

Unfed Hunger: Beauty, Pain, and the Politics of Vulnerability

By Bruno Vinhas *

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken." (C.S. Lewis)

"To share your weakness is to make yourself vulnerable; to make yourself vulnerable is to show your strength." (Criss Jami)

There is a certain type of vulnerability that exists in the liminal space between what is visible and what remains concealed. It is the vulnerability of carrying pain that cannot be immediately seen, of moving through the world in a body that appears whole while quietly negotiating suffering beneath the surface. Kristen Piercey's *Unfed Hunger* occupies this space with remarkable honesty. This exhibition requests the viewer to not simply look; but to bear witness to the reality that has been brought to the surface.

Walking into the intimate setting of *Unfed Hunger* brings both the beauty and ugliness of pain served on a silver (perhaps more accurately, red) platter. The minimalistic aesthetic of the installation invites an unhurried encounter, one that feels less like entering a gallery and more like stepping into the artist's private confession. The work reveals itself as a sacred altar dedicated to contradiction: vulnerability and resilience, desire and restraint, intimacy and isolation, beauty and suffering. It presents viewers with a paradoxical challenge: *"Do we admire the beauty of the work before us, or do we feel the pain embedded within its creation?"*

The answer, of course, is both!

Piercey's work is rooted in her life experiences with endometriosis. *Unfed Hunger*, however, is not just an exhibition about illness; it is a gentle exploration of what happens when pain reshapes intimacy, when the body becomes both home and obstacle, and when desire must navigate physical limitations that society often refuses to acknowledge.

From a male perspective, it can be easy to overlook the hidden realities of living with endometriosis and their profound effects on the body, psyche, and soul. The disease often exists outside public discourse, tucked away behind polite conversations and cultural discomfort surrounding women's health. But *Unfed Hunger* makes such avoidance impossible. If one dares to place themselves in the artist's shoes—or perhaps more accurately, in her body: the discomfort quickly emerges. The work encourages reflection on freedoms that many take for granted: the freedom to move without pain, to desire without negotiation, to inhabit one's own body without constant awareness of its limitations.

This confrontation is intimate rather than aggressive in tone, and more powerful for it. Piercey does not demand sympathy; she offers proximity. In doing so, she unfolds vulnerability as a form of strength.

The exhibition's engagement with Catholic imagery and Christian narratives adds another layer of complexity. Christianity often approaches the female body through themes of sanctity, purity, self-control, and relational wholeness. Yet throughout history it has also carried narratives that position women as simultaneously sacred and dangerous. Figures such as Eve, Delilah, and Jezebel have frequently been interpreted as cautionary symbols, the “devil’s gateway”, embodiments of temptation and transgression. The burden of these narratives has historically fallen upon women, whose bodies become conflicted sites.

Piercey draws upon these inherited thoughts and literature not to support their viewpoint, but to interrogate them.

"The crocheted red thread functions as blood, cord, and wound: a fragile connection that insists on closeness while signaling pain. Intimacy here is not seamless or simple; it is strained, negotiated, and physically taxing. The piece reflects on how chronic illness complicates physical touch and emotional vulnerability, turning desire and passion into something that must be meticulously cared for and managed rather than freely expressed and enjoyed. References to Catholicism, such as Eve's transgression, ideals of purity, and shame around sex, linger throughout and question how religious expectations, particularly involving women, may shape intimacy; especially when the body does not conform to ideals of health, production, or control." (Piercey, *Unfed Hunger*: Artist Statement, 2026)

The statement that accompanies the exhibition serves as foundation and tone for what lies ahead. Through it, the viewer begins to understand that the hunger referenced in the exhibition's title is not merely physical. It is a hunger for understanding, affection, tenderness, acceptance, and connection that has not been historically allowed. It is the longing to be desired without conditions and to be seen beyond the limitations imposed by illness.

Under the glow of presumed red votive candlelight, represented by two dimmed red-light bulbs suspended in darkness, the installation takes on the atmosphere of a devotional space. The room invites reflection not only on chronic pain but also on the cultural and religious narratives that shape our understanding of bodies, particularly women's bodies. Here, the notion that women should serve, endure, or silently carry burdens is gently but firmly challenged. The artist exposes what lies beneath these expectations, revealing scars that are often hidden from view.

Spilling beyond the surface, the red threads trail between the two altars: like blood, lost memory, and unconceivable connection, the cord simultaneously suggest wounds and healing, separation and attachment. The duality of the threads' resonances, material, and colour evoke fragility in the intimacy of relationships while being resilient enough to hold together entire structures. In many ways, this mirrors the experience of living with chronic illness itself.

Textiles have long occupied a complicated position within art history. Frequently associated with domesticity, women's labour, and craft traditions, they have often been marginalized within hierarchies that privilege other artistic media. "Stitching can be a subversive act; thread can work as a language to challenge fixed ideas and voice free expression. Across many cultures, textile-based art has been marginalised — deemed inferior as a domestic or 'craft' practice within a hierarchy of artistic value and framed as feminine through a sexist lens." (Steele, Stephanie. *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*, 2024)

Throughout *Unfed Hunger*, Piercey's extraordinarily intentional use of traditional filet crochet techniques resonate deeply with Steele's incisive observations. The medium is not incidental to the message; it is inseparable from it. By using a process historically associated with domestic labour and feminine virtue, she transforms an inherited language into a tool of resistance. The crochet work becomes political precisely because it remains intimate.

