PMS IS NOT A 4-LETTER WORD

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

by
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* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1994

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for being so patient and supportive all this time.
VITA

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INTRODUCTION

In my graduate school application statement, I said I wanted to "make prints, lots and lots of prints". I also noted that the Tyler Graphics works, which had recently been shown at the Wexner Center, made me think about what the parameters of a print really are and what could be done with prints other than to hang completed, framed images on the wall. At the same time it was necessary for me to deal with issues that were personal yet universal. Self-exploration and self-image, especially while coping with PMS (premenstrual syndrome), were subjects that had kept recurring in my early work and were, therefore, likely to be used as the focus of the work I would pursue in graduate school.

In that work, pears have become the metaphor for my body, both the physical shape of it and the collateral, biological uterine associations. The obsessively drawn lines of large pears in some works connect visually and conceptually with the fallopian tube images on the "carpet bag" with its obsessively thready, lush surfaces. This obsessive line work is seen again in the pear image repeated on a pear shaped apron. The aprons present an image of protection which is echoed in paper quilts. While creating a covering, the quilts also present views of PMS from the general population, which are also graphically presented in the postcards of my "Wailing Wall". While working on these objects and images, I came to a better understanding of who I am and how I wish to continue to work.

This visualization of who and what I am has enabled me to return to my own background in fiber as a medium and combine it with new skills to express myself in a
language that was not possible earlier. This is my shaped image; these are the issues with which I am concerned; and these forms are how I choose to communicate with the viewer. I feel these objects are familiar, non-threatening, and visually rich in appearance, enabling the viewer to approach them and to continue with the exploration of the works. The resulting shared information hopefully leads to an increased understanding of the issues of PMS and women’s biological functions that will impact on behavior and present a venue for further sharing so that the isolation of any individual is lessened. I hope these images present a new way to look at these issues, stimulate much needed dialogue, and thus remove some of the taboos, such as not speaking about it in mixed company, normally associated with this subject so that women can get on with their lives.
THE PROBLEM

For such a progressive, modern, and technologically advanced country, the United States still fosters many old-fashioned ideas and customs, particularly when it comes to issues of sexuality. Too often women bear the brunt of this puritanical mind set. The double-standard still exists despite lip service to equality. One of the areas of out-dated thinking deals with the issue of PMS. PMS is very seldom spoken of in mixed company, and when it is, it is usually done in a joke or viewed as this "woman's thing" to be endured. It is accepted by many, including a number of women, that either PMS: does not really exist; is purely psychosomatic; is an excuse; or should be easily dealt with because "you have had it for so long", despite the fact that it has been proven to have a chemistry driven basis. Women who experience PMS are often unaware that it is the cause of their mood swings and their self-doubt, tears, anger, and fatigue. Those who are aware of these things are often at a loss for how to deal with it because of the denial of the existence of PMS from their physicians and the societal pressures to be in control at all times or be stereotyped as an "emotional" woman.

There is help available. Dietary and activity modification and pharmaceutical intervention are options that help many, but many more could be helped if PMS was no longer treated as taboo or simply a humorous subject. The issue could come "out of the closet" and be discussed in an intelligent manner. People need to find out that they are not the only ones who are experiencing these feelings.
A public awareness, sensitivity and sharing of these experiences are all necessary, and these are issues in my work. This is not subject matter just for women; it is for everyone because women do not exist in the world by themselves.
ENTER ART

During my youth, art was presented to me as something that took a God-given talent, and the measure of this talent was the spontaneous ability to draw. This attitude was reinforced throughout high school, where I was not allowed to take art classes because I was in a college preparatory program. When I finally took my first drawing class well into my adult years, I still was not sure learning to draw was possible. The joy and liberation I experienced as I progressed was intoxicating. I felt as though I finally had a voice. And, then I learned something else equally important. One could also learn how to look at art. The understanding of an art work is not a mysterious intuition bestowed upon a chosen few.

Initially, the body of work that I have created may appear to be about me and my experiences with mood fluctuations and self-perception, and while it is that, it also goes beyond me. I feel I am a symbol, not only for any other woman experiencing PMS, but also for any person, male or female, who experiences relatively rapid changes in self-perception, whatever the cause. It is through the personal that I am able to see, respond to, and present issues that are much broader as well.

