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Creating Receptive Spaces Within the Gallery: A Look into the Role the Arts has on Survivors of Abuse and its Contribution to the #MeToo Conversation

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Abstract

Through the use of personal place and memory, the artist fosters environments in the gallery to navigate healing from trauma. By cultivating this type of space, survivors of trauma can begin to dissect and navigate through imagery of another survivor in order to visualize ways in which to navigate their own. The artist, Tawny Skye, begins to explore this route by recreating her bedroom in a public gallery. Inviting others to openly gaze at her work, she is bearing her trauma for the audience without directly triggering them with the graphic imagery which is known to cause discomfort, panic attacks, and even flashbacks. She sees avoiding these triggers for her audience as significant as anything else in the #metoo conversation. This work begins to find ways for survivors to openly discuss experiences of sexual assault without further harm.

Influenced by the works of Suzanne Lacy, Liza Lou, Tracy Emin, and ancient feminine sculptures, Tawny is using personalized visual imagery to convey emotional navigation, intimacy, and trauma healing. Landscape sculptures serve as reliquaries for her story in combination with paintings in which she alters her body in reference to the process of healing from trauma.
Post-traumatic stress disorder can feel as though it radiates through the soul. When a person commits trauma on another, it does not die after the moment passes. It lingers and festers, leaving the victim with a plethora of work to do to get to a stable point in their mind. The person who has no choice in the matter is the one in therapy and support groups working tirelessly to maintain a stable mindset and heal from the actions of the other. Not only is the emotional toll after trauma elevated for survivors, but the societal reaction is off-kilter as many react to their claims in disbelief.

 Victims of sexual abuse do not always have the platform to feel seen and heard. While the #MeToo Movement has done wonders for raising these voices, the work is not yet done. There is still an imbalance in the world when it comes to hearing the stories of these victims and responding with validity and belief. Even the closest people in their life can turn in opposition which then reflects worse on the victim when they appear cast out. In my work, I want to change this dynamic.

 I aim to create spaces in which survivors can feel heard; spaces in which they do not fear responses that negate their feelings and make them question the validity of their own experiences. However, I cannot expect myself to be able to accomplish this without being vulnerable with my audience concerning my own history of abuse. By laying out my story on the gallery walls, I communicate to my viewers that I know how it feels. I know how disheartening the world can be, but I also know that when you find that environment in which you feel secure, it is important to foster that relationship to the space and invite others into it.

 Using landscape sculptures that act as reliquaries and paintings in which I alter my body with images of nature in combination with installation (Figures 20-26), I create these
environments in places they are not often found. What begins to happen when I put together paintings of myself and the maps of the places I have existed within is this unique combination of work that creates a more accessible approach to the topic. I use light in these spaces to make environments that feel like a safe domestic room. Doing this ensures that I am bringing my safe space to my viewer: an extremely vulnerable act for me as a survivor. With an installation of approachable and beautiful imagery, I can foster a place for people to feel invited. It creates a moment of peace that survivors need in the midst of a public event such as an exhibition (Figures 19-26).

People create spaces for themselves in which they can foster both positive and negative emotion throughout their lives. These can be past feelings as well as present and preemptive. Places hold within them our memories and thoughts and the history of presence. Inviting others into that place is inherently intimate; however, this invitation becomes far more sacred when paired with trauma. A person inevitably presents oneself to people who come into these spaces and, in return, share’s the person’s thoughts and memories. Each environment holds old experiences that mix with the new.

What is a normal human experience? How does day-to-day life change when a child is properly and appropriately loved? Do people look in the mirror without hearing voices encouraging them to see someone less than themselves? Is going to sleep in the dark calming or even an option for some? What is the cut-off for trauma to engrain itself into our being, and how
much is too much? Why does the artist pose the question “how does day-to-day life change when a child is properly and appropriately loved” instead of “how does day-to-day life change when a child is improperly and inappropriately loved”? The question can only be formulated by the person asking because experiences shape everything down to how they talk, walk, write, create, eat, or even compose their questions. Though the query then becomes: how much of this approach is determined by personal trauma or the ways those who raise them are responding to their trauma? What is passed on? What is accumulated? Where do they intersect?

Learning the ABCs is done through processes of visual representation combined with repetition to encourage permanent memorization. How does the trajectory of someone’s life change when they go through this type of learning process while loved ones show them the ideal of beauty and tell them they cannot fit within it? What happens if those ideas accompany significantly distressing lessons encouraging inappropriate acts of secrecy? How does the individual carry these in her life to follow?

Being one of two kids on my mother’s side of the family who did not have blond hair and blue eyes (the other being my brother) put a target on my back - a strange one that was not visible by just anyone and that presented very specific types of opportunities for very specific people. Who would believe someone half Jewish (something scandalous for a small western

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town) would be the child victim of molestation by members of her own family who have historically favored Aryans?