There is a profound sense of reclamation operating throughout the exhibition. Piercey reclaims not only a textile tradition but also her own narrative. She refuses the silence often imposed upon conversations surrounding menstruation, reproductive health, sexuality, and chronic illness. She rejects the expectation that pain should remain private. Instead, she presents it openly, inviting dialogue where there has historically been discomfort and avoidance.

The work never slips into spectacle; the artist does not aestheticize suffering for dramatic effect. Rather, she reveals how beauty and pain can coexist without diminishing one another. Likewise, the visual elegance of the installation does not soften its' difficult subject matter; it amplifies it. The viewer is drawn in by beauty only to discover the difficult realities that lie just below the surface. This tension creates some of the exhibition's most powerful moments. One finds oneself oscillating between admiration and unease, between appreciation of technical skill and awareness of the lived experience embedded within each hooked thread. The work asks viewers to inhabit both positions simultaneously. To engage with the exhibition fully requires acknowledging that beauty can emerge from pain without erasing it, and that vulnerability can exist alongside strength.

As an invited guest to the exhibition setting, one who felt like asking permission to enter this sacred space, I believe that vulnerability is perhaps the exhibition's central theme: not vulnerability as weakness, but vulnerability as courage. The courage to reveal what society encourages us to conceal. The courage to discuss illness in a culture obsessed with productivity and wellness. The courage to question inherited religious narratives while still engaging with their symbolic power. The courage to ask for intimacy despite knowing its complications. And it is once you are in the presence of the work, absorbing the layered dichotomy like a punch that breaks the "looking glass", that *Unfed Hunger* becomes an act of radical honesty.

Unfed Hunger refuses simplification. It embraces contradiction. The exhibition does not offer solutions. It does not seek neat resolutions to the tensions it presents. The work encourages viewers to consider experiences that may differ from their own and to recognize the invisible labour required to navigate daily life with chronic pain. What lingers after leaving the exhibition is not simply an image of red thread or candlelit-like darkness. We are left with a heightened awareness of the unseen burdens carried by others, and a renewed understanding that bodies are not merely vessels of productivity or objects of desire, but sites of memory, struggle, resilience, and care.

Through the symbolic and material power of textile, and personal narrative, Kristen Piercey creates a space where vulnerability becomes visible and where hidden experiences are granted the dignity of being seen. The exhibition reminds us that the deepest hunger is often not for relief from pain, but for connection in spite of it. And in offering viewers access to her own vulnerability, Piercey demonstrates the profound truth contained in Jami's words: "*to make oneself vulnerable is, indeed, to show strength.*"

***About the Author**

Bruno Vinhas's journey as a curator, arts administrator, and cultural connector has always been shaped by curiosity, collaboration, and care. With a background in Cultural Tourism and Textile Craft & Apparel Design, he has found purpose in using creative work to bridge communities, spark conversations, and shift narratives. He brings to his practice a combination of resilience, curiosity, and care—qualities shaped by his experiences as a queer, Latin immigrant living and working in Atlantic Canada. He learned to turn difference into strength, using his positions to elevate others and to question who has access to cultural spaces.

From 2017 to 2024, Bruno served in progressive roles at the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador, including as Gallery Director (2017-2022) and later Director of Events and Outreach (2022-2024). He has installed and curated over 60 exhibitions, at the Craft Council of NL, The Rooms, Eastern Edge and the Quidi Vidi Artisan Village. One of his projects to develop emerging craft voices was the creation a partnership between the Craft Council Gallery and the College of the North Atlantic Textile's program, in 2018, to exhibit their graduation show in a professional gallery space with mentorship components to the students and was a consultant on the development of the Emerging Curators Program for the Cape Breton Centre for Craft and Design, 2025. He also implemented large-scale programming such as the Craft Conversation series during the pandemic, and worked on national initiatives such as the Northern Lights, in Ottawa, Made in Canada: Sustainable Fibre Arts Conference 2024, hosted in Gros Morne, the Baffin Chamber Trade Show (Iqaluit, Nunavut) and Labrador Expo (Happy Valley Goose Bay, NL). He developed new programs for accessibility during his time at the Craft Council of NL, such as the Whisper Program, a dedicated program for blind and visually impaired patrons to enjoy the gallery exhibitions; dedicated sensory aware time for patrons in the spectrum; SENSORIUS: Where the Skin Meets the Eye 2021, the first local exhibition focusing on work created for the disabled-identified community with their support along the curatorial process.

At the heart of his work is the belief that craft can be a tool for empowerment, healing, and cultural continuity , especially in underrepresented or rural communities. Much of his practice has centered around creating accessible, collaborative spaces for artists to grow, share knowledge, and celebrate identity. His practice focuses on the promotion and development of the craft community and makes room for diverse cultural narratives.

His curatorial work expanded internationally with Collect Art Fair's exhibitions Here + Now: Collected Works from Canada's Atlantic Coast, Connecting Culture + Landscape Through Water and The Power of Objects: Voices of Contemporary Craft, held at Somerset House, London in 2024/2025/2026, respectively, showcasing Atlantic Canadian craft on a global stage through Craft Alliance Atlantic Association. In 2024, he was appointed Manager of the Export Program at Craft Alliance, where he continues to support craft artists in accessing international markets. He has also contributed to the craft sector development through Canada Council peer assessments and authored articles in Studio Magazine (Canada) and Unsustainable Magazine (Australia).

Recognition such as the 2023 Mary MacDonald Award from VANL/CARFAC affirms his impact in championing craft practices and cultural equity. Receiving the Mary MacDonald Award was a powerful affirmation, but what matters most to him is the network of artists, cultural workers, and communities that he has supported and learned from. Their trust and collaboration are the real rewards—and they are what fuel my continued commitment to work in the cultural craft sector.