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Camilla Mørk Røstvik

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Seeing Red: Menstrual Art and Political Portraiture in the Trump Era

Camilla Mørk Røstvik *

In August 2015, artist Sarah Levy was waiting for her next menstrual cycle to begin. It had been days since US presidential candidate Donald J. Trump had made remarks about journalist Megyn Kelly on national news, which had been interpreted as a suggestion that she was following a line of aggressive questioning because she was menstruating:

Well, I just don't respect her as a journalist. I have no respect for her. I don't think she's very good. I think she's highly overrated. But when I came out there – you know, what am I doing, I'm not getting paid for this – I go out there, and you know, they start saying lift up your arm if you're gonna ... And you know I didn't know there'd be 24 million people. I knew it was going to be a big crowd, because I get big crowds, I get ratings. They call me the ratings machine. And she gets out and she starts asking me all sorts of ridiculous questions. You know, you could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever.¹

Social media reactions following on from the interview linked menstruation to this comment, and headlines about the debate was covered in the news during the next days: "Trump draws

outrage after Megyn Kelly remarks',² 'Donald Trump's new misogynistic low',³ 'Donald Trump makes menstruation jibe at Megyn Kelly',⁴ etc. Two days later, Trump clarified that he had meant nose bleeds:

Do you think I'd make a statement like that? Who would make a statement like that? (...) If I had said that, it would have been inappropriate. (...) I didn't even finish the answer, because I wanted to get on the next point. If I finished it, I was going to say ears or nose, because that's just a common statement – blood is pouring out of your ears. (...) Only a deviant would say that what I said was what they were referring to, because nobody would make that statement.⁵

Clearly, Trump was offended and disgusted by the idea of publicly discussing menstruation in this way. Only a 'deviant' would say or do such things. Conforming in this way to the 'menstrual concealment imperative', Trump expressed a typical facet of the menstrual taboo, suggesting that it was disgusting to speak about in public life.⁶

Not everyone agreed. Levy had a plan in place for a new artwork that would

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Fig. 1. Sara Levy, *'Whatever' (Bloody Trump)*, 2015. Menstrual blood on canvas, applied with fingers, tampon, and brush. 11, 5 by 13.5 inches. Kursiv, Berlin, Germany. Digital photograph courtesy of the artist.

comment directly on the latest Trump episode, as well as menstrual stigma more broadly. She just needed her period to start first (Fig. 1).

In late August or early September, Levy got her period. By 15 September, over a month after Trump's remarks had been made, she had successfully stored enough blood to paint a larger-than-life painting of his face. Sarah Levy's resulting portrait of the

presidential candidate, *'Whatever' (Bloody Trump)*, was painted in response to a politician and political episode, but rarely discussed in light of her other political artworks nor political art and portraiture in general. Commentary about the work also ignored the unique and challenging bodily labour involved in making menstrual art, from collecting the material to overcoming stigma about touching blood to sharing this

with the world. Furthermore, coverage focused on the material (menstrual blood) rather than the artist's wider project to document white supremacy in the United States. Seen in the light of her larger body of work, which includes reference to Trump via portraits of the Central Park Five as well as a later portrait of George Floyd, the artwork was not simply about one politician, but more precisely about the type of politics of white supremacy fronted by the presidential candidate. Connected to this, Levy's use of her own blood as a Jewish artist was not lost on antisemitic commentators, underlining the line between racialised notions of blood and menstrual blood throughout history. In this article, I analyse the artwork within these contexts: as a political portrait, a complex piece of material culture created through bodily labour, and as a response to the history of white supremacy in the US. While the term 'political art' might refer to propaganda, protest or activist artworks, Levy and other menstrual artists' work do not neatly slip into such categories. Rather, they use menstrual themes to build a new menstrual politics of visibility.

This article is based on correspondence with the artist and visual analysis of the artwork.⁷ I first discuss the inspiration behind the work, exploring the artistic, cultural, political and aesthetic environments leading up to its creation. I then examine the techniques used by the artist and the materiality of the artwork, stressing the bodily and emotional labour inherent in Levy's specific menstrual blood practice. Following on from this, I briefly situate '*Whatever*' (*Bloody Trump*) in the historic context of menstrual visual culture and art history. Finally, I discuss the work's reception in public, art institutional and media discourse,

both online, in the United States, and in Germany. Specifically, I unpack its acquisition by the Berlin-based museum and studio Kursiv in July 2017, and the meaning of its initial inclusion but ultimate exclusion from the 'Violence and Gender: Male War – Female Peace?' exhibition at the Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr (German Museum of Military History), in Dresden, Germany, in October 2018.⁸

I follow the scholarship of Critical Menstruation Studies in which menstruation is increasingly theorised as beyond the biology versus society binary, and rather something that is at once part of a person and part of the person's life in society. The field of Critical Menstruation Studies was defined relatively recently, with the 2020 publication of the same name featuring leading and emerging scholarship about menstruation from across the globe and across disciplines.⁹ This solidified a scattered field of study that had emerged since the 1970s, with the establishment of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research and the first critical histories of menstruation appearing in that decade.¹⁰ Within this field of scholarship, art historians and artists have written about how menstrual art, performance and creativity plays a distinct role in thawing the menstrual invisibility imperative in public.¹¹ Scholars also examine the cultures and history of menstruation, and the changing public and political attitudes to menstrual blood. This includes gendered aspects, and recently more studies of how trans and non-binary experiences of menstruation have widened the field and challenged the essentialist readings of menstruation as something that matters only to cis-women.¹² This article contributes to Critical Menstruation Studies, political arts and the art histories of the body, as well as

exploring the tangled gendered and racialised expectations of behaviour regarding menstrual blood in the 2010s.

