

Transmutations of Emotional Energy: Ceramics, Fibre, and Flesh

By

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Abstract

This document explores the ways in which emotional energy, such as sentiments associated with depression, trauma, and anxiety, can be represented in a physical form with the mediums of ceramic and fibre sculpture. It discusses the ways in which using these materials' properties can represent the complexities of these vibrations. When treating mood disorders or mental illness, when you are able to imagine something abstract like emotions as an image, form or object, it brings validity to it, and it brings something easy to visualize in order to work on ways to treat it. Therefore, within this document, I am questioning the ways in which this can be done with sculpture, and to create a dialogue, not for the viewer to connect with the specific emotion but rather to open up a space for contemplation of our interior lives that are often too elusive to share other than through material, abstract and affective works of art.

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I would like to acknowledge that this practice and research has taken place on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.

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Introduction

“I want you to describe the emotion you are feeling.”

This is one of the first questions asked in order for a doctor, therapist, or social worker—depending on their own methods—to understand the emotion they are about to undertake. After being through years of behavioural and trauma therapy throughout my adolescence and early twenties, I have been asked on multiple occasions numerous ways to describe how I am feeling. Whether this was during a depressive episode, during a panic attack, a flashback, or else during the session itself in which I was sitting on the sofa with a pillow on my lap, across from the therapist. And, despite having different experiences with different therapists and doctors in my life, whether it was within an office, or a hospital room, or under different therapeutic techniques, they were all essentially asking me the same things:

“Could you please explain to me where you feel this emotion in your body? Your breathing is very light, do you feel it in your chest? Your spine? Your stomach?”

“Are you floating right now? I’m going to try to bring you back out of the memory. I need you to place your feet flat on the floor, and imagine a tremendous amount of weight on the top of your feet.”

“I want you to close your eyes, and breathe deep, and as you inhale, imagine the air which you take in to be a beam of positive energy. Imagine it enter through your lungs, and feed into your veins, your ligaments. Let it nurture your organs, bringing life back into your body. Let your cells thrive in this breath of air, and feel it as it travels all the way to your fingertips. Can you tell me, what colour is this energy that’s rejuvenating your body?”

“Can you describe how it felt to tell me that traumatic memory out loud? The act of the memory leaving your body, did it look like something?”

These are variations of Visualization Therapy¹, grounding and Metaphor Therapy², commonly attributed to various psychological practices to bring the patient out of their distressed state and to comprehend where the emotion(s) is coming from. Sometimes these techniques consist of representing an emotion in the form of a metaphor, an image, or an object to create a sensory experience to remove the patient from their stressful environment.

These were some of my responses:

I'm feeling depressed. I'm feeling like I'm being sucked into a black hole and cannot get out.

I feel most of the pressure in my chest and my throat. It feels like something's fluttering in my ribcage and needs to escape, or like a lump that's constantly expanding in my throat.

My body's on the couch, but I feel like I'm hovering two feet above that right now.

It looks like honey. Like a bright glowing amber, entering my body and illuminating and warming everything as it brings life back into it.

Saying that memory out loud felt like I was exhaling a wad of ectoplasm. Or, it felt more like excising a cyst or a tumour from my throat. It feels like a relief, but the site of excision feels raw, and needs to be stitched.

When you are able to imagine something abstract like emotions as an image, form or object, it brings validity to it, and it brings something easy to visualize in order to work on ways to treat it.

¹ In her article, psychologist Dr. Jennifer Baumgartner says "Visualization is a cognitive tool accessing imagination to realize all aspects of an object, action or outcome. This may include recreating a mental sensory experience of sound, sight, smell, taste, and touch." Baumgartner, Jennifer. "Visualize It." Psychology Today, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-psychology-dress/201111/visualize-it>. Accessed 16 January 2020.

² Metaphor therapy is a practice of psychotherapy that uses metaphors or symbols to help individuals express their emotions or situations. The journal article "The Mighty Metaphor: A Collection of Therapists' Favourite Metaphors and Analogies" from The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist (2016), vol. 9, demonstrates "the great versatility of metaphor to address all kinds of issues in therapy and how the shared exploration and collaboration of both client and therapist generated metaphors can add to problem solving and facilitate therapeutic change." (S. Killick et al., 4)

Psychiatrists and therapists have used this treatment when I was diagnosed with Bipolar Type II and later Post-Traumatic-Stress Disorder. It subsequently made me question why is it so difficult to understand emotion, in a larger, societal perspective. As a result, my research and practice, informed by these direct experiences consists of taking emotions associated with mood disorders and mental illness and depicting them in a physical, aesthetic form. I do this to navigate the emotional terrain of my psyche but also as a means to generate artistic artifacts.