Over the years, I have thought quite a bit about the best ways to prove that my experiences occurred and to confirm their validity - not necessarily to others, but to prove this to myself and, in turn, my family has been a sought-after goal of mine. Examination of a crime requires officials to look for three major aspects: means, motive, and opportunity. The trinity has become an anchor point in which officials can begin building cases against assailants.\(^2\) Racism, avoidance, and generations of child sexual misconduct provided all three of these for my abusers. According to the National Center for Victims of Crime,

> When generations abuse the next, it becomes 30% more likely that a child in that family will be abused as well. 51% of children abused grow up to experience more abuse throughout their life. One out of every three children sexually abused by family will grow up to become sexually abusive.\(^3\) One in five girls will be sexually abused before the age of seventeen and one in twenty boys will be too. Every ten seconds, a childhood abuse is reported.\(^4\)

My family responded to molestation in the same way as the previous abuse. Avoidance became the status quo and, perhaps, the easiest way to cope. Avoidance, and specifically experiential avoidance, stems from the brain’s inability to cope with emotions and memory when

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alone. Therefore, when confronted with something that stimulates the senses, the mind shuts off, and fight, flight, freeze, and flee responses kick in. People come to use this as a reason to avoid the circumstance altogether. Confronting these innate responses create further social issues and can spark the need for explanation. Post-traumatic stress begins to challenge the all-around meaning of existence and one’s place within it. The notion of questioning one’s existence is one that many can put off for a duration. Considering reasons for life in combination with the meaning of traumatic events is daunting and some feel the need to circumvent the thought altogether.

This act of eluding circumstances that cause memory or strife in relation to an event is known as experiential avoidance and can halt progress in healing. Lack of recovery can prevent long-term goals and further the cycle of regret and shame. By shirking these encounters of traumatic triggers, many revert to unhealthy coping habits that can shift them into the very thing they fear. This then creates a cycle in which trauma follows throughout the generations to come as it was never previously resolved.

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6 Herrnstein, 49.
This explains my family perfectly. Their inability to deal with being molested festers deep within. They do not avoid the person who harmed them but rather the memory of what happened altogether. Each person finds a way to suppress the memory: blaming another individual outside of the family, considering it a bad dream, resorting to drug abuse, or denying it to everyone until they believe this denial themselves. Of course, there are many other ways beyond these listed that people can use to avoid the healing process. To my knowledge, my family uses complete denial.

In my youth, I used drug abuse to forget what I did not even realize I remembered. In doing so, I compartmentalized the part of myself that needed healing and set her aside leaving me to become a person I was not. It was easier to ignore it than to dissect my existence at such a young age. Had I had the emotional maturity that could enable me to properly process this trauma, I may not have become the person writing this, but rather someone who had previously come to terms with my past and moved forward away from pain and struggle.

Between my pockets lies a carefully constructed map of who I am or wish to be. These pockets begin to abstract that identity in a way that leaves me in a constant state of connecting dots. Where do my memory pockets end, and how can I unblur those lines to foster a more cohesive frame of mind?
Throughout the artwork, my viewers often find hidden spaces within others. A look through keyholes offers a more specific set of language for these events. These keyholes are symbolically linked to the Jonbenet Ramsey case, which is referenced throughout my sculptures and embedded in the landscapes they embody (Figures 1-6). By combining these keyholes along with makeup compacts and brushes in the western landscape, such as JonBenet Mountain (Figure 1), I connect the aspects of her life as a beauty pageant contestant and bring light to a pivotal moment in the investigation into her murder. In the beginning, the six-year-old beauty pageant queen was thought to have been kidnapped to leverage something from the wealthy family. When police initially came out to review the crime, they believed their main objective was to find escape routes and search for clues. While other officers thoroughly searched the rest of the house, one went to the basement. He came across a cellar door: one in which he thought was simply more storage. The case specifies that the officer paused for a moment while staring at the handle of that cellar but ultimately decided not to open it because there was no way for an escape in that space.  

A few hours later, the family went into that cellar to find Jonbenet’s body dead and tied up. The father moved her body upstairs which ultimately tainted the investigation because of his interference with the crime scene. It is a case that remains unsolved to this day, but one that could have been better investigated had the officer looked through that door. Perhaps if there had been a quicker way to peek through, Jonbenet would have the justice she deserves.  

This case is something I connect with in many ways. Further investigation of Jonbenet’s body and history revealed a plethora of abuse. In her underwear, officials found the semen of

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three other men. A history of aggressive behavior from her older brother was also exposed. While I cannot definitively say who was responsible, I can say that there was family abuse and denial that played a role in her life. The same abuse would go on to taint the investigation of her murder. 11

My family also neglects to acknowledge abuses that present themselves to each generation. To me, Jonbenet became an image of what could have happened to me with a few slight changes. I was her age when my sexual abuse began, and it happened within a family that vehemently denies any claims of abuse or neglect. We were both from Colorado, and this happened in 1996 when I was only three years younger than her. I am left wondering where she would be now. Would it be a similar life to mine? Would she advocate for others or go through the same repetitive history of denial as many around her did?

Often survivors of deep trauma can feel as though they are in a state of purgatory. Just as the house in Toni Morrison’s Beloved became a place for their past to survive in the present, manifesting itself in many forms: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims.”12 Though I connect with her in ways, in other ways I envy her love for her children. Trauma changes our perspectives. Trauma is what shifted Sethe’s mind from “at least my children are alive” to “I would rather they

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11 Conrad, 182.
I am trying to find landmarks with space to house these trauma pockets somewhere outside of my mind.