Before examining Levy's work, it is worth noting that menstruation itself is linked to the politics of white supremacy which the portrait draws our attention to. Non-consensual hysterectomies, sterilisation, and the practice of eugenics all disconnect a person from their cycle, deciding who is allowed to be fertile and not.¹³ Throughout history, oppressive regimes have understood the power of controlling the menstrual cycle for population control or growth.¹⁴ Notoriously, owners of enslaved populations kept diaries of menstrual cycles to plan population changes.¹⁵ As Jo-Ann Owusu has documented, the Nazis utilised starvation, medical experimentation, and violence to interrupt the menstrual and fertile cycles of Jewish prisoners.¹⁶ During the Trump years and after, eugenics was just around the corner from the modern politics of ableism and white supremacy – both of which are ideologies that ultimately seek to control who reproduces and populates the earth.¹⁷ To understand '*Whatever*' (*Bloody Trump*) we must tie menstruation to the politics of reproduction and see beyond what might appear as a flippant remark from a politician to the underlying and historic roots of menstrual control.

Luteal phase: inspiration and preparation

In August 2015, then-presidential candidate Donald J. Trump suggested that Fox News anchor Megan Kelly was aggressive, after she had questioned him critically. Kelly, gender-bending the trope about hysteria and women, asked Trump if he was a fit candidate

since he seemed so temperamental. In turn, he claimed that she was, in fact, so angry, that she had 'blood coming out of her eyes. Blood coming out of her wherever'. While Trump maintained that he meant a nose bleed, others assumed he was talking about menstrual blood. It should be noted that the presidential candidate said 'wherever', not 'whatever', as in the title of the artwork. Levy's twisting of his words was her first stab at the politics of the Trump era, soon dawning on the USA when the results started arriving on 9 November 2016 and as the new President was inaugurated on 20 January 2017. With the Trump presidency underway, Levy's portrait now recalls a bygone era in which the potential of a Hilary Clinton presidency was still an option, and before the four-year reign that would follow.

Before his presidency, Trump often resorted to gendered tropes to vilify his opponent. He talked openly about Clinton's body. When addressing younger women, Trump often resorted to similar tropes, affixed to their stage of life and whatever gender trope resonated (i.e. some women can be 'grabbed by the pussy', others are 'not hot', some are 'nasty' or 'a dog').¹⁸

Menstrual blood has long been linked to gendered emotions.¹⁹ By suggesting a link between menstrual blood and a woman's state of mind, Trump inserted himself into a long history of powerful figures upholding the menstrual taboo. Laws defines the menstrual taboo in Western industrial societies like the United States as a belief that menstruation must remain hidden, a practice which in turn is upheld by norms like using menstrual products and restricting mention of menstrual blood to euphemism.²⁰ Trump's later insistence that he was talking

about a nose bleed and that discussion of menstruation was something only 'deviants' did also upholds the menstrual taboo by stating that it should not be discussed at all. While Kelly made it clear that she found the remark offensive, the episode received mainstream attention over the ensuing weekend, but quickly fizzled as Trump continued talking, and as he moved from candidate to President.

Unwillingly, Trump inserted himself in menstrual discourse. Memes and slogans about menstruation already existed by the time Trump made his statement, and a new online campaign – #PeriodsAreNotAnInsult – was quickly created to critique Trump's perceived view of menstruation.²¹ This was just one part of the campaigning done by menstrual activists during the 2010s, in addition to calls to end menstrual product taxation, questioning of product ingredients, and calls for more menstrual health research. While menstrual rights had been taken up as a feminist and health issue in the US since the 1960s, this was the first time non-gendered outlets began covering menstrual rights through stories such as 'The Fight to End Period Shaming is Going Mainstream'.²² This frontpage, notably, was published in the same issue as an article about the 'Trump generation', documenting how these two topics exploded into public consciousness at the same time. Corporations and advertisers responded, resulting in the first red (rather than blue) liquids appearing in product campaigns. In short, Trump made his comment at a time when the rules around menstrual visual culture and censorship were being rewritten.