Emotions, Ceramics and Fibers

It is challenging to represent an emotion in a physical form, where the form allows for the communication of the emotion beyond language. What I am questioning with my practice is what ways can emotions be transmuted into a physical object and how might this affect the viewer? And can one induce a sense of empathy from the viewer for a physical form, even if the object is alien or non-representational? Perhaps, this can all be realized by imbuing an art object with emotional energy through formal strategies. This expression of emotional energy in material form, specifically ceramics and textiles are the focus of this thesis project.

My practice is rooted in ceramic sculpture, a material that mirrors the subject matter I am depicting: emotional trauma and emotions that are difficult to control. Ceramics can be unpredictable when used for artistic purposes, and its final form relies on structure, luck, and chemistry. It is an emotional material—it remembers, it cracks under stress, it can explode in the kiln for specific reasons or for reasons that are undecipherable and unexplainable. It can be strong and fragile at the same time. You can roll it; wedge it; throw it; compress it; centre it, stretch it—then send it through its transformative process, by bisque-firing once to glaze, and then firing it again until it becomes a petrification of the final form. All of these actions are cathartic, collaborative, and destructive. The process and the material work collaboratively. No other material really goes through that much transformation in its physical properties. The outcome which can be beautiful or catastrophic, supports the subject matter of representing difficult emotional energy and the transmutation of these emotions into a physical form. The metamorphic

properties of ceramics allow for a gradual transformation and eventual petrification of these emotions and material into a physically fixed, unchanging object.

My therapist gave me a rock for my PTSD (Post-Traumatic-Stress Disorder)

She told me to squeeze it every time I

-remembered that night

-remembered what he did

-remembered being pinned against the wall

And asked me to feel the roughness of the surface fit perfectly within the folds of my knuckles;

to focus on how the cold surface eventually turned warm with my body-heat,

and how I could feel my pulse eventually form within my fingers

For the past two years,

I've been squeezing the rock so hard

every night

that it feels like the rock now has the pulse,

and not me.

Catharsis and Cathexis

Cathexis is the concentration of mental or emotional energy in one particular object, person, or idea (merriam-webster.com), while catharsis is the process of releasing repressed emotions, and therefore providing a sense of relief. The core of my process consists of cathexis, catharsis, and transmutation. This means directing my emotional energy into a material process, taking it to its material limits to the point where it is brought to a point of abstraction. For many years, ceramics was the material with which I conducted this approach, but through MFA research, I have more recently discovered that my process is not specific to ceramics.

Fibre, like ceramics is very emotive and it has a memory and processes which has the interesting contradiction of being strong while simultaneously soft and fragile. It is a material traditionally used to mend, to protect, and to warm, which I believe introduces an important conversation to the work when juxtaposed with ceramics. It brings in the notion of care for an object that is harnessing dark emotions. Working with textiles is different than ceramics, especially crocheting, knitting, or sewing. It's something that one must sit and focus on, and do the same order of movements over and over again. As a practice it feels like the union of both cathexis and catharsis. According to the online *Anxiety Resource Centre* "holding the hands together in front of the body creates a sensation of having a protective 'bubble' of personal space and comfort."³ It allows the maker to be present and to be within the process of creating an object through the same necessary repetitive movements. Regardless of what emotion the maker begins with, due to the concentration it takes when working with textiles, the result is a calm and focused energy. An interesting note about the etymology of cathexis is "you might suspect that *cathexis* derives from a word for 'emotion' but in actuality the key concept is 'holding'.... It can ultimately be traced back [...] to the Greek verb *echein* meaning to 'to have' or 'to hold'" (merriam-webster.com). I relate this to the role of the hand-made in my practice and the need to work with tactile materials. My invisible body and gesture, holds just as much value as the material outcome of the work, therefore, the material and I collaborate through whatever process in order to achieve the final piece.

³ From "How Crochet and Knitting Help the Brain" <https://anxietyresourcecenter.org/2017/10/crochet-helps-brain/>

I am also questioning how a material with protective properties can be used to express depression and anxiety. To allow a material that is soft and protective, and light to expand to its limit through a classic technique of repetition (crocheting) allows for a certain tension to form in the material that inhabits a space between compulsion and absurdity. I believe this material and its handmade, repetitive process manifests the subject matter and desire to represent emotional energy. Many artists have adopted familiar practices in their work such as Hilma af Klint, who channeled unknown forces to collaborate with her to create her paintings, or Eva Hesse when she used properties of sculptural materials to reflect her own anxieties⁴; and Alina Szapocznikow's work from 1969, where she depicted bodily fragments, were a creative response to her breast cancer diagnosis in 1969⁵. While the ways in which these artists engaged emotional energy whether through the process, the material of their subject matter is inspiring, I believe that they have not used tension to the same extent as I do. Song writer and poet Ev Reheard writes "life is the food we eat. Art is ... the shit" (Reheard, 12). In relation to this, I see the creation of art as a form of regurgitation of emotions and surroundings. The process is driven by the emotions which are the catalyst and then the work is the cathartic action of representing the emotions through material form.