By recreating my grandmother’s house to scale, I have been able to implant these memories within it. (Figure 7-11) Not only does this act validate my memory of childhood and the abuse that happened during it, but it also provides somewhere for me to release these memories and visit when I have the emotional capacity to do so. Each room is filled with games, toys, clothes, or whatever else was stored in them. (Figure 8-11) I remember where to find each and every thing in the house that I could need or want. I construct these objects from polymer clay. While this is not the most permanent or sturdy of materials, it accurately resembles the forms my memory takes. They are stable, yet changeable, colorful, but fading, detailed, but messy. The balsa wood the house is made of is weak and unstable just as this environment was for me as a child. It formed together to make what seemed to be a sturdy home visually, but what was actually ready to crumble with the slightest movement. The cars in the driveway come from a long history of my collecting matchbox cars- a collection that started with gifts from the very grandfather that would go on to abuse me. As a child, my grandmother made my clothes. This was a beautiful sentiment, but being the only child whose clothes were made from 1970s fabric and 1950s dress patterns only further emphasized my otherness as a Jewish girl in a small town. The carpets and wallpaper in my model home are created with the same fabrics that made me stand out as a child- the same fabrics that my grandmother handed down to me alongside our generational trauma. (Figure 7-11)

The energy within trauma can be passed on. Many do so generationally through either behavioral interaction with parents and their children or epigenetic alterations from trauma of the

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13 Toni Morrison and Bernardine Evaristo, 43.
past.\textsuperscript{14} Through documentation, I wish to pass on these memories without the general trauma. Perhaps these artworks can help others find homes for their own suffering and release the energy from their being. If nothing else, these artistic bookmarks can serve as a space receptive to similar stories from the audience.

One of the most significant things that survivors have so strongly lacked in existence is space to cope. These spaces release tension in an outward and safe manner in environments where their stories are laid out to be received by believing minds. With this series and many more moving forward in my career, I will provide both. Not only will I be there to connect and validate my viewers, but I will offer spaces in my work for the audience to leave behind their stories. The only place I know to begin is to try and map out my own by recreating places from my personal life (Figure 12). In addition, I am shifting the scales of these environments showing the viewer that looking at memory from a different perspective can be empowering and give a feeling of dominance over a scene that once felt so daunting. In addition, these installations help foster environments for closure and healing.

The landscapes I have managed to create within my installation serve as these monuments. I take these forms from my experiences on the road with my abuser and as adventures with my family (two things between which the line is blurred). Using clay for these forms has helped me connect with the land. The red-orange, adobe clay of the West met my line

of sight often while on the road. Being able to work with that land on which I was abused and mold it into these monuments helped create a shift in perspective I needed to visualize control over my past. For example, Garden of the Gods is a park outside of Denver, Colorado. A park I have frequently visited in my past and thoroughly enjoyed. It consists of various rock formations composed of layers and scattered throughout the park. It is a holy experience to walk amongst these forms and climb them - an experience I find to be a privilege in my life (Figure 2-3). While abuse happened to me in these locations, the times I interacted with them alone were tranquil.

Chimney Rock is another formation in Colorado (Figure 4), just outside of Pagosa Springs, my hometown. It is on top of a mountain outside of The Valley that you drive about ⅔ of the way up. Once up there, you hike the rest of the way to the top where you meet a structure built by indigenous people hundreds of years ago. The walls and roof are missing, but its presence remains. As a child, I loved remnants like this because I could create the rest of the structure through thought. It was fun and exciting until I became an adult and realized the structure had a history that was not so exciting. My perspective changed drastically with information and experience. Beyond this structure was a large rock shaped like a chimney on top of the mountain. The intricacies of the rock were extensive layers of misshaped rocks stacked together, hugging one another. Alone these rocks are simple, irrelevant even, but together they become majestic.

Wolf Creek Pass was a frequently visited place with my abuser. His truck company even had the name in it. It is the last mountain you drive on before reaching my hometown, and to get there, you must go through a long tunnel in which many families would honk so kids could enjoy the echoes. Driving through the tunnel was different from the driver. I did not honk, of course, but the lack of annoying noise showed me something else about the journey in which to be in awe. When approaching the tunnel, you are driving down the mountain at a sharp angle and in
your eyeline is the steep drop beyond the edge and a plethora of “falling rock” signs. When you leave the tunnel it is like entering a beautiful storybook scene filled with green hills, beautifully fluid waterfalls and rivers, and the horizon suddenly reappears.

Route 66 is a highway that is historically significant when it comes to both travel and the automobile boom in the twentieth century. Many historical events that happened along this route such as the Great Migration west and the rise of semi-truck use to stimulate the economy. However, this path serves my memory in ways not found on any map or in any museum. There is no documentation outside of my perspective of the trauma from my childhood that pierces its very surface. Such memories eternally haunt the strongest of humans. The land around me serves as more than just settings for these stories.