The new menstrual optics of the 2010s were often pioneered by artists who rejected menstrual invisibility and presented an alternative

world in which visible menstruation was not an insult.²³ As such, Levy's portrait was part of an already existing small canon of menstrual art in which menstruation became recontextualised as a worthy subject and material for creative engagement.²⁴ Since the late 1960s at least, artists have sporadically used menstrual blood and themes.²⁵ These images are to varied and many to detail but overall tend to provide a contrast to the cheery packaging, sleek advertising, 'technology fix', and glum medicalised versions of menstruation seen since the 1920s.²⁶

Levy is not the first artist to examine menstruation in the light of US politics. For instance, in Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* from 1971, the title nods to the ongoing Vietnam War and the anti-communist sentiments of the era.²⁷ For Chicago, a Jewish artist who had recently become heavily engaged in the civil and women's rights movements, the link between menstruation, gender, racism, and antisemitism was clear. Jewish identity had been 'shuttled' through several stages of the American racial structure in the long twentieth century, effected by national economic, political, scientific and public discourses.²⁸ At the time Chicago was working, the category of 'Jewishness' was connected to the aftermath of the Second World War, which would change by the time Levy was racialised in some of the reception of her artwork, as we will trace. Brodtkin has argued that the complexity of this experience, resulted in art that explored the ambivalence of Jewish womanhood through a focus on the body.²⁹

Chicago worked at a time when menstruation was not a frequent topic in the institutions of the American art world and she often faced claims of attempting to simply shock her audiences.³⁰ The shock-factor may

well be important to many viewers, but it misses the deeper political themes inherent in blood arts. Later, artworks engaging with HIV-positive blood would underline the links between politics, bodily fluids, race, and gender yet again.³¹

Despite menstrual art's long history, the 2010s marked a distinctly new environment in which artists received an unprecedented amount of public and mainstream attention for work involving menstruation.³² They were also able to connect directly with new audiences (evading the censorship of the art or gallery world) by publishing their work directly via social media, fulfilling the prediction of art historian Lynda Nead who theorised that the feminist political project of showing different ways of being and visualising in the world would galvanise and proliferate with new types of media outputs that would be freer of censorship, norms and regulations.³³ For artists, menstrual politics is articulated in various ways through the use of products, blood and clothing. Each instance suggests that the use of menstrual imagery in itself is noteworthy and norm-breaking, and that by showing us this usually invisible event, the artists in various ways provoke viewers to rethink their own menstrual blood shame. Beyond this, menstrual art invokes many other types of politics about gender, sexuality or respectability.

This is the environment in which Levy was working in late summer of 2015 and she was also increasingly drawn to political themes during this time, seen in her early work. From 2014 to 2015, she worked as a journalist in Palestine and Greece. As a journalist, she thus briefly shared a profession with Meghan Kelly. In terms of local politics, she watched the Obama years end and the

gendered debates between Clinton and Trump emerge.³⁴ Throughout, she kept an eye on Trump, in his numerous roles as businessman, TV entertainer, and politician.

On her website, Levy cites John Berger:

The important point is that a valid work of art promises in some way or another the possibility of an increase, an improvement. Nor need the word be optimistic to achieve this; indeed, its subject may be tragic. For it is not the subject that makes the promise, it is the artist's way of viewing his subject. Goya's way of looking at a massacre amounts to the contention that we ought to be able to do without massacres.³⁵

The quote shows that Levy understood her role as one in which her presentation of her subjects could create the potential for 'improvement'. Bearing witness to Trump's face and politics may not be 'optimistic', but as a serious attempt at grappling with his political intensions it nevertheless reflects an attitude of hope towards accountability and change. To understand how Levy sought to do this, it is useful to remind ourselves of Trump's reputation amongst artists and art institutions at the time.

By the 2010s, Trump had interacted with the art world for decades. He himself maintained a large art collection throughout his career, and in turn inspired art and visual culture, most after he became President.³⁶ Most notoriously, photographer Tyler Shields utilised his hyper-realist style to capture comedian Kathy Griffin holding Trump's decapitated and bloody head in 2017.³⁷ The violence of this image provides a useful comparison to the reception and legacy of Levy's portrait, as both images invoked blood, became viral sensations, involved women who faced sexist comments in return, and led to international debates

about the usefulness of visual culture and artistic freedom in political discourse during the Trump presidency. Furthermore, neither image was consistently described as art, and neither artist was warmly received by the institutional or established art worlds around them (in the case of Griffin, not Shields), who seemed to suggest that both images were created in extremely bad taste. Lynda Nead reminds us in her discussions about the distinction between art and pornography, the boundaries of taste are constantly policed, drawn and redrawn.³⁸ For artists like Levy, who examine the body and transgress modes of 'good taste', the fight for visibility on one's own terms is part of a broader feminist cultural politics, challenging the authority of patriarchal boundaries of gender and identity, art and obscenity, good and bad taste.³⁹

By the time he took office, Trump had already been accused of having 'bad taste' by art aficionados.⁴⁰ These critics connected his taste to his politics, which included remarks about artistic merit. Before and during his presidency, Trump used the expression 'degenerate art' to clarify his own attitude towards the general modern and contemporary art market.⁴¹ The use of this specific word directly references the 1937 Nazi exhibition of degenerate art in Munich.⁴² The candidate politicised art in this way, drawing a boundary between acceptable and unacceptable cultural production.