This use of tension is not only present in the practice itself, but manifests in this text. I purposely shift between academic and creative writing, in order to express how these raw emotions feel, and how they are situated in the body drawn from my own experience. In contrast to the visual work, where the emotional experience is abstracted, my intent for these writings is to imbue the reader with a descriptive honesty of how these experiences have felt. While I do my best to make the work accessible and relatable for others to understand, I can only speak from what I know through research, and how I have experienced the emotion personally. I also believe, that while scientific analytics, statistics, and patterns can show how an emotion can feel, sometimes the best understanding is through the sharing of raw, personal experiences.

⁴ Lippard, Lucy R., *Eva Hesse*. New York University Press. 1976. Print.

⁵ Filipovic, Elena and Joanna Mytkowska. *Alina Szapocznikow Sculpture Undone 1955 – 1972*. Museum of Modern Art. 2012. Print.

Anxiety—for me, is like batting wings in a small cage, it's the invisible clock as the seconds-arm pulses closer and closer to an unknown future. It's the fight or flight action when there's still nowhere to run. It's the feeling at the base of your sternum, as if a panicked dove with broken wings is trapped inside your ribcage.

*The breath shortens and quickens as your mind speeds through every unbearable possibility
that may or may not happen*

Situated Knowledge

I was born in Hamilton, Ontario, which is situated upon the traditional and unceded territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Mississaugas. Growing up, Hamilton was known as “the Armpit of Ontario”, “the Hammer” or “Steel City” due to the everlasting smog that hovers in the sky from the constant factory pollution, and because it thrived back in the 1960s – 70s as a working-class trades city in its steel production for the white baby-boomers. My parents were not artists, but the act of working with your hands in order to make a living or as a hobby was heavily instilled in my upbringing, and became an invisible belief system that I carry with me. My father is an electrician, and my mother who had studied fashion design was always teaching me some sort of craft from textiles, to drawing, to working with modeling clay.

Born into a working-class family, the act of manual labour and strenuous processes was instilled in my body as a means of survival. The action of working with my hands, building something or pouring concrete was more satisfying to me than an office job—and I believe that this sensibility has carried into my art practice. Ceramics, textiles, and sculpture are all very strenuous practices which involves a great deal of pressure and physical activity. You have to be strong in order to work in these mediums due to the toll it takes on the body. Ceramics, textiles and sculpture all involve repetitive movement⁶, hand-eye coordination, heavy lifting, working with dangerous processes⁷ and laborious steps. Despite the occasional exhaustion and pain, I have found the most satisfaction working in these mediums. The amount of labour put into my practice is cathartic. The end result feels rewarding because it is not only a product of my imagination, but a product of my body and the materials’ own limits.

These formative years learning by example from my parents’ manual skills and labour was the beginning of an appreciation for how energy can be transferred into a physical material. Despite experience in other sculptural materials and techniques⁸, ceramics has been my main and preferred medium due to its malleability, reciprocity, and memory. If you press your finger into it, it will

⁶ For ceramics: hand-building, wheel-throwing, mixing materials and dry matter; wedging etc. In textiles, various techniques such as crocheting, knitting, weaving, and embroidery take a toll on the fingers, hands and wrists, usually causing carpal tunnel and later arthritis.

⁷ Occasionally these mediums involve working with heavy machinery and hazardous materials depending on the process at hand.

⁸ In woodworking, foundry, metal-work; textiles; mould-making, and ceramics

retain all of the prints' information even after firing. When you hand-build, you are expanding the molecules for them to grow into a larger form, when you are wheel-throwing you are compressing the clay and controlling the directions in which the particles are going in order to evenly create your vessel or form.

During late adolescence, my mind began to shift between depression and anxiety until the cycling shifted to hypomania⁹ and suicidal depression. I was diagnosed with Manic Depression¹⁰ by one psychiatrist, however the diagnosis was changed when I was considered to be too “high-functioning” by another psychiatrist to Borderline Personality Disorder. It is possible for a person to have both, but this was never confirmed nor denied in my treatment. Then, a few years later after being the survivor of an assault, I was given the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This was the start of my long-lasting education in the world of mental health, therapy and wellness, and the realization of how interconnected the mind and body really are as I embarked on my healing process. It was during this time I realized how difficult it was to navigate the world of mental health¹¹, and how romanticized having a mental illness is especially on the female identifying body in North American society and in the media. Christa Parravani refers to this in her book *Her: A Memoir*, when she writes “I’d learned over the years that some men like a beauty with tragedy. A lovely woman with a dark rotten story is like sweetened chocolate with a hard-caramel center that sticks in the teeth” (Parravani, 114). This statement refers to how women with emotional issues or troubled backgrounds are fetishized by cisgender hetero-men. This is especially evident in mainstream media. In her *New York Times* article “Please Stop Merchandizing Mental Illness: There’s No Way to Make This Pretty”, Rhiannon Picton-James writes:

“Don’t expect an honest depiction [of mental illness] from television and movies either. The 1986 movie “Betty Blue” turned men on to a concept of women with mental illness as impossibly chic, French, and sexually insatiable. More recently

⁹ Hypomania is a symptom associated with Bipolar Type 2, and is a less severe form of mania. While experiencing hypomania, the person may experience an elevated mood, feel highly productive, and be high functioning, but display behaviour that is noticeably different from their typical behaviour.