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even-year-old brown eyed girl radiates curiosity while on yet another journey West. Overseeing map navigation made her feel so special. She was too young to realize her position as a surrogate spouse to her only grandfather. Scratched voices of stand-up comics filled that eighteen-wheeler cab while she was affronted by full blasting cold air that was somehow surrounded by the heat of the desert in a space maintaining a torturous temperature. Her throne was a much larger version of any car chair she had seen, and it was adorned with beads that were somehow both comfortable and obnoxious. Her seat bounced along with the truck: relentless as if she were riding a bronco bareback. Despite

15 Peter Brigham Dedek, *Journeys on the Mother Road: Interpreting the Cultural Significance of U.S. Route 66* (Middle Tennessee State University, 2002), 132-207.
the space in this large vehicle she was constantly feeling confined. Unable to escape if
even just momentarily, she was trapped in a trauma-infested environment.

The vibrant and burnt oranges of the New Mexican landscape filled her eyeline. Each
moment was riddled with the most intricate details, enough to provide that much needed
moment of blissful escape. Her anxiety did not benefit from the fact that she could not
escape this space alone without seriously injuring herself from what seemed to be a
twenty-foot drop down the side of the truck.

This feeling of entrapment would follow her well into adulthood. While pain pierced her,
she implanted trauma into her surroundings. To share her troubles, these moments on the
earth would help to shoulder what her mother would not.

Often lonely and without support, she found herself hours from civilization. She knew
something was wrong on the way to that friendly small town. The only friends around
were other witnesses to this abuse. They never judged her, nor have they since forced her
mind to live these memories. Sienna rocks documented her story for her to visit on a later
journey. Rocks existing long before her and likely to exist long after are sure to have a
plethora of similar stories preserved in their sediment. This matched with the landscape
of her body, the land felt anything she did. She became one with the rocks.
To this day I have found myself bound with the land. Living a life filled with triggers, it is nearly impossible to feel solace in moments from childhood. As an adult, I had the chance to revisit home nearly twenty years after the start of my childhood abuse. Ready to meet an old friend, I stormed through the walls of my anxiety to say hello to her once more. With open arms and calming touch, the landscape welcomed me in as if no time had passed. Her face had changed. Momma Earth had aged, and with each new memory, a wrinkle or crack embraced her body. Though in this space the land was not the only friend I greeted. The land preserved my younger self stripped of innocence by the family I once loved. I was able to connect with an adolescent version of myself and ease some of her pain.

Being introduced to a young Tawny was not something that appeared visually. I was not hallucinating. Rather, certain places brought on memories I had forgotten. As a child, I was intent on going to the bathroom only when convenient for me. I would hold everything in until I absolutely could not anymore. The adults in my life responded to this with anger and shame. They made me feel guilty for my issues and did not bother to explore the reasons for it. Because of that, I chose to ignore logic and adopt the idea that something was very wrong with me. Why was I afraid to go when I needed to? What made this barrier between me and my health?

When I took my recent trip west, we stayed in Santa Fe for a few days. Afterward, we drove up to Denver and made stops at certain sights along the way. At a gas station on our route, we stopped, and I was overcome with anxiety. I did not understand at first why my flight mode was kicking in. Nor did I know why my mind was so intent on figuring it out as I normally practice avoidance. Until I remembered the truth. This gas station was one at which I had gotten in trouble while on a trip with my grandfather. He used to get extremely angry at the frequent
trips to a restroom that I needed. Not normal, adult anger, but more of a deep-rooted disdain for me. He would yell or punish me with public shaming at our stops and this one was bad. It was bad enough to push me into my memories.

I discovered that my reasons for holding back in my childhood stemmed from fear. I was suddenly lighter. Not because these were happy memories, but because they proved that I was not abnormal or a gross child. It helped me and my younger version understand and love ourselves more than we had previously been able to. This moment of understanding changed my mindset for the rest of the trip. I was able to set aside the confusion and pain to get to the deeper reason of why I felt the way I did. I found many answers to questions that a kind and scared seven-year-old Tawny would have loved to know. These revelations altered how I viewed myself then and now and forever shifted my perspective on my identity.

The human experience is complex even outside of abuse and pain. Emotions are elaborate. Each person's moments of anguish differ from the next with no two experiences the same. Understanding ourselves requires us to know our trajectory. It is imperative to know which came first and how each moment affected the next. Mapping out our individual history is a useful method to begin the process of understanding current emotional strain.

Physical identity is shaped by a number of external factors such as the reactions to the news from loved ones or access to a space free of abuse. These may alter the individual response to emotional turmoil. Healing is personalized by multifaceted approaches from a variety of sources including medicinal, creative, and spiritual practices. What comforts one person with PTSD may
intensely harm another. An individual can have complex layers of trauma formed in many ways. Through speaking specifically to physicality, the trauma inherited by previous generations can drastically shape the mind, body, and soul of the individual in the present, which means that some are born with the ramifications of the past lived before their conception. These past moments intertwine with the accrued experiences of the present resulting in the individual’s mental and, in turn, physical identity.

Growing up as a half Jew, frequently I was told jokes about my people. A recurring joke was that Jews have anxiety or often visit analysts or psychologists making them on edge or uptight. This likely emerged out of the stereotypes of our complaints and discomfort in the world. Though further investigation would suggest that the history of oppression Jews have faced would cause those, not to mention the fact that a Jewish man, Sigmund Freud, shaped the ideas of psychology that we see today. I became familiar with Xanax long before I could grasp the concept of a menstrual cycle. I began my life in a mindset already in need of recovery. The bodily ramifications of trauma I have endured are only slightly rectified by the fact that as a Jewish person, I was born ready to survive and persist nevertheless, just as those who came before me. I am tethered to my ancestors.