Despite ridiculing much of the American art scene, Trump ironically held vast power over its institutions during his presidency. The results were often heavily reported as a menu of bad taste: Phantom of the Opera and ill-fitting suits, hamburger dinners and gold toilets. If Trump is a man of 'bad taste' and menstrual art is dismissed as 'bad art',

then Levy's act of bringing these two 'tasteless' themes together challenge the official Trump art environment and changing notions of public taste at the time. This can be seen as what Nead defines as a challenge to the authority of patriarchal boundaries, reclaiming space and making the invisible (menstrual blood) visible on the artist's own terms. This type of feminist politics, she notes, might well be able to proliferate when new types of media, producers and audiences emerge due to new technology – a prophetic remark in the case of Levy, whose art circulated in the relative new and censorship-light atmosphere of social media.⁴³ While Levy was watching these events unfold on television and the Internet, her period finally arrived.

Menstruation: creation

The process of making '*Whatever*' (*Bloody Trump*) involved the body of the artist and careful timing. Menstrual blood cannot be bought in an art shop. Rather, it must be produced by the body, collected, and stored. It is not comparable to the process of defecation or urination (which happens several times a day) or paint (which is manufactured and sold), and therefore not automatically similar to art that engages in menstrual themes via other materials, nor other body fluid arts.

Levy used a menstrual cup for the first time to collect her materials, storing them in a sealed glass jar in her refrigerator. Cups rendered working with menstrual blood different to the use of sponges, free-bleeding, tampons, and pads that artists had used earlier. As an artist who favoured drawing in dense layers on large canvases, Levy needed a good amount of blood to be able to work with light and shade across the canvas. Using the cup allowed for sufficient material and also

excited the artist on a personal level because it led to mastering a new menstrual technology.⁴⁴ In this way, as the technologies of menstrual products shifts, menstrual art changes in response.

Yet, any method of collecting and handling menstrual blood can be challenging. Also proponents of 'period positivity' remark that even an ideal world in which menstruation was not taboo, it would still leave many people uncomfortable due to human taboos against blood more broadly.⁴⁵ In a short documentary, Levy joined two journalists to demonstrate her technique.⁴⁶ In the film, they clearly grapple with the smell of their menstrual blood as it blends with oxygen: '(laughing) we all just leaned into the fact that it smelled bad!'.⁴⁷ While fresh menstrual blood generally smells very little, stored blood will over time oxidise. Yet, the journalists and Levy continue, getting used to the smell and the slippery consistency. Levy, who is more experienced, is in command, encouraging the others to 'explore the blood as blood, not as any other red thing'.⁴⁸ She gives the journalists advice about how to use menstrual blood clots, slowly turning the conversation from one about menstruation to one about artistic technique. Like other artists before her, Levy has transcended her first experience of making menstrual art and returns to it with more detailed technical questions. When the menstrual taboo of visibility has been challenged, the process of dealing with menstrual blood can become familiar, even routine.

Materially, working with menstrual blood is complicated because it dries rapidly, and varies greatly in texture and colour. Levy painted with a brush and tampon straight onto the canvas, making speedy work necessary. Utilising the older technology of the tampon, Levy connects the various

technologies of menstruation to her process, using each for their specific qualities. In terms of the tampon, she worked with its effective ability to absorb blood over time, leading to a dense, deep red colour on the canvas. She also used her brush to make the blood trickle more abstractly, allowing some to remain and others to blend into the details of Trump's skin. As the blood dried, she had few chances to make changes, painting much faster than her usual week-long sessions with charcoal. While she initially thought erasing any of the blood would be impossible, experimentation with saliva turned out to make blending the colour easier.⁴⁹ The immediate nature of the material also suited the theme of the painting, which responded to a contemporary media event which was still unfolding. Leaving the work to dry, she used black ink to sign her full name at the bottom right of the canvas. While Levy's blood is all over this work, she made the decision to leave her name in another material and colour, perhaps to separate herself from Trump or to make a connection between blood and ink as types of signatures. After this, she considered the work finished. On the bloodstained canvas, a menacing figure stared back through blood-shot eyes, furious, out-of-control, hormonal.

The portrait sees Trump menacingly filling the whole frame. Levy has caught him mid-speech, head slightly dipped, cut off at the neck. Trump is easy to identify. His demeanour is also recognisable, gathered from a press photograph from one of numerous rallies from the time, in which he enthused his followers through spit-flying speeches that delighted his audiences. This is a realistic depiction that conforms to many traditions in Western portraiture, in that it is naturalistic.⁵⁰ Working in this tradition, Levy is engaging

with the dominant trend in portraiture, and is not part of the anti-portraiture genre recently defined by art historians as fluid and receptive to broad interpretation of the subject matter.⁵¹ Yet, Levy's work does not confirm entirely to realism, letting her materials decide where shadows and light fall, and distorting colours to underline themes of the person she is investigating at any given moment. While Trump is recognisable, the material renders him smudged and red, and Levy's focus on some facial details over others distorts his likeness by emphasising one eye and the shadows that fall on the left side of his face.