¹⁰ Manic Depression is another name for Bipolar Type 2

¹¹ Usually in order to get in-patient or out-patient treatment through mental health facilities, patients are put on a two-year waitlist; the answer to your negative emotions are usually prescription drugs and most of the time the side effects to those drugs can be more detrimental than the disorder being treated.

the Netflix series “13 Reasons Why” which has been commissioned for a third season, has explored the reasons a pretty high school teen takes her own life from the point of view of her classmate and colleague, Clay, who is in love with her” (Picton-James, The New York Times).

I do not agree with Picton-James in the sense that she suggests there are currently no honest depictions of mental illness or mood disorders in the media, but I agree that the majority of depictions are glamorized, exaggerated, and inaccurate. In response to the popular representations of women and mental health issues, I identify my work as a feminist art practice. It is important to acknowledge that my experience with mental health is from a woman’s perspective. And I believe that the portrayal of emotional vulnerability in contemporary art can evolve to acknowledge and address real, lived experience. Too often mental illness has been portrayed through the image of the “fallen woman”¹² or emotionally vulnerable women, through the male gaze, which are sexist and archaic representations of emotions that do not reflect real experiences. It creates a dangerous allure to states of mind that are anything but glamorous or romantic.

Something that also should be recognized with portraying mood disorders is that the experience depends on the person undergoing it. Two people with bipolar disorder may not experience the exact same symptoms due to their upbringing or experience; those who suffer from PTSD will always have different triggers¹³. I was once jokingly told by a psychiatrist that symptoms correlated to a mental disorder are like a *buy-one-get-seven-for-free* discount. You will likely be treated for one symptom or emotion but also experience numerous others. For example, people with schizophrenia are mainly treated for the paranoia and the psychosis, but they still experience depression and anxiety. Those with Anorexia Nervosa, while being treated mainly for the eating disorder will also experience and be treated for depression and anxiety associated with their condition while looking into their past to see what lingering experiences may have led to their condition. Then, those who have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder treated for flashbacks will also experience and be treated for depression and anxiety.

¹² Linda Nochlin refers to the use of *the fallen woman* in her article “Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman” published in 1978.

¹³ “People as unlike as these examples, while all having a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, may follow slightly different clinical pathways and vary in their underlying neurological and biological characteristics and causes. Failing to recognize this can mean more time to find the right type of treatment. This can have severe consequences for the quality of life of people with the disorder” (Dr. Tamsyn Van Rheenen, theconversation.com).

There is no way I can make these emotions accessible for everyone to fully understand their complexities, and while I have experienced my fair share of emotional instabilities, it is impossible for me to fully represent mental illness. Every experience is different depending on one's background, gender, social status, culture, and ability or access to receive help. Mental illness is a sickness that is too often invisible in our society, and I create artwork in order to bring some visibility to these hidden concepts and lived experiences.

Process

Most of the time, when I approach the clay, I don't know what I want to do with it. I feel like a child looking at play dough, or even *mud*. That's all clay is, mud, dirt, silica—and oftentimes kaolinite, mica, and quartz. Sometimes I have an idea or shape in mind, but I don't approach the material with blueprints or sketches to plan out the architecture of the sculpture. I can't plan until I've touched the material.

Commercial pre-made clay comes in air-compressed bricks. With my knife or wire, I cut slabs of my desired product, dragging the wire through the clay which slices like butter. I then slide the slab off the brick and slice more – depending on how many pieces I might need. When clay has been compressed for commercial use and not made raw from a recipe by the artist, it usually does not have air bubbles, but I wedge my material anyway to make it more malleable and elastic. The translation of emotional energy begins here.

Sometimes I feel like it is imagined that when I approach a material, I am feeling the specific emotion that I want to translate or represent. But this is not exactly the case, and it is likely best that it stays that way. I don't necessarily use the clay to represent depression, for example. Not only do I find depression to be one of the hardest emotions to represent, but when I am feeling depressed it is usually impossible for me to make myself useful in the studio, let alone able to know how to depict the emotion that is occupying me. Instead, I consider an emotion, look back on experiences I have had with that emotion and how I remember it feeling in my body:

Whether it was the rising mushroom cloud of a panic attack....

The intestinal entangling of an anxiety attack...

