 Persistent Struggles: The Invisible Issues Women Face

“What the heck is this supposed to be?” is what I thought to myself when I entered the Wignall Museum for the first time and witnessed the multiple art pieces found in it. All around me were weird pieces that seemed extraterrestrial to me, and I often wondered to myself how most of these things could classify as art. My skepticism stayed with me while I took the time to analyze the art and read the museum’s guide, but I eventually came to understand the purpose behind the art and the important tales that each piece had to tell. For decades, women have dealt with a variety of issues that were often ignored by society and even though our modern society has recently started to focus on women’s issues, we sometimes tend to ignore the damage that those issues had on women and how they still deal with other issues that are not acknowledged by society. Of all the pieces in the gallery, the ones that got stuck in my mind the most were the pieces *Cervical Smile* by Kandis Williams and *Living With SCI* by Jaklin Romine for the way they represented the many issues that women still struggle with in today’s society. Both artworks achieve this by the way the pieces themselves are presented to the viewer, the perceptions that each piece presents that arises from a common message, diverging focus on the type of women that struggle, and the contrasting scopes of each piece.

One interesting aspect of both pieces is the way that they present their messages to the viewer in a different manner from one another. *Living with SCI* is a piece that presents its
message in a rather abstract manner, as the piece itself consists of a piece of what appears to be foam covered by a type of fabric with a faint picture barely visible in it, which makes its interpretation a bit more ambiguous. *Cervical Smile* on the other hand, appears to be more clear with its message since it openly displays images of women’s smiles as well as pictures of models and other women, as summarized by the museum’s own guide, “Clusters of disembodied grinning mouths with perfect alabaster teeth become grotesque performances of normative femininity and whiteness” (Rhem). The apparent nature of *Cervical Smile* allows the reader to make connections between the images in the painting with what they might know about feminism. The piece also consists of a sort of mirror which allows the viewers to place themselves in the piece, while the more abstract nature of *Living With SCI* allows the viewer to look more closely at the piece and think about the possible meaning of the piece and what it represents. The way that both pieces of art are presented is only a small part of the greater meaning of the pieces of work, with both of them having a similar message that branches off into different perspectives.

At first glance, *Cervical Smile* and *Living With SCI* appear to be paintings that have nothing in common, but taking a more in-depth look at both pieces reveals that some similarities can be found in terms of their meaning, particularly in the way that both appear to focus on how certain perceptions of women can have a negative impact on them. One of the key aspects of *Cervical Smile* is presenting to the viewer how the societal perceptions of what it means to be a woman have negatively affected them throughout time and demonstrates it by showing the pictures of women who were placed in what can be described as a mental hospital and are juxtaposed by images of larger images of traditionally accepted images of womanhood, as
described by the museum’s guide, “Williams’ Cervical Smile mixes 19th century photographs of hysterical patients housed at the infamous Salpêtrière with the blank smiling faces of contemporary women” (Rhem). The description of the images found in the art along with the description of the piece itself only gives further support to the argument. Living With SCI also seems to be giving a very similar message of how societal perceptions of womanhood can negatively affect women, though it portrays it in a different way than Cervical Smile. The way that Living With SCI displays this message is more subtle with the pink foam seemingly shaped in a way that resembles a typical female body which is covered by a cloth that resembles a dress which has a barely visible image of someone’s scarred hands, which can be seen as someone that deals with the pain from a condition as painful as SCI (Spinal Cord Injury) and hiding the pain because of society’s expectations of what a woman should be, which is supported by a statement from the artist found in the museum handbook, “Living With SCI is a documentation of the trauma that happens to my body in areas that I cannot feel like a normal able-bodied person” (Rhem). This statement gives a glimpse into the meaning behind the artwork, and the fact that the image of the injured hands on the dress is not immediately visible to the viewer also supports this since its representative of the artists trying to hide her injuries in an attempt to conform to the societal idea of happy women. The fact that two completely distinct pieces of art that look nothing like each other can have things in common is astounding, but what is truly captivating about it is how both artworks have diverging views on presenting such a similar topic, particularly when it comes to the demographics each piece focuses on.