Of all the details in the image, the most unsettling is perhaps the distorted eye. It is unclear whether it is closed or open, but it seems in direct reference to Trump's own line about anger making people 'see red', as well as to the notion of 'bloodshot' eyes. As such, Levy illustrates that menstrual blood shares many (if not) all characteristics with blood in general – and that our use of blood in culture (war films, sports injuries, horror) and speech ('bloodshot', 'bloodsport', 'bloody Trump') is in stark contrast to the shame attached to visible menstrual blood. While the other eye looks at the viewer, this distorted detail refuses communication, so angry that it has been clouded completely, severing the link to us.

Levy's use of blood on its own, rather than mixed with colour-preserving egg whites or other materials, meant that the work changed over time. Upon creation, the blood was a brighter red – clearly seen in the first social media images that appeared soon after its completion. It has since aged into a more rust-like colour, much more reminiscent of Trump's actual skin which is white and heavily tanned to almost orange. As the

historian of tanning Tania Woloshyn has pointed out, Trump's altered skin was part of his political optics.⁵² While identifying as white, Trump and other white supremacist leaders throughout history have celebrated 'bronzed' white bodies. Trump's orange skin, according to Woloshyn, is both 'provocation', – designed to invite some ridicule –, and a serious link to underlying beliefs about who has the right to experiment with skin tone, and whose skin matters. Upon creation, the bright red portrait looked as if the artist had stripped away a layer of skin, exposing the blood vessels underneath. Today, its aged orange tones remind us of Trump's cosmetic use of tanning, and his interest in racial presentation.

Early discussion of the portrait focused on a formalist analysis that was concerned mostly with the materials used, and usually stopped short of a discussion of the political figure and subject matter. But it is menstrual blood that is the material here, and Trump the subject matter. The material and subject matter both reflect Trump's comments about menstruation, but also functions as a critique of the politics of white supremacy that were emerging during his campaign.

Follicular phase: stimulation

While early news coverage of the artwork redirected most attention back to Trump's initial comment, this was not the first time Levy had been interested in this man nor his politics. As a young woman, she read about Trump's role in the infamous 'Central Park Five'. Levy drew two of the men targeted by Trump and the police, Korey Wise and Antron McCray (Fig. 2).

In 1989, Trump bought a full-page advertisement calling for more police powers and



Fig. 2. Sarah Levy, *King*, 2019. Charcoal on paper, 41" by 38". Image courtesy of artist.

a return of the death penalty, specifically calling out the Central Park Five as villains who should be 'forced to suffer'.⁵³ The episode foreshadowed how his campaign and presidency would promise to strengthen police enforcement. The advertisement, however, was also an early branding campaign to make Trump seem like a viable political candidate in future. At the time of writing in May 2023, he is running for

President again. In other words, Levy had observed the politics of Trump for decades by the time she witnessed him winning. Throughout, she had noted that his racism and support of the police fuelled both his politics and his popularity (Fig. 3).

In her large charcoal portraits of McCray and Wise, Levy has chosen to depict them as men rather than boys, aged after years in prison. In contrast to the Trump image, she

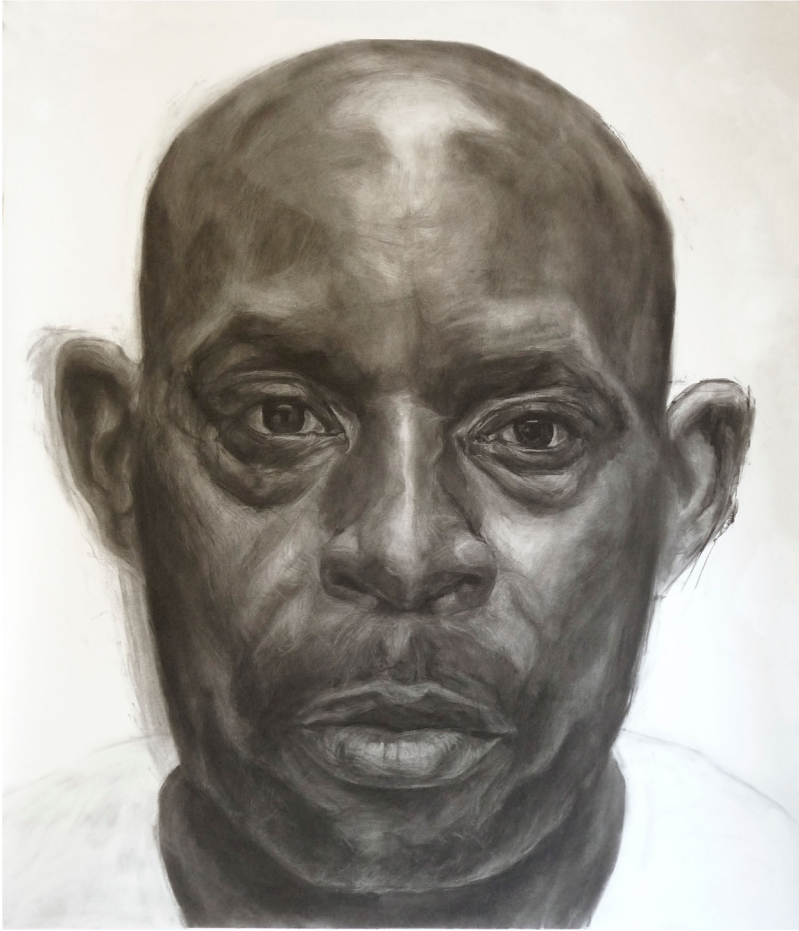


Fig. 3. Sarah Levy, *Antron McCray*, 2019. Charcoal on paper, not measured. Image courtesy of artist.