In this light, I made "Excess Baggage II" (Plate I) to present an outdated attitude about women’s sexuality. The "carpet bag" alludes directly to an old fashioned attitude. Women today are expected to handle issues of their physicality and sexuality in the same way they did when carpet bags were in use: privately and quietly. The lusciousness of the embroidery of the fallopian tubes on the surface reflects the inherent beauty of those
structures. The bag is over-filled with eggs to set up a precariousness, a need for care and balance, a need to rethink the container, a need for society to allow women a more healthy way to deal with "personal issues".

Broadening my views, I wanted to present a venue for people to express their response to PMS and to make those responses into art at the same time. In a sense, I was gathering information or taking a survey but with the emphasis on visual expression. I experimented with several options, from lithography plates to plexi-glass, but finally decided that a 4 1/4"x6" copper "postcard" coated with hard etching ground would best serve my purpose. I love surprises, and a mail box can be a wonderful source of them. This "postcard", with a request for a response and return, was sent to friends, acquaintances, and strangers who overheard and expressed interest.

Keeping in mind a "Fluxus" concept of art being available to everyone through mail-art, I focused the subject of the response on PMS: an individual's responses to the term itself. I used a public system available to everyone and exposed the recipients and their family members to view the postal system as a tool they could use for their own needs. I often received the response, "I didn't know you could send that stuff through the mail." Those in the postal system were also exposed to a new way to think of art and mail. Some clerks were very helpful; others were very hostile; still others were very confused. Several postcards were "returned to sender" via the mail because they were "too dangerous" to send on to the addressee. Causing people to question the usual way they do things or think about things is an important aspect of my work, and I feel this was a successful way to start that process. The responses that were returned by the intended recipients reflect a wide range of feelings; therefore, I began to assemble all of the actual postcards into the construction of a "Wailing Wall" (Plate II).
In Jewish history the second temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome in 70 C.E. The outer western wall was the only thing left standing. This became a site of prayer and worship for devout Jews for centuries. It is traditional to place small rolled-up papers with petitions into openings in the wall itself. After the establishment of Israel as an independent state in modern times, it also became traditional with the Orthodox Jews that women were not allowed to pray at the Western or "Wailing Wall". The women in Israel have been demanding changes in this practice in recent years, against strong resistance.

At this point, my "Wailing Wall" has no permanent home, as women have no place of their own to "wail". Therefore, its present place and size is delineated with a chalk line placed directly on the wall in its temporary home in the gallery. With the construction of my "Wailing Wall" women and men alike have an opportunity to present feelings and emotions that have no other forum or venue for public expression. A book is provided for addresses of those who wish to add their cries to the wall. Postcards will then be sent to these people for their responses, and the "Wailing Wall" will continue to grow.

Among the returned postcards are humorous responses that underscore the differences between men and women, as in the postcard, "Once Upon a Time". There is anger exhibited with hammer mark and large expressive letters in the postcard, "Prostate/PMS Power". There is depression and despair with reference to suicide seen in the response, "It Happened Again".

The solidity and a particular precious quality of the copper and the physical and emotional grittiness of the responses, due to comments and marks made by the recipients and the postal system, give the plates and the "Wailing Wall" a serious reality, which it deserves. I had numerous options with the returned copper postcards: I could have blocked out the extraneous marks made in transit before I etched the plates; I could have printed
the plates on clean printing paper; I could have framed them and made them nice little art pictures. All of these options would have taken away the tangible raw quality of the responses. It would also have "cleaned up" the issue for public consumption, when its "unclean" aspect is the very issue I want to expose. It is not an easy subject, and it needs to be dealt with honestly.