Both Cervical Smile and Living With SCI have differences in its messaging despite having similar themes, particularly when it comes to which population each piece of art focuses
on. *Cervical Smile* appears to be more focused on how the expectations of what a woman should be have affected the average woman which can be seen in the artwork’s multiple depictions of average-looking women being overshadowed by these extravagant women who conform to society’s ideal image of what a woman should look like. The images also seem to surround an image of a woman who appears to be disfigured which appears to suggest that the worries of maintaining society’s expectations of womanhood are a problem that constantly surrounds and plagues the average woman. This particular problem of women being pressured into conforming into a particular view is exemplified in today’s world with the obsession of beauty standards and the effects they have on women as detailed by an article focused on the negative effects of beauty standards, “Those beauty standards, largely proliferated by the media, have drastic impacts on young women and their body images” (Ossola). This commentary about how the obsession that today’s society has with the image of the ideal woman really brings into perspective how those expectations can have a negative effect on regular women and their perceived worth in society. On the other hand, the message that is projected by *Living With SCI* seems to focus more on the struggles of disabled women, which is clear since the artwork centers around the personal struggles of the artist, and the theme of the message reflects how society often seems to forget about the struggles that disabled women experience in their everyday lives and, as pointed out by a journalist, finding their voice, “Women with disabilities all over the world are trying to push forward, as I did, but it’s hard when campaigning is still so focused on the rights and opportunities of able-bodied women” (Strike). As a society, we are making progress when it comes to addressing the many injustices that still plague women, but sometimes it seems that we tend to forget about the existence of women with disabilities and their unique set
of struggles that they have to face that other women do not. The differences between the artworks and messages are not the only ways in which the two artworks contrast, as they both also have dissimilar perspectives in regards to the scope of what they are trying to tell.

>Cervical Smile and Living With SCI both try to communicate a similar message to the viewer, but both artworks offer different levels in terms of the scope of the message. Cervical Smile seems to want to spread a more social message which can be seen everywhere in the artwork since it focuses on how women have been overall affected by society’s expectations of what they should be like and appears to want to communicate to the viewer through the use of its mirror that they should not just be a part of the problem. Living With SCI goes for another type of messaging, structuring it as a personal story as evidenced by a statement made by the artist, “So I document this phenomenon and try to show the beauty and discussed withing this experience” (Rhem). This statement supports the idea of this artwork being a more personal story and suggests that one of the purposes of this piece is to get the viewer to not only connect with the story of the artist but also to become more aware of the silent struggles and pain that disabled women often have to face by themselves. The similarities and differences that are found in both artworks only go to show the complexities of the message that is found in them.

>Cervical Smile and Living With SCI are both artworks that do a good job of showcasing the variety of struggles that many women still face in today’s society by showing contrasting perspectives about how women are affected by the way society thinks they should be like. The artworks showcase this in a wide variety of ways such as the different manners in which the artworks are structured, the common message in the artworks that gives rise to contrasting perceptions, the diverging views of the artworks on the women affected, and the contrasting
scopes of the messages of both of the artworks. Throughout the process of developing this essay I have become more aware of the struggles that still plague women even today, with the skepticism that I experienced during my first visit to the Wignall Museum being gone for the most part as the pieces of art from the museum have made me appreciate the unique way they presented the message as well as the steps we have taken as a society in order to address the struggles of women. By bringing to light these issues in the form of art, *Cervical Smile* and *Living With SCI* are important steps that will bring more awareness and help more individuals understand the struggles that women face in society today and will hopefully lead to further societal change that will be beneficial to women from all walks of life. My experience with the Wignall Museum and the research that went into this assignment has made me confident that the next time I step into a museum with art that baffles me my reaction will be less skepticism and more thoughts along the lines of “What is the significance and the meaning behind this piece?”.
Works Cited