has used more time to carefully sketch and detail the likeness of their faces. At the edges of their bodies, the lines are hectic, moving, as if the image is alive and vibrating. The eyes are open and look at the viewer directly and clearly.

Levy has used charcoal for these portraits. Like blood, charcoal is organic matter. But in contrast to the Trump image, analysis of artwork depicting the Central Park Five tends to focus mostly on the subject matter, and not the material. While Trump's likeness is

discussed in relation to the material, McCray and Wise can never escape their history despite their convictions being vacated in 2002. Trump is part of their history. Their lawyers pointed to Trump's 1989 stunt as an inflammatory event that led to the wrongful conviction, and protests outside Trump Tower were held soon after. Like Levy's choice of menstrual blood for her portrait of Trump, her choice of charcoal for McCray and Wise is specific. Charcoal is versatile and easy to fix permanently. Levy used several

techniques, including rubbing, hatching, blending, and lifting (erasing).⁵⁴ Sometimes, this resulted in stark, clear lines, other places in blurred details and soft contours. As a material, it is one that the artist must return to again and again, often working slowly, getting to know them over time, greeting them, and spending hours and days bearing witness to their faces. As in the use of charcoal in cave paintings, this technique is distinctly human, slow, and full of ritual. Charcoal body painting has been used to mark rites of human passage, including war, deaths, and mourning. Charcoal remains fixed to its surface, but easily flakes. As such, it notes the passage of time, and any injustice carried out during this process. Even so, Levy worked to ensure that McCray and Wise's eyes remained fixed and that the charcoal did not flake in these areas. While the portraits may change over time, as do cave paintings and other vulnerable charcoal creations, Levy wanted to force the viewer to meet the gaze of these men.

Eyes that follow viewers around the room have a powerful effect that can be somewhat eerie due to the lack of blinking. While the image is still, Levy's vibrating lines outside their profiles suggest an electric calmness in which, at any moment, a blink might occur. In this way, it is difficult to find any sort of peace or calm in the portraits of McCray and Wise. As such, they echo the activist call 'No justice, no peace', first utilised in 1986 in response to the racialised murder of Michael Griffith in the US. While Trump can close his eyes easily, or rage in a blood clogged frenzy, these men cannot. While charcoal is a decidedly organic matter, it is also colourless and dead. Blood, meanwhile, is full of colour and more recently a live organic matter. Here, Levy's choice of material underpins the fundamental injustices invoked by Trump's

politics: some people (like McCray and Wise) go to prison, others (like Trump) thrive.

Levy's interest in Trump's politics of white supremacy has continued. In her 2020 charcoal portrait of George Floyd, we see the same unblinking eyes as in the portraits of Antron and Corey (Fig. 4).

We see, however, no vibrating lines surrounding Floyd's profile, suggesting the stillness of death. When Floyd was murdered by a white police officer during an arrest in summer 2020, many artists created murals, sketches and online imagery to celebrate his life, – often taking inspiration from Floyd's own selfies and art. Visual documentation and aesthetic interpretation of Floyd, be it through the viral video recorded by teenager Darnella Frazier or the artworks created in response to his death and subsequent trial of police officer Derek Chauvin, transcended international borders, language, cultural frameworks, and some political lines. Levy's portrait of Floyd was part of this movement, building on a long and complex tradition of US image-making that documents and aesthetically interprets racialised violence, but which also asks question about who has the right to make such images and how much graphic details should be included, demonstrated recently in the case of Dana Schutz painting of Emmet Till.⁵⁵

Levy's body of work remembers that, like the Central Park Five, Trump was linked to Floyd.⁵⁶ From his statements about the Central Park Five in the late 1980s to racist campaigning in 2015 to the presidency of 2020. In drawing Antron, Corey, Floyd and Trump, Levy draws US history.