While working with the postal system, I searched for another way to solicit people to engage in this question and response dialogue regarding PMS. I was looking for something that might not be as "precious" as a copper plate and would therefore get responses: faster, from a wider audience, and with much less expense than the return postage for copper plate. I began experimenting with electronic mail through the campus computer connection to the Internet. After a time, I began to understand that there were vast numbers of people who only communicate through their computers. Continuing along "Fluxus" lines, e-mail is: the logical extension of mail art, outside the museum and gallery system and accessible to large numbers of people. It also seems a logical step because the computer works holistically, just as I feel I do. It deals with vast quantities of information, all at the same time, and makes divergent items come together as a whole. For a long time, I felt that much of my art dealt with a large number of things on many different levels. I felt the connectedness of these things from a mother's point of view, that is: even though laundry, grocery shopping, chauffeuring, and scheduling are not alike, the successful completion of all of these leads to a somewhat sane family life. Working with the computer helped me see that my art worked together in the same way. Now, even though the mail and e-mail responses differ both from each other and from my drawn and printed images, they have all been used to explore and to express ideas on the same subjects.
I only received one e-mail response. It was a poem from a male. I had expected more responses, primarily from women. However, occasionally in a scientific investigation, all the data points do not fit on the curve. This is a problem only if there is a predetermined result in mind. While this is not a scientific study, a parallel exists. All information truly is valid if the response itself is more important than the result. The validity of the experience transcends the specificity of the response. While the result of the e-mail request were not what I had expected, and did not fit "on the curve", the response was valid as a source of additional information about the computer as a collaborative venue to deal with this subject at this time.

While doing this e-mail investigation, I became aware of the relative ease of access in this community to digitalizing and printing images. Images could be generated, scanned, and manipulated by the artist on a computer program and finally printed out via laser printer or printed on a plotting device in a size up to 44"x32".

Several of the postcard prints were treated in this manner. "Who Am I?" (Plate III) is a plotted image printed in reverse values from the original. The scale of this image and its placement on the wall gives it an overwhelming aura, as though the image maker was being overwhelmed by her emotions. The blackness makes it more of a voice from an abyss. The image taken from the plate "I Want to Growl" (Plate IV) shows a more aggressive and active response to the effects of PMS. The placement of these large plotted images on either side of the "Wailing Wall" provides all of the individual postcards in the wall an opportunity for a similar presence. Therefore, I do not feel that enlargement is necessary or appropriate for all the returned images. By selection, I have created a commanding presence to frame the "Wall" and call out to the viewer to see what is on the small pieces of metal between them, while suggesting another way to consider what an art print may be.
While working on the US postal service mail and e-mail responses, I have continued to use traditional drawing and printmaking methods as a means to do further self-image exploration. It took me so long to discover that I could draw and I experience such joy when I do that I miss the connectedness I feel with an image that is hand drawn if I do not continue the process. As an undergraduate, I made many images of headless fat ladies, bloated women who had temporarily lost their minds to PMS who also represented any stressed person temporarily out of control. The image has had various evolutions while I was looking for the metaphor that embodied more than just an approximation of my own bodily shape. I have worked with chicken legs, lightbulbs, screws, seeds, mummies and numerous other things.

I did a series of self-portraits for thirty-three days, starting with the first day of my menstrual cycle, going to the end, and continuing into the next cycle for four days. I wanted to see how my self portraits would change from one day to the next, if there were any changes that could be correlated with my menstrual cycle and thus get to know myself better. I did two weeks of individual self-portraits, and then I drew face parts for two more weeks. I felt fractured and my drawings reflected this. I could not do a complete image of myself. I pinned all the parts of my face together overlapping each other. When I drew myself whole again, I felt that the image looked quite tired and old. All this was necessary for me understand whether the human figure was necessary to express the issues I was exploring. I decided that too many limiting factors were brought into the works with the use of the figure, and I looked for a metaphor that would work for me with fewer restrictions.

When I started drawing pears, there was a fleshiness that had been missing from the other images I had used. The more of them I drew, the more I felt like I was drawing self portraits without making myself the primary issue. When I printed them, they seemed to
have a sense of weight that felt somehow appropriate. The blackness of the printed ink had a very rich, permanent feeling that seemed to penetrated the paper. The tonal qualities were not competing with the surface of the paper as with graphite or charcoal. There was also a physical depth to the ink in the intaglio format that added an air of seriousness to the images. I printed several modest-sized pear images, but they felt as though they needed a larger presence then their 9"x12" size could provide. I made one large image of a single pear that is a 22"x30" print (Plate V). It is formed from compulsive amounts of thin black lines. It is a complex, multi-"thread" image, with many layers. Because of the layered, thin black lines, it has a very fibrous feeling and makes the connection between the pear image and an inverted uterus for me. I needed to know what was inside this pear in the same way that I had been looking at what was inside me.