The raw mental-scab that you want healed from a traumatic memory....

I think about how they felt, and I start to build on the clay.

Applying my manipulated material on top of itself, I begin the process of building
and building
and building.

This is where I become intertwined with the material. I cannot always put into words where the process comes from.

Sometimes I imagine it to be this destructive, romantic, emotive scene where I throw the clay into oblivion; there's splatters on the studio walls, ceramic shatters; there's drama, but it is not as intense as that. In reality, I disassociate, not to the point that I am not present, but my body goes into an intuitive automatic state that repeats a gesture over and over again onto the material. Sometimes it has been finger-scratches¹⁴, other times teardrop-shaped nodes¹⁵. In other materials, it has been the infinitive slip-knot of wool in crochet¹⁶.

I am not suggesting this intuition is coming from a supernatural place, but I can suggest that it is coming from a deeper internal space somewhere within the subconscious as I think about these emotions.

At this point, I can assume it must be asked whether this practice art therapy? And my response is, no it is not. If my practice was anywhere near therapeutic, I would assume my own emotions would be healed at this point, my hands and body would not be killing me at the end of the day, and after finishing a piece I would feel a sense of release or relief. If it was a practice of art therapy, the pieces would be devoted to my own emotions and experience specifically for the purpose of healing my mental health, which is not the direction I intend. Even though I use my own experience with an emotion as a starting point, the intent is not to heal myself, but rather to communicate these concepts that are difficult to describe. Therefore, I see myself as a translator, attempting to replicate these emotions by hand and then imbedding them in the material.

¹⁴ *Just an Itch*, ceramic sculpture, 2019

¹⁵ *Manifest*, ceramic sculpture 2019

¹⁶ *Always Growing, Never Healing*, crocheted wood and velvet, resin and ceramics, 2019

The Transmutations

The following are three specific pieces which I consider to be *transmutations* of mental energy into a sculptural form. They were created between 2018 and 2020 at Emily Carr University of Art + Design which is situated on the traditional and unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. During my studies here, I acknowledge my position as a visitor and uninvited guest on these unceded lands.

Each of these transmutations resulted in abstracted forms. They appear to be bodily but are often elusive in their exact references. While I have experimented with representing emotions and sentiments of depression, anxiety and trauma in more representational forms before, I have found the concept of affect to resonate more in the tension¹⁷ and process¹⁸ of the specific material being used. When I abstract the work, the form is less literal and more open, allowing the viewer to connect with it, through the presence of affect. Sarah Ahmed writes “feelings are not about the inside getting out or the outside getting in, but rather they ‘affect’ the very distinction of inside and outside in the first place” (Ahmed, 29). Affect is a kind of abstraction of emotion where a sensation is experienced without being reduced to a specific meaning. This leads me to Wassily Kandinsky’s thinking on abstracted forms in his paintings when he writes, “form is the outward expression of its inner meaning” (Kandinsky, 71). I relate this to the need to abstract my work, as it is representing internal meaning informed by emotional energy.

¹⁷ When I’m bringing either ceramics or fabrics to its limits by letting the clay crack, or using the accumulative stitching of crochet etc.

¹⁸ Referring to the repetition of a gesture or technique.

Manifest

Manifest (fig. 1) is the first work where I attempted to represent an emotion in an abstracted way. It is a large ceramic sculpture, with a twisting tower of node-like forms, intertwining in



Fig. 1. *Manifest*, 2019

different directions, entangling in on itself. There are two different textures—the node-like ones that appear to be moving in different directions and the smooth intestinal elements which are evident in small areas of the form and seem to be consumed by the nodes. The surface is glossy, suggesting a wetness in the light and the colour gradually shifts from a fleshy-pink at the bottom to purple, blue, and then black at the very top. Are these forms twisting upward, or are they unraveling downward? I appreciate that it isn't entirely clear. This work was the first of the transmutation process, the act of representing an emotion in a material form. The core of *Manifest* was coiled to a tower-like form until it could not grow any further without collapsing. The nodes were added by hand one by one to the structure until it swallowed the majority of the intestinal coils, suggesting unidentified fingers, or a mass of growths that eventually covered the initial body.