Generational trauma can be seen in more ways than one. Mothers birthing babies in concentration camps unknowingly create a new, ancestral quality.\textsuperscript{16} Generational trauma can alter the DNA thus embedding itself in the physical makeup of future generations. In fact, the US still tracks these traits in contemporary African Americans years after the conclusion of segregation.\textsuperscript{17} This type of trauma challenges preconceived ideas that trauma comes from a


\textsuperscript{17} Eyerman, 3-8.
direct experience and informs us of the true complexity of stress disorders and the more physical effect it can have. The physicality of mental health presents itself as undeniable and challenges ideas many have when considering how much society is willing to believe its tangible nature.

Another form of generational trauma remains a history of abuse: when one violated generation harms the next. The person creating trauma and the person who has had it inflicted on someone become one person; they become what they fear most. The created versus the creator—only these stories do not end up elevated between white walls in a gallery or even uttered amongst loved ones because the topic is so dense and unpleasant. Discovering this problem comes not only from academic research and personal experience but also from breaking down the barriers that prevent communication for survivors and victims. Language, whether visual or written, creates bridges of communication with the ability to surpass hurdles. The strength in communicating these traumas is powerful enough to prevent future occurrences.

To continue to break down these barriers, I must first piece together my own memories. Often, I experience these as “rememory,” a term coined by Toni Morrison in Beloved. Though unlike memories and unlike remembering, “rememory” is neither current knowledge nor is it an act. “Rememory” represents both old and new: the known and the forgotten simultaneously. It refers to a memory that continues throughout someone’s life. While memories do remain with us for years, rememory is more consistent. In these rememories, details are not lost and the act of remembering can be unprovoked. It is a consistent and detailed memory that evokes strong emotion in an individual while following them through life as a permanent fixture.¹⁸

Navigating through how I can best help others and myself with these experiences is something akin to learning to sculpt. Sometimes the process is labor-intensive, other times it is

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meticulous and often I use dangerous equipment and tools to do so. Without focus and commitment, I could severely harm or even (unintentionally) kill myself. But, if I hunker down and fully envelop myself in the process, the things I can create are endless and limited only to the beliefs I find within myself and the viewer.

Saturday night in a place radiating with culture and excitement, the city was bright and teeming with energy. Barely an adult, she got ready for yet another party at the LAX house. She had been there many times before. So many that she would remember even the floor plan a decade later. Despite this intimate relationship with this place, she knew nothing of those who inhabited it. Sure, she knew the guy at the keg handing out cups and the familiar faces on the garage dance floor, but the house became the most familiar face.

Behind that home, the backyard was so large it had spaces rutted in the grass from years of parking. As she smoked her cigarette, she scanned the yard for a partner in the steamy night ahead. Her gaze was suddenly interrupted by headlights: the beer had arrived. Out from behind the headlights emerged a golden, muscle-riddled sculpture of a man. Time seemed to slow as he flipped his hair and waved her way. Accompanying him were two men: a pale, sunburned man she did not know and a tall Asian man she had only known through the marijuana market.

As the night progressed so did their blood alcohol levels. The disco ball over the dance floor was spinning as much as she was. The golden man offered his body as a crutch (an idea she was all too familiar with). She asked him if he wanted to leave together to which he enthusiastically agreed. Too drunk to drive, she was also too inebriated to recognize that fact. In that white Ford Contour, they traveled (luckily) only three streets down to make it home okay. Time started clipping and suddenly she was in a passionate scene like
that of lovers in a film tearing each other’s clothes off on their way to his bed. Unexpectedly, he made his way down her chest with his tongue. Slowly tracing her curves until he reached her center. After an explosion of ecstasy, he embedded himself within her and the world went black.

I would not remember much more of that night for a while after. Flashes of his friends above me filled my mind at night and I lost track of sleeping and my memory. When I awoke later that night, he had come to bed and began to caress my head. He put himself in front of me and I felt the need to return his precious favor. Eventually he thrust himself inside of me once more. It felt strange this time and different. The room was lit by a passing car (?) and I found myself beneath the pale, sunburned man. As I screamed and cried, he ran away laughing and I could hear his friends laughing with him.

When I told my friends what happened they were focusing on another friend’s assault which was taken more seriously so I felt no validation in shifting attention away nor would they let me. I buried these stories because nobody was there to hear them, and they festered. Suppressing stories beneath pools of alcohol is toxic and damaging to both mind and body. According to psychologist Carl Jung, “Whenever we give up, leave behind, and forget too much, there is always the danger that the things we have neglected will return with added force.”¹⁹

While Jung is not known for including people that lay on different places of the intersection in his theories, which brings a level of irony to this statement, there is still much precedent to his ideas on memory and trauma. The act of suffocating experiences does not erase them and neglecting experiences of loved ones only prolongs their pain.