When I scraped away the vertical center of the pear to expose its core, I found that I had created a very sensual representation of a woman's external genitalia, complete with pubic hair (Plate VI). While trying to create a metaphor, I had actually gotten more graphic than I consciously would have. As the image itself had directed me this far, I decided to let it take me even further. The edges of the pear became more dense than I had thought possible, while the central "core" image evolved into a more complex shape (Plate VII). A double-layered shape appeared, echoing the shape of the large pear, but alluding to a split seed or cell, or perhaps an inverted, muscular heart. These three large prints possess the very physical aspects of a woman's body while also being various presentations of a piece of fruit. I had gotten to the heart of the matter without even knowing that I needed to do so.

I also began to combine parts of some of the smaller prints with drawings. This seemed natural, for I was reusing prints which had not necessarily printed well, in the same
way that I had, in the past, pieced used fabric into quilts. In these works, I began by adding extra fullness and weight to a single pear (Plate VIII). In the next image (Plate IX) outlines of single pears seem to fall out of the solid pear, as though layers were coming off or various aspects were falling out of the original pear. At this point in the series of drawings, I made an association between ancient armor and aprons with aprons being a woman's version of armor. The next drawing shows a half apron and a shield next to a pear (Plate X). The metaphor of the pear to my body and the apron as shield seems quite natural. In the fourth drawing in this series the apron becomes more animated and colorful (Plate XI). I believe that this speaks to the belief that personality has various features and layers. Finally, a full apron that covers a body appears (Plate XII). This apron, however, comes with a pair of combat boots. Surely, this is a woman's life-battle uniform, but by the nature of their material and what they are, they offer only superficial protection. I was stimulated to think that perhaps superficiality is all women are officially offered in the world: superficial protection, superficial acceptance and superficial understanding. The same might be true in a variety of ways for different classes, groups, or cultures.

Then, instead of just drawing aprons, it became necessary for me to explore aprons more fully to see if there was something about them that surpasses the stereotyped idea of aprons for clothing protection. They have so much which is female associated with them, but there is also the male chef, male butcher, and other male associated roles; the shape of the apron needed to be special for my associative purposes. I found an apron that spoke of the life of an anonymous woman. The fabric of the apron is close to threadbare, but it has no large permanent stains. It is worn, but the apron strings have been carefully sewn back on. It is full-length but it was made for a woman much thinner than I. It had obviously seen frequent use, or it would not have needed all the washings that created its
worn appearance. It was lovingly cared for, hence its good condition. What more could I do to this apron but continue the good care that it had previously seen? Therefore, I have starched and pressed it, wrapped it in acid-free tissue and placed it in a box which is used for preservation of a christening gown, a smaller version of a wedding dress box. This apron brings to mind what is reality for many women: hard work, frugality and anonymity. Setting it aside as a precious relic, rather than the usual wedding gown keepsake speaks to honoring reality, rather than fantasy.

The shape of the first apron I was to actually make (Plate XIII) needed to fit me and not be associated with other uses. I needed to make this metaphor for myself, as none of the aprons I had found fit both my shape and individual need. Because most full-length women's aprons have a narrower top than bottom and the neck area is curved, their shape already approximates a pear. By exaggerating various aspects of this shape, my apron became a pear-shaped garment that actually fits my body and still reinforces my body self-image as being "more" than the ideal, thin nineties woman. I also printed the large pear composed of thin black lines on the front center of this apron. Had I made multiples of this apron, they, too, would have become another type of art print. This printed image emphasized the pear shape of the apron and reflected the inner person the apron is really protecting, the confused, complex, multilayered, vulnerable person inside. The apron strings are carefully hemmed around the edges giving the apron a functional quality; however, the hem around the apron itself and the neck hole is not turned under but is strengthened by numerous black threads. These echo the black lines of the printed pear in the shape of the apron and neck hole and then fall off the edge of the fabric. I am frayed around the edges, like the apron, but holding myself together on the outside as I am on the inside.

For the next apron (Plate XIV) I returned to a more traditional shape, similar to
the "found" apron, for I wanted to make the aprons a more universal statement. This time, however, I decided to make it out of a translucent paper. The fragility of the paper was contrasted with machine stitching. This machine sewing only gives the illusion of added strength. Apply water to the apron and the fibers of the paper immediately become easily torn, and the machine stitching actually gives too strong a seam, causing added stress if the apron is used.