This was the beginning of my collaboration with the material. Considering an initial emotion as a catalyst and building it into the material structure, I would allow the material to work with or against me, embedding it with the emotion and allow it to take its own form. When making this piece I was manifesting and considering the emotion of anxiety. I was reminded of Yayoi Kusama's *Accumulation* sculptures as I worked on this, where she covered sofas, chairs and ladders in soft phallic forms. In her practice, "like the most basic processes of nature, Kusama's plant forms are in a state of continuous multiplication" (Yoshitake et. Al, 23), and what began as covering furniture in her textures, eventually turned into one of her infinity rooms. In her piece *Phalli's Field*, Kusama used "mirrors as multi-reflective devices, transposing the intense physical labour that had marked her earlier works—inscribing countless arcs on enormous canvases, stuffing and sewing hundreds of phalluses—into an instantaneous perceptual experience" (Yoshitake, et. Al. 23). After considering Kusama's way of working I began to more fully recognize the ways in which cathexis and catharsis entered my practice. The act of making over a thousand clay nodes by hand, and attaching each one piece by piece was one of my first material explorations of cathexis. I embedded the piece with the energy of the emotion I sought to represent which was the build-up of an anxiety attack in the body manifesting in a twisting guttural feeling of that emotion. The emotion reverberated through the directional axes of the sculpture—the tension in the coiling of forms building upward and the unraveling in a downward direction. What I later learned in critiques was that although the form was ambiguous, the viewer was able to connect with its oscillating, anxious energy.

Depression is the weight

It's the shard of volcanic rock sinking into the twilight layer after an eruption

It's the fog that never seems to cease.

It's not as forgiving as emptiness because at least then, you don't feel anything. You feel it in your gut—you feel your sternum being crushed, it feels like led trying to pass through the folds of your bowls, and you feel it in your limbs as they feel as if they're 500 pounds.

Sometimes I don't want to get out of bed.

You say you feel empty inside, but it's not as fortunate as not feeling anything at all. Under the spell of depression, you feel so much that it begins to sink you down. You feel every nerve and every inch of sinew stretch as you sink deeper and deeper into your own void.

But you don't care.

When She Thought There Was a Moment of Hope

The next work I made, *When She Thought There Was a Moment of Hope*, 2019 (fig. 2), a 5ft-long ceramic sculpture, depicts twisting and entangled spirals. It was installed on the floor, lying horizontal on a white body pillow. The piece has the same entangling spirals that *Manifest* began with, but without the nodes encapsulating it. *When She Thought There Was a Moment of Hope* still has a purposeful ambiguity that allows for the viewer to enter into the work. Unlike its predecessor which incorporated compressing, coiling, and then modeling the hoard of nodes, the ceramic element here was made through one process of pulling the clay in the same procedure performed to create handles for ceramic cups¹⁹, which was then coiled in onto itself.



Fig. 2 *When She Thought There Was a Moment of Hope*, 2019

¹⁹ Pulling a handle is a pottery technique associated with wheel-throwing, in which you introduce water to a certain amount of clay for your pottery and proceed to stretch it by gently squeezing your hand along the clay, pulling it downward, stretching it into a handle.

The act of cathexis operates in this piece through the concentration of my emotional energy in one particular object and process. When I had approached the material, I was thinking about the idea of hope²⁰, and how difficult it can be to experience when you have a mental illness. It can feel like something you long for so badly can never be reached or achieved. I am not suggesting with this piece that being hopeful is unrealistic or something optimistic cannot be accomplished, but rather how the sensation of constant rejection can feel on the mind and body.

I began compressing and coiling the clay on top of itself and repeated the gesture, allowing the potential for the form to grow into a tall spiraling sculpture.... Until it began to collapse. While maintaining some of its structure, the coils sank into themselves, creating a buckled version of the tower I once saw. I allowed the piece to rest, and then performed the same process I had done before: stretch and coil, and the piece built up itself until it couldn't any longer and instead it sank. This emulated the way that hope feels for me physically, it is like a rise of optimism in the body that then collapses when some desire isn't realized. As I embedded this sensation into the clay, I had hope that the process would allow the piece work in my favour – I had hope that it would build onto itself, but instead it collapsed.

Catharsis functions through the act of bringing this form into a physical space through repetitive movements with the clay. In this way, I sought to bring an emotion into a physical space and give it a tangible form. This form is then given a life of its own through the process-based transformation²¹ until it finds its final resting place on a body-pillow on a gallery floor. The pillow reflects a couple things including the feeling of not wanting to get out of bed in a spell of depression, a hospital pillow on which you rest after surgery, or even a pillow your therapist offers you during a session. It is a means of both physical and mental support. Similar to what sculptor Louise Bourgeois does with her work, I intend to instill a sense of familiarity and estrangement with this piece. It looks bodily, but it also resembles an aspect of the body in pain or in turmoil. However, for Bourgeois, her art was often a manifestation of her own anxieties.²²

²⁰ Hope, noun: a belief that something you want will happen – oxfordlearnersdictionary.com

²¹ The piece is bisque fired to 1060 degree Celsius to transform the clay from greenware to earthenware. I then used three different glazes which were glaze-fired to 1222 degree Celsius to change it to stoneware

²² “Her sculptures represented ‘emotional states’ but they had been unemotionally presented and self-contained if they were to be socially accepted. Her spirals are rational – mathematically correct – constructions however irrationally compulsive they are. Indeed, they suggest that repetition compulsion is the basis of her compulsive creativity, or at least one of its ‘motivations.’ It is worth noting that serial Minimalism is compulsively repetitive – the same feelings in her journals, impulse to repeat a ritualistic experience” (Kuspit, 25).

