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BEFRIENDING THE BODY

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Introduction

This paper explores the theoretical, historical and contemporary influences and how they have molded my art practice throughout this masters program. I received my BFA in 2018 from Memphis College of Art and Design during which time my primary focus was the manipulation of materials and learning the historical relevance of art within the building of the societies and cultures of our world. In grad school, I was afforded the opportunity to step back from the venerable formalities of classical knowledge in materials, and began to further the exploration of turning my internal language into physical form using the skills I had honed.

Trauma upon the body was familiar to me. Visually articulating the tangible side of trauma upon the body has always been simple. As simple as the fact that manipulating materials is a physical act. But, trauma upon the mind was what drew me to further dive into how our singular experiences can still share a collective emotion. I found visualizing that was particularly interesting and elusive. I am interested in the line between what is tangible versus what is not. Cinematography and photography was where I began my search for answers. This was a step in the right direction given that within these areas of the art world, we are shown what we cannot touch, with or without permission. Yet, they continue to evoke emotion. The answers I found most relevant to my own practice were the uses of color and the acts of documenting. I explore this by combining different materials' and items’ visual and nostalgic values. Within color, we have learned reactions. These are sometimes as simple to us as green means go and red means stop. Materials themselves have tactile sensations. While thinking of a lego block, one may picture it to be any number of colors, but the sensation of holding is always plastic.

I look to the world of phenomenology to begin to answer my questions as the exploration in the field itself is inherently “a method, an open and ever-renewed experience having different results” (Farina pg. 2). For instance, the desire to touch that which is not meant to be touched and
the lack of acknowledgement when touching that which is. Within my work, I’m exploring a mental dimension where the unconscious and trauma meld.

When we cannot process trauma, our brain breaks these emotions and memories down into what I call tiny boxes, or compartmentalism. In doing this, our brain builds a defense to keep the trauma at bay, processing the small instead of large. I have come to realize that whenever something happens that we cannot handle, the default is to go back to something rooted in our remembrance of the past in order to busy the mind with something safe and comforting. In my case, things like watching science fiction films and building LEGO sets. However, since we frequently resort to these escapes, there comes an additional association of something ominous and unnerving. I use the abstraction of moments of clear adolescent iconography as a form of expressing that moment between distracting and self soothing and coming to terms with reality. This provides the viewer with autonomy from the object's direct visual characteristics yet allows me to express a mental state which can relate to a larger audience's mind.

Trauma’s Language and How the Body Responds - Look Into Bessel Van Der Kolk

In the earlier years of what we consider modern psychological medicine, Bessel Van Der Kolk was doing what others were not. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, he was looking at people and what they wanted to talk about versus that which they did not want to speak. Rather than pushing them forward reluctantly and prescribing medicine based on their resistance, he realized that if he allowed the patient to recollect things that evoked sentimentality, their brain would eventually circle back and allow them to begin to make sense and verbalize that which they could not before being given the tools.
In his study of Vietnam veterans, Van Der Kolk writes of an after-hours support group he started at a local community center. At the beginning, he was shocked at how many people attended; and yet, they sat in silence. When he prompted them to talk about why they came they would give brief responses usually relating to anger outbursts. If asked to elaborate, they would become frustrated or not respond at all. After a couple weeks of this, he swapped his tactics and asked them to talk about their favorite stories while deployed. They all began contributing and relaxing. To Van Der Kolk’s fascination, they then began talking of how they were having dreams while awake, which were almost always followed by what Van Der Kolk coined as fight, flight or freeze responses.

Throughout his time working with these men, Van Der Kolk became fascinated by these patterns of nostalgia followed by honesty and how over time, their fight, flight and freeze responses improved. Van Der Kolk went on to be the leading scientist on what he named Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. While the study of these Vietnam veterans directly correlates with my own observations, what truly caused him to become a focus of my studies is his research on the effects of childhood and sexual trauma. Specifically, the ways that these forms of trauma manifest within our bodies and the ways we organically defend against them.

“Trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies. Being frightened means that you live in a body that is always on guard. Angry people live in angry bodies. The bodies of child-abuse victims are tense and defensive until they find a way to relax and feel safe. In order to change, people need to become aware of their sensations and the way that their bodies interact with the world around them. Physical self-awareness is the first step in releasing the tyranny of the past.
In my practice I begin the process by helping my patients to first notice and then describe the feelings in their bodies—not emotions such as anger or anxiety or fear but the physical sensations beneath the emotions: pressure, heat, muscular tension, tingling, caving in, feeling hollow, and so on. I also work on identifying the sensations associated with relaxation or pleasure. I help them become aware of their breath, their gestures and movements.” - Body Keeps the Score (pg. 130).

By prompting his patients, Van Der Kolk gives them the opportunity to sit within their bodies and analyze where and how trauma manifests on a physical level. While studies into physiological trauma had been in existence long before this one, Van Der Kolk was the first to break it down to a level that was accessible to the average person.

“The mind needs to be reeducated to feel physical sensations, and the body needs to be helped to tolerate and enjoy the comforts of touch. Individuals who lack emotional awareness are able, with practice, to connect their physical sensations to psychological events. Then they can slowly reconnect with themselves.” - Body Keeps the Score (pg. 130).

Phenomenological Theory in the Arts.