After making one of these aprons and because I had used paper, I felt as though it was disposable. Anything that is disposable brings with it the implication that there is more than one. Consequently I made several more. If the edges of these aprons are examined closely, it can be seen that the edges are torn, similar to the torn edges on art prints. They are made of print-quality paper; they are practically identical; they are numbered and signed; they are an edition. Editioning works implies preciousness and fine art. These, however, can be read as disposable.

As with the plotted computer images, I wanted to suggest a different view of a print, one that can be made to be transitory. The plotted images of the copper postcards are not light fast, but can easily be generated again. These aprons are disposable, but they can also easily be made again. With a computer disk or with a pattern, art can become more readily available, if the artist so desires. And therefore, the aprons, like the postcards and e-mail messages, are possessed of a personal intimacy that breaks down the barrier of the "elitist" art object.

This edition comes packed in a box that denotes that the aprons are "one size fits all" (they do not) and "disposable" (they are). The box recalls containers in doctors offices that hold disposable examination gowns. Women are advised to go to a doctor for a yearly pelvic exam. Those gowns never fit either, but the implication is that the problem is not
with the gown but rather with the patient. Since the aprons are also metaphors for women, the message of "disposable" poses a challenging question, promotes a visual/intellectual association which questions attitudes.

As I was working on the aprons, I started thinking about other things that offer protection and comfort. I had made quilts for eleven years before coming back to school. They were always there for protection. But, for all their physical layers, they spoke of women's craft and women's work and seemed to remain too one-dimensional in concept.

While I was doing research on the aprons, I discovered information which indicated that the "making" of a quilt was often more of a comfort for women than the resulting quilt itself. This "making" was a type of shield to protect the maker from the "elements" of society: it gave permission to sit and sew, it made use of limited resources, and it was actually productive, with the end product a necessary commodity. It protected the maker by allowing her to be productive in a somewhat relaxing and less physically demanding manner than plowing a field. It also gave her time to socialize. I knew and appreciated all of this. I yearned for this shield, this type of making, the repetitive, soothing nature of it. I wanted to sit and sew, to make, but it also occurred to me that I could find use for all the paper that is tossed aside by myself and others. How to relate it to the multi-layered art I longed to make was the problem.

I began by thinking I could make prints of these quilts and somehow incorporate other layers with additional imagery. Then, I thought about the aprons. I needed to make the apron to better explore and understand it, so why not make the quilt for the same reasons. I decided to make it out of used intaglio prints, for women have made quilts out of previously used fabric. Making it by hand, sewing it together so that the marking and cutting of the paper becomes as obsessive as the loops on the carpet bag and the lines in
the pear print on the apron, became important. Some of the need for this obsessive activity is because of the comfort factor in the "doing". The multiple layers of lines and threads on the pears, aprons, and quilts relates both to the thready lining of the uterus before menstruation and to the interconnectedness of all parts of life. I also feel that the repetitive activity is an attempt to gather all the loose threads in my life and gain some type of control in a world where one has no real control of anything.

The subject for the quilts is again, PMS related. I still felt the need to involve others to enlarge the scope of my art, so I decided to hand out a questionnaire to people in classes at the university. The questionnaire asked for responses in a few words or phrases to the terms: PMS, menstruation, and menopause. As with the postcards and e-mail requests, I was gathering information but this time for the verbal and not the visual response. I wanted to supply the visual imagery, but I wanted community input/response that I could add as a layer.

For the first quilt (Plate XV) I decided to use the responses to PMS and combine both male and female responses, first names, and ages on the white triangles of this black and white intaglio quilt. The grittiness of the intaglio prints reflect the grittiness of the subject matter. The outside triangles are finished off by having no holes poked in the outer edges. The side edges are sawtooth in nature for the subject matter is a bit sharp and has an edge to it. When hung on the wall with an outwardly bowing center, it becomes shield-like, and its three foot by five foot vertical shape gives it a life-sized reference.