The act of supporting and cushioning this ceramic sculpture on the custom-made body pillow was my introduction to the possibility of fibre and soft sculpture. It brought the notion of *care* into my work that I had never explored before, not only with its final display, but the act of constructing and hand-stitching the pillow introduced a gesture of mending and comfort. I felt the work needed a cushion perhaps to protect it. I then noticed an emergent relationship between ceramics and fabrics, and wanted to explore further how I could bring these two materials together.

Bodily trauma—

—the negative memory of some sort of pain inflicted on the body feels different from mental trauma. Depending on the type of infliction, the sensation in the memory will feel much different. Physical trauma or injury will feel different than sexual trauma, and—as I’m sure—it differs from person to person, and—as always—is abstract. For me, who’s experience the latter, Bodily Trauma starts at the throat, a sensation of expansion I’d imagine that is similar to an allergic reaction.

It’s hard to breathe.

A numb feeling washes over the body similar to the sensation it had felt when it had been pinned to the wall....

...Then there’s a gross feeling....

like the stomach reacting to rancid food.

It’s hard to breathe.

The eyes flutter like moths fleeing darkness as the mind tries to get out of the memory. The body’s frozen, the skin starts to crawl remembering the betraying touch of the flesh.

It’s a weight that’s not the same as the slow, sinking rock as depression; it’s the floor that unexpectedly dissolves under your feet and sends you spiralling down, only for your eyes to snap open as you experience impact, waking up from the horrible nightmare that is the repulsive memory.

Gasping for air, feeling naked inside and out, and all that can be done is to curl up and hold yourself.

Because it feels like no one else will and no one else can.

Always Growing, Never Healing

On December 19th 2017, after surviving an assault, I contracted a staph infection that over the course of a few hours was fast moving to my brain. Despite the infection being internal, you



could see it travelling under my skin as a what looked like a small red thread that pooled in some areas. It surfaced at the back of my neck, wrapped around me and then pooled in my forehead where it began travelling under my brow and into my skull. Delirious and whilst experiencing a forest fire inside my head, upon obtaining treatment I had learned that if I had waited no more than three more hours, I would have become braindead, and if I had waited beyond eight hours of infection, I would have lost my life. While this

Fig. 3. *Always Growing, Never Healing*, first iteration, 2019

fortunately did not happen, this experience is something that still haunts me and has been looming

over my head for the past two years. With the work *Always Growing, Never Healing*, I wanted to find a way to represent the raw, invisible wound I continue to feel inside.

When She Thought There was a Moment of Hope introduced the use of fabric and fibres as a method to bring the notion of care into my practice. I questioned how could I take fabrics and fibres to its limits and collaborate with the material in the same way as I had with ceramics. Fabrics, in contrast to ceramics with its material properties of coldness, fragility, and unpredictability, is more commonly perceived to suggest warmth, strength, protection, and comfort. Therefore, I wanted to explore if this material could transmute emotions in the same way as I had discovered working with ceramics.

Always Growing, Never Healing (fig 3.) is an installation depicting a tethered entangled mass made out of various shades of crocheted red yarn and red velvet growing around encapsulated ceramic tumour-like shapes and then bleeding into pools of velvet ribbon on the floor. This piece has had no final form, instead it has continued to grow and expand the entire second year of the master's program, and will continue to grow over the years to come. Working with emotions connected to trauma, I am trying to depict some unidentifiable bodily mass that suggests an entity that it is bleeding, and scabbed by the resin elements. As with the two previous works discussed, it is unclear whether the piece is growing into itself or unraveling (fig 4).

Trauma is one of those emotions that takes the most toll on the body. A lot of mental health workers in my own experience, while treating trauma, will ask where in your body do you feel this traumatic memory? When you suffer from PTSD a lot of the times you feel tension in your chest, or in your gut and feels equivalent to butterflies in the stomach. This is what I am trying to address with this installation. There is a suggestion that these materials are tumorous or a disease, potentially growing inside of the body which has either been excised or has emerged in its own

life form.

Despite the outcome bordering between the decorative and the grotesque, this was one of the most laborious pieces I have ever created (fig. 4). Catharsis was a beginning point, while the performative aspect of the making echoed the physical and psychic trauma that informed the work. The process of slicing the red velvet resembled a violent action sustained over a long period of time. I noticed how much the velvet would emulate flesh or skin when cut, with fibres holding together like little sinews while they also left red, haunting scars in the



Fig. 4 process image of cutting of the first five metres of velvet, 2019

cutting matts.

Cathexis came back into my practice when I began crocheting velvet and wool into organic, bodily forms that resembled brains, an enlarged cluster of bacteria, as well as intestinal matter.