When diving into the theory behind phenomenology, what started as a slight piquing of intrigue, quickly became overwhelming. However, after deliberative study of many leading phenomenological theorists and the various ways that visual artists involved their work, I have found that it lays at the core of my work.
Edmund Husserl is considered one of, if not the leading theorists of the subject of phenomenology. His work is often seen at the root of a variety of other works on phenomenological theory. One of his most prominent works, *Logische Untersuchungen (Logical Investigations)*, dives into his theoretical beliefs around the structures of consciousness. He asserted that we have to identify the acts of our consciousness and the ways we interact with objects' intended purposes. This theory specifically fascinates me. The phenomena of our knowledge of an object that we may pass by, yet we still use it by intention.

Within my piece, Liaisons (fig.1-2), the viewer navigates walking between knobs that were created for simple utilitarian purposes. These knobs are placed upon thin steel rods and plates at differing heights causing the relation of one's own body to the objects to change. What was intended to be used and touched is now in a position and place that stigma not only says it should not be touched but also demands further visual examination. They show differing levels of wear from the human hand and time itself.

Artist’s Influence

When diving into my studies I found several artists that continue to inform my work in ways that not only expand my understanding of visual language, but also the ways in which I may move forward in my career.
Tracey Emin’s exhibition Living Under the Hunters Moon (fig. 3) at the White Cube Mason’s Yard in early 2021 explores the human perception of self. She challenges the ways in which we, as viewers, may look at our own individual experiences through her internal struggles of daily self-reflection. She looks to historic methods of sculpting such as her larger than life bronze castings and directly puts them in opposition to paintings that verbally call out the words that plague her mind. I was first drawn to her through these methods in which she experienced her trauma through work on a verbal level while also invoking what the world has historically seen as “proper” art.
Margarita Cabrera: Space in Between, 2019.

Margarita Cabrera has greatly influenced my work through her manipulation of space that causes the viewer to navigate her many series of sculptures as well as her dynamic approach to trauma of the body both on a mental and physical level. Her installation *Space Between* (fig. 4) at the Tully Dun Gallery is what I drew upon within my investigating the body’s navigation through my own work. Specifically, the ways in which I may show the viewer memories that cause them to think upon the steps they take within their daily life.
Gregory Crewdson has informed my work through his exploration into color, lighting, and composition that cause the specific feelings he wishes to evoke. He takes a large amount of inspiration from science fiction classics, specifically, Close Encounters of the Third Kind by Steven Speilberg. His piece Brief Encounters: Untitled (birth), (fig. 5) is a great example of his merging of the uncomfortable and the enticing.
Bateman, Iza: Phantasmagoria 2022.
In both of my works, *Phantasmagoria* and *Palpable*, I utilize the familiarity of childhood toys that one would recall as commonplace, contrasted with those items in an unobtainable or untouchable position. *Phantasmagoria’s* round spheres are ordinary and recognizable as the large balls from children’s days of play, yet, they are also different. The use of metallic surfaces and color imply heavy and hard while being suspended in a bright pink netting reminiscent of the nets which many would recall from their first bedrooms filled with toys. Yet, they are
unobtainable, taunting. *Palpable*, a refined silver logo sinking into the hollow form, elevates a utilitarian tool of childhood design and architecture to a piece with intrinsic value.
Emily Young is an artist I have followed since 2014. Her work has helped me to understand how the meticulous refining of a work can simultaneously speak of the love given by the human hand and the trauma of the body shown through the carved pieces of stone she has carefully formed. Her process starts with the raw piece of stone that she then works by discovering and manipulating its weak areas such as cracks and veins. She bases the work and turns it into a meticulously refined piece that compels the viewer to want to stroke the work while also fearing they may break or disturb the sculpture by doing so. Her series of work *Disks* (fig. 6) span from 50cm to 150cm alabaster disks with surface treatments that beg one to touch while their thinness causes fear of harm. She melds geology with art that displays a sense of fragile permanence while pushing her chosen medium to its limit of refinery and grace.
Bateman, Iza: Abrade 2022 (fig. 1)
Bateman, Iza: Abrade 2022 (fig. 2)
Bateman, Iza: Abrade 2022 (fig. 3)
Bateman, Iza: Abrade 2022 (fig. 4)
Bateman, Iza: Abrade 2022 (fig. 5)
In *Abrade*, the focus is shifted to the meticulously refined surfaces of each object. The viewer is drawn in by flowing ripples carved into disks creating ambiguous forms. Layers of shoe polish are rubbed into the wood and then, they are in turn, rubbed away in the same manner which, over time, handrails are worn to a smooth finish by the users’ hands. Through these processes of touch the sense of wear and beauty are displayed. Each has a glowing halo of an artificial hue of orange. This is used to add a trick of light that gives pause and encourages the curiosity to draw in closer and examine more intimately.

Throughout my three years in graduate school, I have learned to adapt my creative process to one of continually asking myself questions. One of my largest challenges has been taking the time to let these questions find rest in my mind. In Tony Morrison's, *Beloved*, she coins the term “Rememory,” as the moment of being, whether that is within a place, or state of mind, pulls upon more than what physically is present. This term challenges me to look at where we fail when facing situations that cause our body to remember this at a speed at which our brain is unable to acknowledge. To learn to not allow these moments to bypass us without pausing to examine the reasoning behind the body’s reaction and the subsequent choices we make takes discipline.

Moving onward with my career, I intend to return to my roots of the venerable and merge it into the thought that follows rememory. Bessel Van Der Kolk and Margarita Cabrera stand as my two greatest influences within my thesis work. Van Der Kolk’s intensive studies into trauma's effect on our daily life and our bodies and Cabrera’s way of interacting with viewers' bodies by her placement of her textiles remain in the forefront of my thoughts as I plan my future work. The influences and studies outlined within this writing have formed the questions I have been asking and the way in which my work answers them.
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