Failing to acknowledge experiences of others goes beyond the personal and into the political. When colleges, galleries, offices, and other institutions neglect to share these stories or to provide platforms to lift the voices of the unheard, it stifles many artists and survivors. When these spaces then elevate the work of abusive men, not only does this put up another obstacle for victims of abuse, but it specifically suffocates the painful experiences people have endured at the hands of the abuser on display. Yet the issue of disliking men who act out these crimes has not provoked even the slightest blink of an eye. These institutions isolate the artists and viewers familiar with this trauma and show them the door. So how does the institute begin to alter the toxicity of their environment? By providing stories from survivors about their experiences with rape and abuse in a safe and receptive environment, the conversation starts to shift. Then removing the pedestal from men who have all but earned the space, these organizations can reprioritize voices heard and drastically change the tone of these environments to that of a safe space.

The gallery, the legal system, my friends, my family, and society need stories like mine. Art reflects the self, and it is necessary to share these stories in a safe and secure space. A space where people have room to be seen and heard without judgment. The only way to change the world’s viewpoint on survivors as victims is to listen and believe their experiences. As a survivor myself, and sometimes a victim, I find I am most comfortable in a group of people who own their vulnerabilities and share their stories and leave the space open to hear others’ experiences. It is only natural that I bring my viewer into my safe space to tell my experiences at our comfort level. But how does one share without triggering? Finding a respectful way to tell these stories is imperative in ensuring that the audience is receptive to the topic. Bombarding the viewer with graphic and triggering imagery without their consent becomes an abuse in and of itself.
Removing the ability for viewers to actively include themselves and to their individual comfort level is also removing their sense of choice and replacing it with force. This is something overlooked not only in the Fine Arts, but also media and film, the literary arts, and the sciences as well as many others. Abruptly confronting others with the image of sexual assault in the gallery strongly resembles rape scenes in film. The impact does not end up adding anything to the conversation of surviving and healing. This tactic stems from a fetishization of rape and sexual assault. It is not only triggering to those with these experiences, but it also desensitizes others to this event. This cycle makes it difficult for those in U.S. society to present their traumas and receive the help needed.

This show begins a series of events that I will navigate how I can communicate trauma intimately and without harming my viewer. An enclosed space in the gallery seems daunting at first. It feels almost as if I was trapping myself and my viewer. I found ways to make us comfortable in the room together. Perhaps they read the trauma within my walls filled with my face or perhaps they are overcome by the colors set on top of a black and white checkered wall further emphasized with twinkling lights. There is always the chance that a space that is intimate in this way can make a viewer uncomfortable and want to leave. (Figure 19-26)

Sometimes we have things that need to be told and not necessarily heard. I can hope to reach others with my artwork and show other survivors how trauma can be coped with and the spaces this can be done within. This is a major goal of mine. I have found my words to be just as important as the work. The different reactions I see in people when they see my room completely
constructed in a gallery versus when they realize what it is about it is unmatched by mere interaction with one or the other. Being shocked at such a comfortable space that is being utilized to tell these traumatic stories only further follows along with the theme to which I find myself drawn.

My room at home serves as my sacred space. I have curated the best way for the furniture to be arranged for me to feel an open flow in the space and to be able to access and organize my belongings within it. The walls hold portraits of myself that are seen in my installations. Portraits of my body altered to be one with nature as it has felt to be for much of my life adorn the space. These versions of myself have come to be my company while I navigate the landscape of my life. They look over me as I sleep and remind me that my trauma is not the only definition of myself.

The floor plans and recreations of space are reminders that my mind is valid (Figure 12). The memories I have are a partial picture of what I know to be true because I can clearly remember the spaces they happened within. On top of my bed is a model of my grandmother’s house in Colorado (Figure 7). A house where I was able to be free and trapped at the same time. When my grandfather was away on the road, I could explore the land and the town with my cousin and enjoy the new spaces I found. When my grandfather was there, the space changed to become a different version of a horror tale around every corner. Either way, my memory of the house and its contents are clear. Each room is decorated and organized as it was in the real house. I find an odd comfort in the fact that I can still remember where to find what I need in that space. Though, the true utilization of the model did not present itself until I showed it to the one person in my life who remembers it as much as I do: my brother.
When he approached the installation, he was nervous. Not because he lacks faith in my abilities nor was it because he is claustrophobic or afraid of anything physically there. Rather, he was nervous because he fears what memories will resurface in him. He was afraid of how much he would recognize in that space and what it would do to him. There were moments of pause in his exploration of this installation while he navigated his emotional responses. Then he did something that surprised me. His fiancée was with him, and she had never been to the real house, nor had she really heard stories of that space and time in our lives. My brother began to walk through his memories and explain to us what happened and where. As he told us his experiences of prejudice, domestic racism, and harmful parenting, he pointed to the model. He moved throughout the fabricated space telling us story after story to explain his perspective. A perspective that is very different from mine except for its location. I realized another use for this other than to validate my memory.