Ovulation: reception

Posted to social media by a friend (Levy did not use social media, but consented to her friend



Fig. 4. Sarah Levy, *George Floyd*, 2020. Charcoal on paper, 21.5" by 35".

posting a photograph), the work and artist became a viral sensation, spreading equally as an object of celebration and hatred.⁵⁷

Art world responses were split between those who celebrated the portrait's timeliness and political action, and those who found it uninteresting. The latter group were more vocal, as documented by a *Guardian* review of blood-based arts, in which Levy is wrongfully described as an 'outsider artist'⁵⁸:

Everything makes sense, all the boxes are checked: Trump is about sex and violence (and talked about 'blood coming out of her whatever'), so here you are, blood from a vagina. Beep boop, input output. Ironically enough, it's a little too tidy. It's a closed system that doesn't much speak to anything else in art history.⁵⁹

For writer Dan Duray, Levy's work was simply one of many, and, contrary to the

general societal perception of menstruation as messy and wasteful, he found '*Whatever*' (*Bloody Trump*) 'too tidy'. To accuse menstrual art as being 'tidy' might be seen as a victory against menstrual stigma, which for so long has had to battle accusations of being 'feminine waste' and 'unsanitary'. But this neglects the emotional and bodily labour behind menstrual art making, and willfully ignores the effect of menstrual stigma on people who menstruate. Levy has noted that when she first got her period, she was 'terrified'.⁶⁰ She added 'if someone then had said "hey, let's paint with it", I might have been excited'.⁶¹ While Levy's work is about politics, it is thus also about challenging menstrual stigma. Duray's dismissal echoes of the much longer history of menstrual artwork and criticism in which artists, especially women, trans, and non-binary artists, are

defined as cliché or dull for working with a gendered issue like menstruation.

Levy also received violent commentary, including a sizable amount of antisemitic material. Sharing the hundreds of horrific comments she received with me, it was clear that some respondents included correlations between Jewish blood and racial purity, connecting Levy's image to a long history of antisemitic writings and commentary about the Jewish body and menstrual blood.⁶² Control of fertility (and thereby the menstrual cycle) was a hallmark of Nazi ideology, tied to policies of eugenics and genocide. Here, Levy faced many of the same politics of hatred she had first spotted in Trump's attitude to the Central Park Five: calls for criminalising her art, calls for corrective rape, calls for violence, and death.⁶³ In turn, this reflects how the status of Jewish Americans has shifted several times, in and out of the category of whiteness, and that the prelude to the Trump presidency was accompanied by a loudly expressed interest in racial boundaries on the anonymous forum of the Internet. It also suggests how Levy's experiences metabolised into sympathy and empathy for other racialised groups and genders, such as African American men.⁶⁴

Through examining Levy's other artworks, it becomes clear that her interest in aesthetically interpreting and recalling racism in the US, and her experience with antisemitism after the creation of the Trump portrait, are important factors in understanding '*Whatever*' (*Bloody Trump*). Menstrual taboos are constructed on the basis not only of patriarchy, but of racist notions of blood. Many artists who are not white and who work with blood have faced similar hatred, including Judy Chicago, Sarah Maple, Rupi Kaur, and Zanele Muholi.

Cycling: legacy

In July 2017, the painting was acquired by the exhibition space and studio Kursiv, based in Berlin, Germany. They had hoped to have it included in a 2018 exhibition titled 'Violence and Gender' at the Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr in Dresden. However, the work was discussed by the curatorial team and was ultimately not included.⁶⁵

Yet, the connection to German history persists through the painting's current home in the Berlin-based studio. At first glance, the original exhibition space in the military museum dedicated to histories of violence in the aftermath of the firebombing of Dresden might seem a strange home for this portrait of an American presidential candidate, but the conceptual and historical links were in fact strong. For a Jewish-American artist to have art exhibited in a German military museum and in Berlin drew clear lines between Levy's work and both German and US political history and present. For a menstrual work to be seen as a part of military and political history, as it was originally positioned, rather than mere menstrual experimentation, is also significant and relatively new in the history of menstrual art, which tends to be placed in exhibitions or collections focused on female artists, feminism, women's bodies, or shocking art, as was the case with the potential inclusion in the military museum's 'Violence and Gender' display.

But it was not to be. During planning for the exhibition, the museum faced a 'major crisis', including postponement of the opening. The museum's director noted that he had nothing against the gender theme, but rather against a few works of art that had originally been included, 'for example

the painting of a feminist depicting Donald Trump, which had been painted with menstrual blood'.⁶⁶ We can only imagine what the underlying problem was: the depiction of a (by then) foreign state leader, the use of menstrual blood, or considerations of the visitors. From the perspective of the military museum, the portrait was fundamentally not acceptable or tasteful and the artist was mostly 'a feminist' engaged in the politics of shock.

The exhibition at the military museum would have written Levy's portrait into the history of political portraits. The Trump in the portrait is full of bloodlust, a reminder of his encouragement of Neo-Nazi groups, dating back to before the Central Park Five incident. The Neo-Nazi groups at work in the US in the twenty-first century of course also have a direct relationship to German military history, and older histories of white supremacy, slavery and violence towards Black and Jewish people both in the United States and beyond. Levy's work connects the dots, using her blood to capture both the moment of Trump's anger and the history and future of the causes that fuel him.

Yet, a question remained. Levy has spent large amounts of her career painting victims of racist violence, so why focus on Trump? She writes:

I believe in the power of beauty and in the beauty of faces. My hope is that there is some magic in a drawing that can make the viewer stop for a second longer to look, and in that second there is the possibility to see more deeply and the possibility to reassess preconceived notions that might only be reaffirmed in a passing glance at a photograph.
(...)