As with the aprons, one quilt was not enough. I made another scrap quilt, again using pieces from black and white intaglio prints (Plate XVI). This time, however, I used an ascending and descending brick pattern. This up and down pattern mimics the hormonal and emotional roller-coaster that women are on every day, and this in turn is a roller-
coaster ride for the men around them. The male responses to PMS are on one side of the peak and the female responses are on the other side in an adversarial "them against us" configuration. In this quilt, there is no central outward bow, but there is a detachment of the top fifth of the quilt along the cut thread lines, referencing the dissociation of my head from the rest of my body and my lack of control over my body when I PMS. As I have said, I see these images as metaphors that go beyond PMS to portray a universal lack of control.

The third quilt is a directional reversal of the pattern in the first quilt of triangles, but this one is done with red intaglio prints as it is the menstruation quilt (Plate XVII). The tones of red begin with a spotty pinkish-red, move into a bright orangy-red and progress to a solid brown and then spotty brown color, similar to the flow of the menstrual cycle. Again, male and female responses are mixed on the surface of the white triangles. The protruding corner triangles are not trimmed off in this quilt as they were in the black and white one, but they are left and bent outward toward the viewer, as little prickly red thorns. These echo the jagged edge and give a three-dimensional aura of dis-ease, of threat.

These three human figure sized quilts present visually rich surfaces as a result of the variety of intaglio print pieces presented in relatively simple shape arrangements. They also show numerous responses to the issues of PMS and menstruation. Comparing the answers from the male and female respondents and considering their ages raises a number of questions for a continuing dialogue. Stimulating this dialogue is a major aim of these works. The "specimen" type box presents a record of the responses that were used.

During the show many comments about PMS were heard. Reinforcement of the stereotyped response by males were rare but present. "Man, I'm glad it's not me," was
expressed with relief. A female viewer stated that, "this is so much fun. I've thought so many of these things myself," in reference to the responses on the quilts.

Several other women told me they closely related with the image of the apron and combat boots. "I'm a woman, but sometimes it gets rough out there," was the prevailing sentiment.

A male student asked if the boxed fabric apron was a symbol for a mother telling her daughter about menstruation, thus handing down information in the same way that christening gowns and wedding dresses are handed down. A husband was overheard asking his wife how there could be an entire show about PMS. She looked at him and said, "Haven't you seen me get crazy?" and they walked out continuing with the conversation. Another woman related that when the invitation arrived in the mail, a major discussion about PMS resulted.

These particular comments were immediate. I knew I had opened an important subject for discussion and these usually private statements occurred in public. While I watched many people spend more than five minutes quietly reading the quilts, I hoped that more discussion would occur about which I would know nothing. I hoped the ideas presented would truly "go public".
CONCLUSION

All of these images reflect parts of each other and interact with each other as the various parts of my personality and my life interact. There is a universality in the images and the concepts that are presented allowing the viewer to see the specifics of PMS and the generalities of being out of control. There are interactions with the audience that I hope will continue into the future with this work via the growth of the "Wailing Wall". Communication and sharing were an integral part of the quilting bees of the past. Besides gossip, stories, and recipes, the quilters gave each other sympathy, empathy, encouragement and a sense of community. I feel that communication and sharing are necessary today if the community view of self-perception, PMS, menstruation and other issues that are primarily seen as women's concerns is to be broadened. When these are seen as human issues instead of women's issues, we can begin to make changes together.

The definition of a print has broadened to include objects, such as the disposable aprons, as well as images.

The work presented here encompasses a variety of forms: intaglio prints, mixed media drawings, copper postcards, computer plotted prints, aprons and paper quilts. All are united by the concepts of PMS, control and self-exploration. These concepts are presented visually in the form of threads, pears, aprons and the "Wailing Wall". The attention to placement and craftsmanship strengthen the interconnectness of the concepts and the physical art works. The quilt format and the issues it can "cover" present the opportunity for a large body of related work in the future.
PLATE III, WHO AM I?
PLATE IV, I WANT TO GROWL
PLATE VIII, SINGLE PEAR
PLATE X, APRON AND SHIELD
PLATE XI, PEAR AND APRON
PLATE XII, APRON AND COMBAT BOOTS
PLATE XIII, APRON STRINGS
PLATE XIV, ONE SIZE FITS ALL / DISPOSABLE
PLATE XV, RESPOND TO PMS - I
PLATE XVI, RESPOND TO PMS - II
PLATE XVII, RESPOND TO MENSTRUATION