The house model became a tool for storytelling. It was like my research into the Woman of Willendorf (also known as the Venus of Willendorf) (Figure 13). Because she is a prehistoric object, she has been interpreted by many people in various ways. I first believed she was an object that was fetishized and made to dehumanize women. Commonly referred to as a “fetish” object in a historical context, these statues have been spoken of as But I learned from research that from an anthropological perspective, she may have been a tool for women or a symbol of achievement for women. This figure may have been meant to explain to pregnant women the ways their bodies would change with pregnancy. Just as a new perspective on the Woman of

Willendorf shifted my idea of the object, my brother changed my view of my own work in a matter of minutes.

The interaction I had with those who did not have the historical reference to the spaces in my installation was wildly different from what my brother saw. Though different, these interactions were not diminished in value. As people entered the space, I could see their faces go from being in the gallery to finding themselves in a domestic environment. Each person was confronted with the decision on where to start viewing. This reaction is one that I aimed for.

When I began to navigate my trauma, it was overwhelming. There was so much for me to learn and see and do to process these events and my mind was not sure where to start until I jumped in.

The first time that I thought of making a domestic space was viewing the work of Tracey Emin, Robert Rauschenburg, Liza Lou, and Suzanne Lacy. Each artist had a different approach to making domestic spaces in and with art and each brought the audience into a personal and vulnerable story by exposing the viewer to this type of work.

Emin has a special place in the arts in that she is using her work as almost a confessional. In each piece, she reveals herself and her reaction to trauma as she does in her piece *My Bed* (1998) shows the ways in which narrative can spill from a frozen moment (Figure 18). After a particularly bad breakup, Emin spent weeks in bed drinking, having sex, smoking, and even bleeding. The result was a messy, stained set of sloppy bedding atop a caved in mattress surrounded by trash and stained clothing. This image was to her, a piece of art, a visual that
perfectly captured the pain and reaction to this breakup.\textsuperscript{22} This installation provoked her viewers to become curious about what happened to cause this scene. A scene that defied societal expectations of women—the domestic space of a single woman. To me, this moment that she brought into the gallery, was thought provoking and powerful. I aim to express a similar level of vulnerability, and I want viewers to come into my domestic space and feel wonder.

Rauschenberg’s *Bed* (1955) was amongst the first works with which I connected (Figure 14). In this earlier work of his, he used his actual bedding in combination with paint to form the imagery. A bed consisting of warm tones and expressive brushwork, his painting would become historically significant to the use of alternative materials in two-dimensional works of art. Rauschenberg’s use of the flatbed picture plane changed the ways I viewed art and opened my mind to working outside of the “norm.” According to art historian Leo Steinberg in “Other Criteria: The Flatbed Picture Plane,“:

Rauschenberg’s picture plane had to become a surface to which anything reachable-thinkable would adhere…. Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane…. And it seemed at times that Rauschenberg’s work surface stood for the mind itself – dump, reservoir, switching center, internal monologue – the outward symbol of the mind as running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field.”\textsuperscript{23}

This perspective on the picture plane shifted the viewers perspective as well. This new, altered perspective takes the imagery from being seen as looking through a window to peering


over at a surface, choosing to dissect as much or as little as desired by looking around the object instead of at it. This change in perspective is something I wanted to execute in my own work. I wanted to take my viewers’ position from looking at this work to being physically involved in it.

The idea of an elaborate domestic space in the gallery is something deeply connected with Lisa Lou. Specifically, Lou’s work *The Kitchen* (1996) (Fig. 15) In an effort to make labor visible in a piece of art, Lou spent five years reconstructing a full scale kitchen out of layers of beads. In this space she has hidden clues about domesticity and the specific role women have historically played in the domestic environment. She has the headline “Housewife Beads the World” beaded onto a newspaper on the table which is also beaded. This sea of multiple beads-a material historically seen as craft-becomes an all encompassing room with endless details. 24 However, this was not the reason that I found connection with the piece. I found myself within it because of how her memory is displayed in the details of this space, and the time that it took to put into it.

Combining time and place in contemporary art alongside memory is the perfect synthesis because I can paint a story in ways that each aspect cannot do individually. Together they achieve a level of elaboration that is important when talking about trauma and memory. Another artist who combines these elements is Suzanne Lacy. Her work is an investigation into feminist theory that explores issues with trauma and assault alongside a plethora of topics ranging from biology to race theory. How language is used when talking about rape and abuse is imperative in our attempts at understanding its effects. Seeking to empower people who have been sexually assaulted, Lacy wrote a book entitled *Rape Is* (1972) (Figure 16-17). Some theorize that this book provoked the movement against sexual assault in Southern California. From the moment

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the viewer opens the book, they were emerged in a culture dominated by rape. The reader has to break a seal to get into the book: a forceful act placing the reader as an infiltrator into the experiences the book uses to define what rape is. These definitions were meant to shock the outside reader while connecting with those who had similar experiences. It gets as specific as “when you’re on your grandfather’s lap and he slips his hand into [your] panties.” This idea is not something many would think about, but when someone who has experienced incestual child molestation reads this, a sudden sense of solidarity forms them in this literature.

Lacy’s combination of bold red lettering and shocking language helps was necessary to clarify what men have historically disregarded as sexual violence. By writing this, she leaves no room for interpretation. There is only room for a blunt interpretation of ‘this is [irrefutably] rape.’ It is important to note her use of satire in the book which is similar to the Peanuts’ book series Happiness Is…(1962). Tactical satire is used to form connections with a wider range of people. Almost as if Lacy were to say, “you’ve read Happiness Is, maybe you should give this a try.” Imparting a familiarity to the text gives more opportunity to engage with the writing. The most important aspect of art about trauma is to include the perspective of the traumatized at the forefront of the book or art piece.

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26 Princenthal, 108-112.

27 Princenthal, 108-112.

28 Princenthal, 108-112.
Twenty-eight-year-old brown-eyed woman wakes up in a space that is her own. Smothered in soft pink fabric accompanied by loving animals, she is surrounded by things she made. In a space that was curated by her, she is comfortable. Knowing what has happened in the past, she is able to peacefully explore her history in this room. The TV plays various series of her comfort shows as she types another message to her followers.

Since coming out with her story, she has found comfort in writing about her history. In her artistic career, she became a figure in the #MeToo Arts. Connecting her to many others with the same story, her art has become a space in and of itself. Those who surround her are supportive and kind, but mostly trustworthy and safe. She can make these landscapes she once resided within and use them to heal.

Leaving her space, she gets into a little blue jellybean car. One in which often takes her from safe space to safe space and rescues her from danger. It's messy, of course, with clothing and art supplies alongside empty Starbucks cups and cigarette boxes strewn about the vehicle, but it is still an extension of her home. Driving to the gallery she listens to Bon Iver and quietly sings along (even when the lyrics slip her mind).

Nervousness and excitement have come to feel the same to her after years of trauma. So, while parking her car she did not know if she could make it through a three-hour opening. The space is already full of people whose voices fill the room while they are covered in
dim lighting. The artwork is highlighted by stark lighting against a white wall. The pieces’ shadows cast another form of art leaving remnants of the work in the space around them.

Through the sea of people, she makes her way to the gallery. Entering this feels different than it did during her installation: it feels calm and brings her a new sense of closure. She approaches an archway of her own creation – a doorway to the vulnerability she chose to display. It is large and inviting, as if she wants to walk through it to see what it would feel like. She does.

Underneath this arch, she sees the twinkling lights strewn about the place. They highlight the chaotic yet organized work she sees on the walls. Her face is everywhere. Her body is everywhere. But most of all, her mind is everywhere. It is overwhelming at first. Her bedroom that she just left is on display for strangers to walk within – a notion that feels daunting and dangerous to her.

She looks around. First at the walls coated with a variety of floor plans and maps of her experiences. She recognizes them in ways others likely will not, but that is okay. Her altered body is seen throughout the space while the face of her childhood is coated on milk cartons reminiscent of missing children. The landscapes on furniture catch her eye next. She knows these places inside and out. Not only from making the piece but from the hundreds of visits to them at a younger age. The details in this moment of chaos bring cause for further exploration. Until the bed catches her glance.
She almost sat on it – perhaps because she was deliriously tired or perhaps because she felt at home. On top of this bed was a house – an almost exact replica of a house – that she spent much of her youth in. Peering into the space, her memories of each room plays before her eyes. She can feel the same feelings she did then, she can hear the voices of her family and smell the scent of Judy Junk (a custom grandmother dish). Everything is familiar, yet new. It is both the explored and the adventure and takes on new meanings and perspectives for that brown-eyed girl.

Putting in an extensive amount of time and effort into making many pieces and installing a plethora of details to the room which houses this installation adds to the overwhelming enveloping of the viewer. Including a variety of sculpture, painting, found objects, and memorabilia pulls the audience into a place I have spent many hours curating. Viewers see the layers of spaces in this environment and are approached with the notion of connection to that space. With a slight alteration of the light in a gallery space and the scent of the room, the audience can be transported into a place that reveals the true nature of the artist. Each sense is engaged, the aspect of the institution is removed, and the actual idea of the work is presented in a raw and untamed manner. To foster environments that can provoke thought on personal space and experience, it is imperative to break down their meaning and construct. It is what turns a viewer into someone who is experiencing.
There are many steps to bringing change in U.S. rape culture and victim denial/blaming that I am going to have to enact for years to come. This topic is not one I can quickly end and present a final resolution; there isn’t one. This series begins my lifelong journey in coping with my own trauma while trying to change the narrative on a grander scale: the political. This process is not one in which I have mapped out or know the steps in advance, it is one that comes to me slowly and once the previous step has presented itself as finished. For now, my focus will remain creating safe spaces in the institution. Each iteration of this will be different. Perhaps the same room shifted around or a new room or space that can bring comfort to others. The next series is unknown to me right now, I have ideas, but I cannot definitively say anything. For the first time in my meticulously planned and prepared adult life, I am comfortable with not knowing what is next and excited for the future of my work.

In this graduate program, I have managed to break down similar barriers in myself to invite others to understand living with PTSD and the variety of faces it has. I removed the vagueness of my work and added a plethora of visual language so that I am communicating all that I want to say. Using my platform to express my inner thoughts and experience, I aim to give permission to others to do the same. I want to foster environments that are open to change – calming environments that encourage open dialogue that can change not only the life of an individual survivor, but the landscape of our country’s reaction to sexual assault and its response to future victims that come forward.
References


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In the time the average person would take to read this paper, 130 children reported abuse. ²⁹