I also think there is an inherent power in faces. In their curves, lines, folds, and

shadows, and in what deep emotion just minor variances can suggest. By drawing out the spirit and beauty of one face that the viewer might not have stopped and looked at before, I hope to plant a seed for how we look at people and how we learn to see each other.⁶⁷

Extending the same generous analysis that the artist has given victims to Trump shows that Levy's politics of art is one of hope. She believes that there is 'beauty' in every face, some 'magic' that might make the viewer reconsider preconceived notions. By writing Trump into her catalogue of political portraits of 'grassroots radical history', Levy likewise hopes to show us that also Trump hails from the everyday matter of normal people, blood and flesh. While figures such as Trump and Floyd become shorthand for larger political movements, Levy asks us to consider the politics of the individual in the context of the groups and ideas they inspire.

While the original is in Germany, and Levy moved on to other subjects and materials, the social media post that made her a viral sensation continues to circulate online. This has had several consequences, most concerningly danger related to antisemitism, but also that the intense copying of Levy's work often rendered it a rather bloodless simulacra, pixelated and faded.

As art historians will likely agree, Levy's original work *is* different to these Internet copies or even the image accompanying this text. The original image is blood from a specific person and moment in time, but it also recalls other histories of violent blood and foreshadows the bloody violence that is to come, if Trump wins in 2016. In this way, the original artwork serves a very different purpose than its online clones – it captures a tense moment of US political history in

blood, fixing our attention on the face that would come to dominate also world politics for the next four years. But at the time of making, Levy does not know this, nor does her audience or even Trump. Read this way, we understand that the portrait must be returned to again and again, so we can remember a time before Trump, when things could have been different. As such, the simulacra that circulate outside of the artist's control could also serve a political purpose as reminders of this time when Trump's face was everywhere and menstrual blood generally concealed.

While the artist searched for beauty in all faces, it can not be ignored that many viewers agreed with Trump's attitudes to menstruation. At the start of this article, we read how he was horrified by the interpretation of his words as connected to menstruation at all. Only a 'deviant' would talk in such a way, a word which he also utilised when talking about some types of modern and contemporary art. While the term's use by the Nazi's should be recalled, the meaning of deviancy technically fits both Trump and Levy's public work: something or someone who departs from accepted standards, especially in social or sexual behaviour. Transgressing this boundary comes with stigma, but, in the case of Trump and others, also potential power. There is pleasure in deviancy, of course. In the case of *'Whatever' (Bloody Trump)*, is there something to be said for 'playing dirty'?⁶⁸ Can we see the outlines of cruelty in the portrait itself, and not just a beautiful rendering? If cruelty can be part of feminist modes of thinking, we might see them here in Levy's use of retaliation. Is this also a feminist revenge or self-defence story, that gleefully unpacks Trump's menstrual fears?

A delicious attack with no victims (other than the artist)? An impossible and paradoxical simultaneous embrace and rejection of the trope of menstruation as dirty, forcing Trump back into the menstrual context he abhors? This, I think, was not the intent of the artist, but a facet of feminist rage through 'counternormalisation' and 'counterhumiliation' tactics and resistance reside within the work.⁶⁹

Cruel portraiture? Perhaps. But because Levy is an artist interested in hope, let us end here. Whereas making an image of this size with other types of blood would have been difficult and even dangerous, Levy's use of menstrual blood suggests survival. Menstrual blood has recently been discussed as a vital health sign.⁷⁰ As Owusu documents in her work on menstruation and the Holocaust, managing menstruation in times of racialised violence is extremely difficult, both physiologically and psychologically, but could also be analysed as a sign of survival and joy in the body. To paint a history of violent blood and trauma with menstrual blood is, perhaps, to suggest the possibility of survival and a good life, if not this (political or menstrual) cycle, then maybe the next.

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ORCID

Camilla Mørk Røstvik  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9916-917X>

Summary

In the middle of the 2015 United States presidential election race, artist Sarah Levy made a portrait of candidate Donald Trump with her menstrual blood. The work referenced Trump's comments about menstruation during a conversation with journalist Meghan Kelly, in which he said that she had 'blood coming out of her wherever'. While much discussed in the media, the portrait has not received the critical art historical attention it deserves. This paper considers the artistic, cultural, political and

aesthetic inspiration of the creation of the menstrual artwork '*Whatever*' (*Bloody Trump*), the techniques and materiality of the portrait, and its subsequent reception in public, art institutional and media discourse. Drawing on interviews with the artist and critical visual analysis in the tradition of feminist art history, this paper argues that '*Whatever*' (*Bloody Trump*) should be understood as an important artwork that aesthetically interprets and recalls the white supremacist politics and strong menstrual taboos of the Trump era.

Camilla Mørk Røstvik
History
University of Agder
Kristiansand
Norway
E-mail: camilla.m.rostvik@uia.no