The act of sitting comfortably and crocheting the velvet and wool allowed these materials to grow into an uncontrollable and obscure shape, letting it mutate in a way. I wanted to question if it was possible to depict something so dark or emotive like trauma, or bodily trauma with a material that is usually used to warm, to protect, and to stitch, or to decorate.

Art historian Griselda Pollock refers to trauma as a “personal psychic shattering” (Pollock, 10). When you’ve survived a trauma, specifically to sexual assault, I feel that you become a different version of yourself. I remember feeling as if every molecule in my body had been mutated, replaced, and jumbled. In my experience with PTSD, I feel like a wound that has been stitched and scabbed over somewhere in my body has the ability to constantly rip open and bleed out the next time I experience a flashback. The use of cathexis in this piece was not meant to heal myself from my own experience, but instead to transfer this wounded energy into a physical form in a way that it could depict something that is ambiguously growing or unraveling. (see fig. 6).



Fig. 6, *Always Growing, Never Healing* stage 2, 2019

Always Growing, Never Healing is made entirely out of red material with exception to some of the ceramic elements. I relate this to the artist Claire Ziesler who is known for frequently incorporating the colour red into her installations. She works with the colour as if it is a medium itself. She writes, “I adore red. It says structure. It says vibrancy, life. I think I must dream in red.... To me, it’s a constructive colour. I don’t think I really use it as a colour” (Taft, et al. 266). I work with the colour red in this piece to point to its bodily energy whether flesh or blood. While slicing the velvet and

draping the hanging elements, I thought of how in operas, whenever a character was eviscerated, the blood would be represented as red ribbon. Scott Bucklow writes, “According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word ‘blood’ may share its origins with the word ‘bloom’. Roses bloom, but the technical term for the iron that flows from haematite (or ‘blood stone’) in the furnace is also ‘bloom’” (Bucklow, 132). This offers an interesting expansion to the concept behind this piece, as it is ambiguous whether it is intertwining or unraveling; whether it is dying or growing; bleeding or thriving. It is very similar to how it feels when living with the state of mind that it is representing. A lot of art can be compared to this idea, once again returning to the thought of art as a regurgitation or a petrification of emotions. I can relate this to how Frida Kahlo represented her chronic pain and emotional turmoil in her self-portraits, or that Ross Bleckner’s paintings from 1986 onward were “a response to the AIDS crisis. Later paintings also manifest his sense of loss stemming from the disease” (Guggenheim.org). Francesco Goya’s *Disasters of War* drawings were a representation of the political devastation around him, and even Louise Bourgeois’ work was an embodiment of her emotional turmoil from her childhood and complicated relationship with sexuality. All of these artists’ work stemmed from inner or outer trauma. Similarly, my work exists as an artefact of turmoil and tumultuous emotional energy.

By way of a conclusion

Often abstract, challenging emotions and mental illness are fertile subjects to work with especially when they are widely misunderstood. Shifting difficult emotions from the body into the three-dimensional realm of ceramics and textiles allows for both a personal and aesthetic transformation. Working with subjects like mental illness, emotions, and anxiety, and transmuting them into the physical realm brings attention to their material forms within the public sphere. The process of working with difficult emotions coupled with a longstanding investment in physical labour and repetition has proven to be a source of personal artistic inspiration. With that said, I need to highlight that this is a difficult challenge, because I want to acknowledge that there will never be a concrete form to depict how trauma and mental illness feels, particularly because it is important to recognize how these experiences can differ and shift from person to person. How I have experienced my personal trauma will not be the same as how one might have felt from a similar experience, or to someone who

has survived political trauma, or domestic trauma etc. However, as I move forward with my practice, I will embrace the value in acknowledging these emotional vibrations by bringing them to the public sphere in order to create a dialogue, and an empathic atmosphere. Displaying this work in a gallery setting allows for the subject matter to be made available beyond a therapeutic context through aesthetically charged forms. These iterations are important. With stigma, representation and knowledge around mental health constantly changing, offering artworks that take up this subject will engage more current representations to reflect the shifts and affects in clinical diagnosis. I will be pursuing this with ceramics and fibre sculpture, as well as exploring how other mediums in visual art and creative writing can be used to convey these ideas. I have found my voice through the use of a certain rawness in language, material, and visual sensibility in order to bring aesthetic form to these emotional vibrations. This way of working is not about the viewer connecting with the specific trauma but rather opens up a space for contemplation of our interior lives that are all too often too elusive to share other than through material, abstract and affective works of art. As I continue to add more red hyperbolic crochet into my installation over the years to come, its form will grow and change, sometimes becoming more monstrous and sometimes becoming more beautiful. Sentiments will fade, wounds can be stitched, and infections will disperse...

But that doesn't mean they didn't once exist.

And that doesn't mean they cannot be acknowledged and better understood.

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