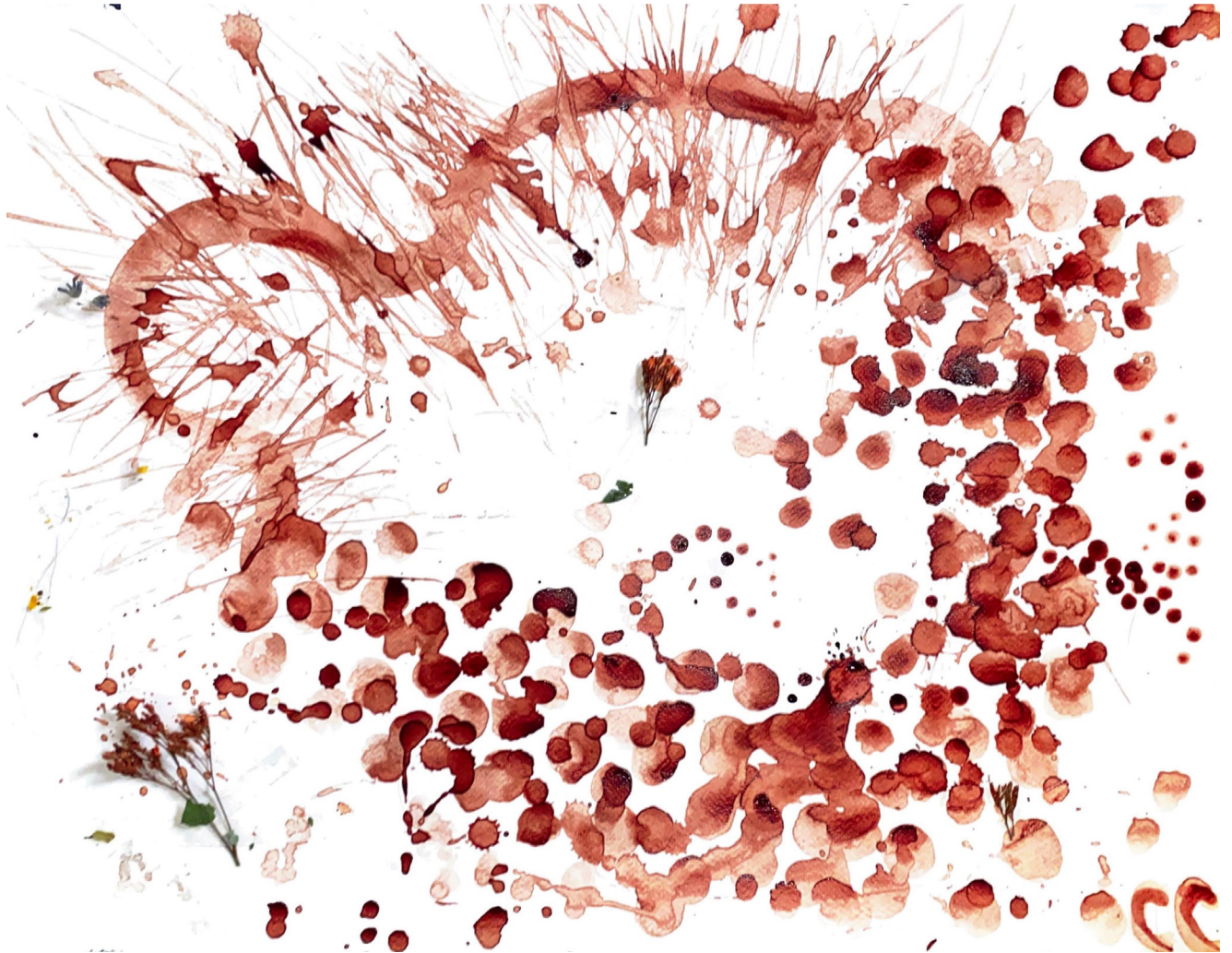
Conclusion:

Although I didn't realize this until adulthood, my upbringing as a uterine body was riddled with societal rules that programmed me to believe I was hysterical. To be honest, I am still reprocessing memories of emotional invalidation associating my behavior with "she must be just getting her period." My journey of validating and reframing my emotional responses always brings me back to that girl on her mother's bathroom floor. When she told me my life wasn't going to be the same as my male peers, she warned me - the world may perceive my emotions as dramatic and irrational. I realize now my mother was teaching me the uterine body's greatest burden; society's fear of our autonomy.

The *Mindscares* presents a story of healing from the patriarchal world, in which I redefine my femininity, reclaim my uterine superpowers, and validate my emotions. *The Mindscares* grew to be more than an expression, but its audience's reaction of disgust revealed society's oppression of the uterine body.

My struggles are not unique to me but are a product of American society. Whether it be reproductive rights (now threatened with the overturn of *Roe vs. Wade*), emotion, or participation in society, the uterine body is invalidated as soon as it exhibits the capability for reproduction.

As a uterus owner speaking on behalf of my community, we want to control our bodies and rewrite the perception of their acts in creating and maintaining life. To be autonomous, I must have the ability to make decisions on behalf of both my physical and mental well-being. Our organs have become public debate and discourse, perpetuating contempt for the uterine body and its autonomy. We, as members of society, are responsible for the cycle of patriarchal performance - it is the American person's moral obligation to learn how these performative acts of invalidation, uterine contempt, and disgust are employed. We need to rethink how we view the uterine body both in society and politics. We need to eliminate disgust and embrace what we are told to fear. Uterine bodies must reclaim their superpowers, remove disgust from necessary reproductive processes, and deny censorship of emotion.



“12.12.2021”
Menstrual Blood on Paper
18 x 24

References:

