

What Moves Us: Emotional Understanding and Affective Engagement Through Material Practices

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“What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place.” -Sara Ahmed

Intro

During my time at Emily Carr I have experienced major growth and change, both in my art practice and my personal life. As an artist I have always defined myself as a printmaker and painter, but in my first summer intensive at Emily Carr I began printing on fabric which led me to expand my practice to include sculpture. In my personal life, in the short three years at Emily Carr, I have experienced two international moves and a divorce. I have transitioned to a move back to my original home in the State of Utah after living abroad for 15 years, where not only did I experience reverse culture shock but also had to begin navigating a new life as a single mom of three while dealing with the wounds that we were left with as a family. Through all of these changes and transitions I found myself in a place of confusion and emotional distress. I became acutely aware of the links between my emotional state and how it was manifesting in my physical body. As I have been picking up the pieces and adjusting to my new life I have realized that the place of transition which is a messy, blurry, undefined state, is also a state where transformation can begin.

My research is a material investigation into processing and communicating this shifting and elusive territory of transition where contradictions merge, overlap and coexist. My work exists in the space of “inbetween-ness”: the place where weakness meets strength, discomfort meets comfort, emotive meets somatic, the unpleasant meets beauty and the injured meets healing. I am concerned with the felt experiences, both physiological and psychological, that comprise and shape our being-in-the-world. I take an intimate look at the boundaries between emotive and visceral, as well as cognitive and sensory experiences. I am interested in the sensations that are felt and remain in the body and mind after adverse or distressing

experiences. My material practice strives to create a space for communication for the sensations, emotions and experiences that are often intimate and unspeakable. As an artist I utilize visual language through the use of simple materials and everyday objects as a means to express my felt experiences, sensations and impressions where words are an inadequate means to express such deep and buried residues of adverse experiences. In Griselda Pollock's book *After-affects/After-images* she quotes Mieke Bal, a Dutch cultural theorist saying, "What kind of semiotic do we need to apply in order to read the unsaid, to recover the repressed, to interpret the distorting sign of unspeakable experience?" (59) The method I choose to both deal with and communicate my inner experiences is through my material investigation. My investigation concerns whether these emotions and inner experiences can be transferred and embodied in the materials and objects that I find and use to create my work. My aim is to find new insights and perspectives into the possibilities of communicating through materials within an art context.

My work comes out of an emotional responsiveness which relates to my personal experiences at the time the work is being made. During my time at Emily Carr I have investigated evolving themes such as displacement (a state of discomfort), departure (a state of detachment), and home (a place to seek comfort). The body is almost always the site of my rumination, where I focus on both emotive and visceral sensations, as well as cognitive and sensory experiences. The simple materials and processes that I use in my work become the catalyst not only for the generation of ideas but as means to emotional understanding. The physical act of making is both intuitive and instinctive, which satisfies the primal desire to be grounded to a tangible world amongst emotional and physical upheaval. My work is driven by an empathy for materials which leads me to view the materials as my collaborators. My investigation concerns whether these emotions and inner experiences can be transferred and

embodied in the materials and objects that I use to create my work. My aim is to find new insights and perspectives into the possibilities of how the materials can both hold and communicate emotional and visceral experiences and in turn, the means in which materials can communicate these experiences to the viewer.

Displacement (discomfort), Departure (detachment), Home (comfort)

I have noticed that while I have maintained a strong material investigation into Affect Theory throughout my graduate work, there have been shifts in the content of my work based on the personal experiences that I was going through at the time. Early on, I was focusing on the concepts of displacement which brought feelings of discomfort.



Figure 1. Jill Saxton Smith. *Piecing Together*, assorted metal findings, clothe, 34" x 32", 2018.

One of my pieces that I did the first year at Emily Carr was when I had just moved to Guatemala City. I felt great discomfort there. I did not know the language and struggled to

accomplish everyday basic tasks. The city has a very high crime rate and although I lived in a relatively safe neighborhood, I would still hear stories of murders and robberies that happened in the stores that I shopped in and neighborhoods that I walked in. The work titled, "Piecing Together" was made during this time. It was made from bits and pieces that I picked up off the ground on my daily walks exploring my new home. I sewed them in between two pieces of fabric and left it outside to be exposed to the wet humid climate which resulted in the rust staining the metal pieces and fabric. This collection of bits and pieces became information or data about the place that I lived. It was my attempt to understand and process my new home.



Figure 2. Jill Saxton Smith. *Together We Are Complete (with Detail)*,
hand woven fabric, chicken wire, thread, 7' x 2', 2019.

My work then evolved into themes of detachment and departure. At this point I was preparing to move from Guatemala City after making many friends and feeling very settled. I was also going through many difficulties in my marriage and decided to separate. This piece titled *Together We Are Complete* is about how the deficiencies in two adults can form a stable yet dysfunctional relationship and the struggles that come from trying to emotionally detach from one another. The cloth was sourced from remnants of Mayan women's blouses traditionally woven by women. This piece also represents on a broader level the feminine experience of domesticity and the complicated and traumatic history and interdependent relationship that the United States and Guatemala share.

A sudden move back to my home state of Utah brought me to focus on themes such as the desire to seek comfort and finding a sense of home. I have observed that when comfort exists there are often residues of pain and discomfort that remain. Pain and discomfort are precisely why we seek comfort. I am fascinated by how this idea complicates my perceptions of comfort and directly questions what I think I know about comfort.

I investigated these ideas in my interim installation called "Comfort Enough" where the presences of discomfort and pain were both felt. In this installation, I presented items that referenced pillows, beds, and blankets: items that often provide us domestic comforts.



Figure 3. Jill Saxton Smith. *Untitled (included in the Comfort Enough Exhibition)*, Fabric, goose feathers, wire.
32" x 32". 2019.

This untitled work was part of my *Comfort Enough* interim exhibition. In this sculpture I was exploring the familiar and old childhood feelings that flooded back to me during my relocation. I was intrigued by how those memories of home linger with us. These private intimate objects such as beds and pillows that offer comfort also hold memories of pain and discomfort. The pillows are sewn from sheer fabric and stuffed with goose feathers from my childhood feather mattress. Some of the shafts of the feathers pierce through the fabric making the pillow, when viewed close up, uncomfortable. The thick twisted wire traps and presses down on the pillows forcing the pillows into a new shape. The rusted wires leave imprints of stains on the white sheer fabric. The wire is heavy and seems as if it has been holding down the pillows for a long time. I am interested in the ideas of seeking comfort amongst discomfort. The heavy and

often painful emotional burdens that we carry to our beds. My pieces are often an intimate look both at the private objects of the home and the emotional and psychological experiences experienced in the home.

Another piece that is part of this exhibition is a hammock made of fabric with dog hair and small feathers felted into it. The dog hair was gathered from the daily brushing of our family pet in efforts to keep his hair from gathering on the beds, couches and floor of our home, which is a constant struggle. The hammock is suspended by cotton ropes that have been dyed with rust. The hammock is more child-sized rather than adult sized. Although the hammock is small, the piece itself is very large and spans outside of the gallery space and is taking up most of the gallery room. The fabric is very lightweight and its ability to hold a body is questionable. The white dog hair and goose feathers from first glance seem so soft and inviting but after thinking it over would be irritating and messy. The hammock is extremely soft and inviting but unrealistic and nonfunctional. The hammock is challenging our ideas of comfort found in the domestic home and whether or not they are realistic and attainable.



Figure 4. Jill Saxton Smith. *Untitled*. fabric, dog hair, goose down, string. 25'x 2'. 2019.



Figure 5. Jill Saxton Smith. *Untitled*. Fabric, nails, rust. 2019.

This untitled piece was also part of my interim exhibition. It involved piercing fabric with multiple nails. When I was creating this piece, I was thinking about the ways in which we search for comfort, particularly physical ways such as self-harm or ritual self-flagellation as a form of emotional relief. The multiple rusted nails that have been pierced through the sheer fabric compromise the fabric's strength. The large amount of nails that the fabric is being forced to hold is testing its limit, demonstrating the surprising strength it has despite how sheer and delicate it looks. The process of making this piece was very therapeutic as I repeatedly pierced through the fabric with each nail. With the repetition of both action and sound it was easy to go into a meditative state. This piece was heavy in both an emotional sense and a physical sense.

I then used this piece to create prints on the wall. I did this by hanging it up on the wall with nails and then spraying it with an acid solution to cause the nails to rust and over time and transfer to the wall. This was done five times leaving the nail marks and the ghost of the original piece. This process took about three days to get all five prints on the wall. The marks and residues left on the walls refer to the emotional traces of unhealed wounds that are left and resurface in ordinary day to day interactions and situations.

The rusted nails and wire, the marks and residues left on the wall and on the pillows held tension in the work by referring not only to a pain but also to the absence of something that was once there. In doing this, I was allowing the concepts of dislocation and discomfort an equal presence to the sense of home and concepts of comfort while distorting the boundaries between the uncomfortable and the comfortable. Since my interim thesis I have focused on these themes and the use of domestic items that are connected to comfort.

The Body as a Receiver

My body is almost always the site of my rumination, where I focus on both the emotive and visceral sensations, as well as the cognitive and sensory experiences. My methodology begins with receiving the impressions from experiences and encounters from the outside world inside my body. My material practice is a means to processing, understanding and releasing the impressions I am left with back out into the world. This is similar to what Leonardo Drew, a contemporary artist based in Brooklyn, New York, describes as his methodology: “Art is fed by experiences allowing it to influence the body. The body is the receiver that finds its way out through the processes and materials” (“Traveling & Making”). I am intrigued by the transmutation that takes place as impressions move from the external to the internal and back out again to the outside world.

Theorist Sara Ahmed speaks about the passage of impressions through the body from the outside world in her essay, "Collective Feelings or, The Impressions Left by Others". Ahmed's essay is centered around affect theory and the politics of affect. Ahmed explores the capabilities of emotions and their functions in forming an individual and as a collective experience. Ahmed materializes the abstract concept of emotions by physically linking emotions to the body and to signs. She suggests that "the 'doing' of emotions is bound up with the sticky relation between signs and bodies: emotions work by working through signs and on bodies to materialize the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds" (33). What we feel emotionally is felt in the body first as a physical sensation which leaves an impression on the skin. These impressions create boundaries between the inside and the outside worlds. The skin through sensations connects or disconnects us from others through intentional or involuntary encounters. These emotional responses that result from the moment of contact establish bodily proximity between others. This proximity is shaped and reshaped and is dictated by the past histories and encounters.

I frequently reference the skin and body in my work. This interplay between the materials and processes I use and my body engages a dialogue which is both symbolic and physiological as the emotions are felt in the body and on the skin. I am very conscious of the size, the shape, the materials used and how the work is installed in relation to my body and the bodies of the viewers. Cloth is one of the many materials that I use to evoke both the corporeality and emotionality of the body. My work often holds tension, and I do this by testing the cloth to its limits. An example of this tension was used metaphorically in my work called *Child's Blanket*. This sculpture was made from my very worn childhood blanket. The bottom of the blanket was cast in heavy concrete and suspended a few inches off the ground by the corners of the blanket. The weight of the cement pulled at the seemingly fragile blanket almost to the point of tearing;

this demonstrated both the fragility and strength of the cloth or metaphorically, and the fragility and strength of the emotionality and physicality of the body.



Figure 6. Jill Saxton Smith. *Child's Blanket*. *Blanket*, concrete, dirt, roots. 24"x 67". 2020.

I have reflected on my choice of materials and how the materials called to me when I made this piece. My mom brought over some boxes of my childhood things when she was cleaning out of her house. In one of the boxes was my early childhood comfort blanket. I was going to throw it in the garbage as it was worn, stained and not of use to me anymore but the sentimental connection which I had to the blanket was still intact, this made it difficult to throw away. I

reflected on the sentiments that were embodied in the blanket, how the blanket holds and communicates affect and how emotional experiences are transferred and communicated back to me. This is what Ahmed refers to as “the stickiness of signs” or the ability of emotion to transfer to objects or bodies or in other words projecting one’s experiences and feelings onto the object. Projection was first coined by Sigmund Freud in his book the *Origins of Psycho-Analysis*. It is the process of displacing one’s feelings onto a different person, animal, or object (Freud). Artists who thrive in their creative work through an immense attraction and deep empathetic relationship with the physical do so through a need to infuse, through imaginative projection, our psyche into objects and materials. I want to contrast this with my desire to use concrete. The concrete doesn’t hold such sentimental feelings like the blanket; instead it was my sensitivity to the somatic affectivity to the material that drew me to it. The concrete possesses what Jane Bennett calls “Thing Power,” or the force that objects possess that draws us near to them or calls to us to them (“The Force of Things” 348).

Child’s Blanket is referencing how early childhood experiences are held and subconsciously manifest in adult behaviors. Physician and psychoanalyst Esther Bick, whose research into early child development and methodologies are used by many child psychologists today, speaks about psychic envelopes. This is the boundary between the internal world and the external worlds and how these worlds relate, influence and interconnect to each other. Bick first describes the psychic envelope as the psychic skin. She discusses the importance of the skin during infant relations and development in her paper “The Experience of the Skin in Early Object Relations” (1968). Bink describes the function of the psychic skin as a primary container and how it can be felt to hold together all the parts of the self.

I am inspired by other artists that also often reference the emotionality and physicality of the body in their work such as Latin American artists Doris Salcedo and Teresa Margolle. Their

visceral art work centers around affect through the exploration of everyday items and materials. Salcedo's delicate work titled *A Flor de Piel*, 2014, which translates to "skin flower," is a collection of hundreds of individual rose petals that have been sutured together to form a large delicate shroud that is displayed on the ground. This work was made in response to the kidnapping and torture of a nurse. The phrase "a flor de piel" is a common idiomatic expression used in Latin America referring to someone who is overcome with profound emotion. In this work, Salcedo summons the tortured body, delicate skin and the wave of emotions that come with grief from the loss of a loved one.

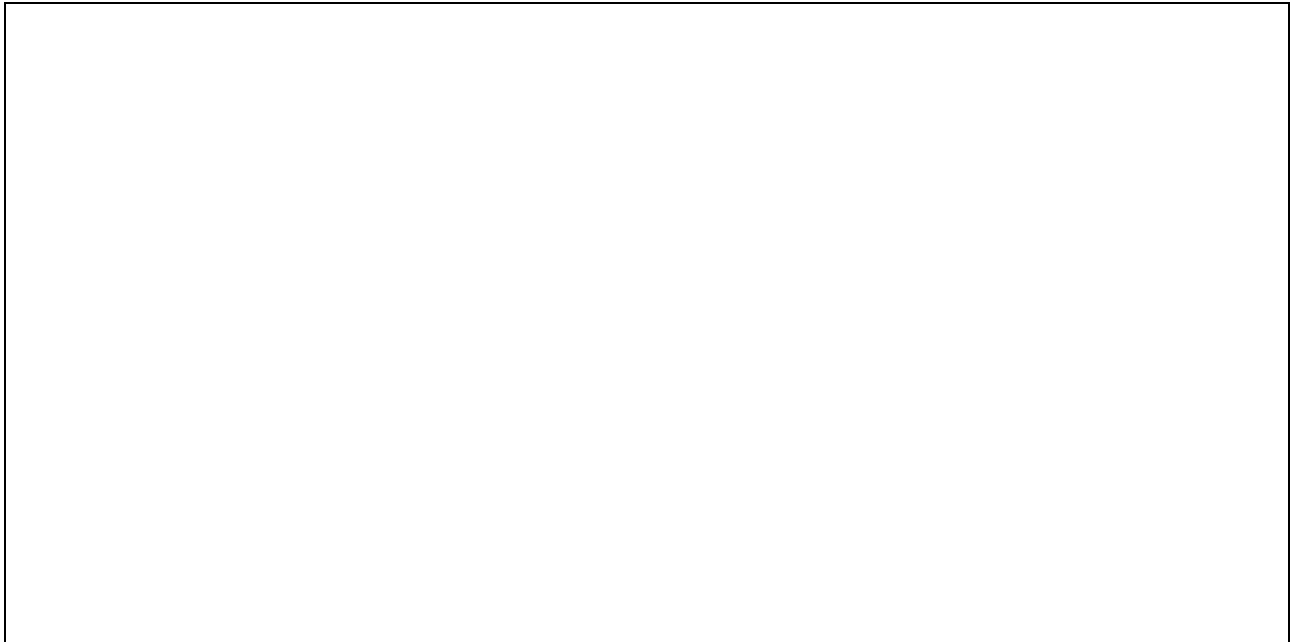


Figure 7. Doris Salcedo. *A Flor de Piel*. 2012.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is an image of Doris Salcedo's "A Flor de Piel" being exhibited at the White Cube Mason's Yard Gallery, London in 2012.

The Psychic Skin



Figure 8. Jill Saxton Smith. *The Containers*. s.c.o.b.y, wire, thread, rocks, cement. 6"x 9". 2019.

As a result of my reflections on Bick's writings about this "psychic skin", I created a piece called, *The Containers*. This piece was made by stretching, sewing and drying fresh SCOBY's (symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast)¹ over simple wire armatures which resulted in a semi translucent skin like film. While I was making a health tea for my family, I was drawn to the nature of the SCOBY: that it is alive and has the ability to grow and thicken to the shape of the container it was placed in. The "mother" SCOBY can be divided and produced more SCOBY's as long as I was feeding it sugar and green tea. The color and texture of the fresh SCOBY

¹ SCOBY is used in making kombucha tea. The tea is produced for its health benefits by fermenting sugar and green tea using a *symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast* (SCOBY) commonly called a "mother". The tea is originally thought to come from Russia or Eastern Europe.

resembles a layer of fat from the body. When it was dried it became semi-transparent and very strong and resembled a layer of skin.

While the SCOBY was growing, I was able to layer pieces of medical gauze on it. Over time it enveloped the gauze and became part of the growing culture. The process of stitching the thick, opaque, moist SCOBY material gave the somatic feeling of stitching actual flesh. As I did this I heard a soft crunching sound as the needle tore through the thick fleshing material. The smell of the fresh SCOBY has a strong pungent smell which also lent to the somatic process of the work. After the SCOBY material was stitched on the armature, I allowed it to dry. As it dried the opaque flesh-like orb became very thin and semi-translucent. Inside the orbs contain rocks that were coated in blue cement. The strength of the material surprised me. This was demonstrated both in the ability to hold the rocks and the ability to not tear through the stitches as the material experienced significant shrinkage during the drying process. The dried SCOBY film physically resembles skin as what Sara Ahmed refers to skin as a barrier that divides the inside from the outside and it is through pain that we make this distinction (28). It also metaphorically represents the psychic skin functioning as a container to hold our emotion and a barrier between our inner emotions and the outside world. As Ahmed speaks about physical skin she expounds more on this concept the physical skin morphs into an emotional skin: "It is through experiences such as pain that we come to have a sense of our skin as a bodily surface, as something that keeps us apart from others, but as something that also 'mediates' the relationship between internal and external, or inside and outside" (29).



Figure 9. Jill Saxton Smith. *Untitled (sutured cloth wipes)*. Facial wipes, makeup, suture thread, wax. 32"x 72". 2019.

Another sculpture that metaphorically represented the body or more specifically the skin is *Untitled (sutured cloth facial wipes)*. In this piece I collected my used facial wipes. As I wiped off my make-up I had to face the mirror and stare at my natural face. The makeup from the day was transferred to the cloth wipes leaving the fabrics soiled. The cloth metaphorically represents

a second skin or rather a proxy skin to hold the emotional stress from the day. The used facial wipes bare the unconscious mark making of the daily action of wiping off my makeup each night before bed. Similar to American artist Mary Kelly's work in her exhibition titled, *Post-Partum Document*² where she used the stains on her son's diaper as recording of evidence of the daily unseen labor of a woman and mothers, the stains on each facial wipe became a recording of the passage of time and proof of each day that I was present and alive. I connected the cloths using a surgeon's knot to reference the suture which is used to connect two parts of the body together so as to make it whole again. It also metaphorically represented each day being stitched back together. These strips of sutured cloth were then dipped in wax that stiffened the fabric or froze it in time and gave the cloth a more skin-like surface.

At first the brown and pink marks left on the facial wipes are not clearly identifiable as makeup but are viewed more as abstract watercolor paintings or smear marks made of something much less pleasant such as bodily excrements. Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow's work, although much more figurative than mine, evokes similar feelings of discomfort, repulsion and attraction. Like my work, she maintains a strong correlation between materials, the body and emotional states and experiences. Her castings titled *Self Portrait* particularly stuck me in correlation to the skin. The casting of her body is arranged as a flattened fragmented body. It is as if the structure of the body has been drawn out and only the skin has been left in a pile. Szapocznikow wrote, "of all the manifestations of the ephemeral the human body is the most vulnerable, the only source of all joy, all suffering and all truth" ("Body Traces").

² *Post-Partum Document* is a six-year exploration of the mother-child relationship. When it was first shown at the ICA in London in 1976, the work provoked tabloid outrage because Documentation I incorporated stained nappy liners. Each of the six-part series concentrates on a formative moment in her son's mastery of language and her own sense of loss, moving between the voices of the mother, child and analytic observer. Informed by feminism and psychoanalysis, the work has had a profound influence on the development and critique of conceptual art ("Post-Partum Document").

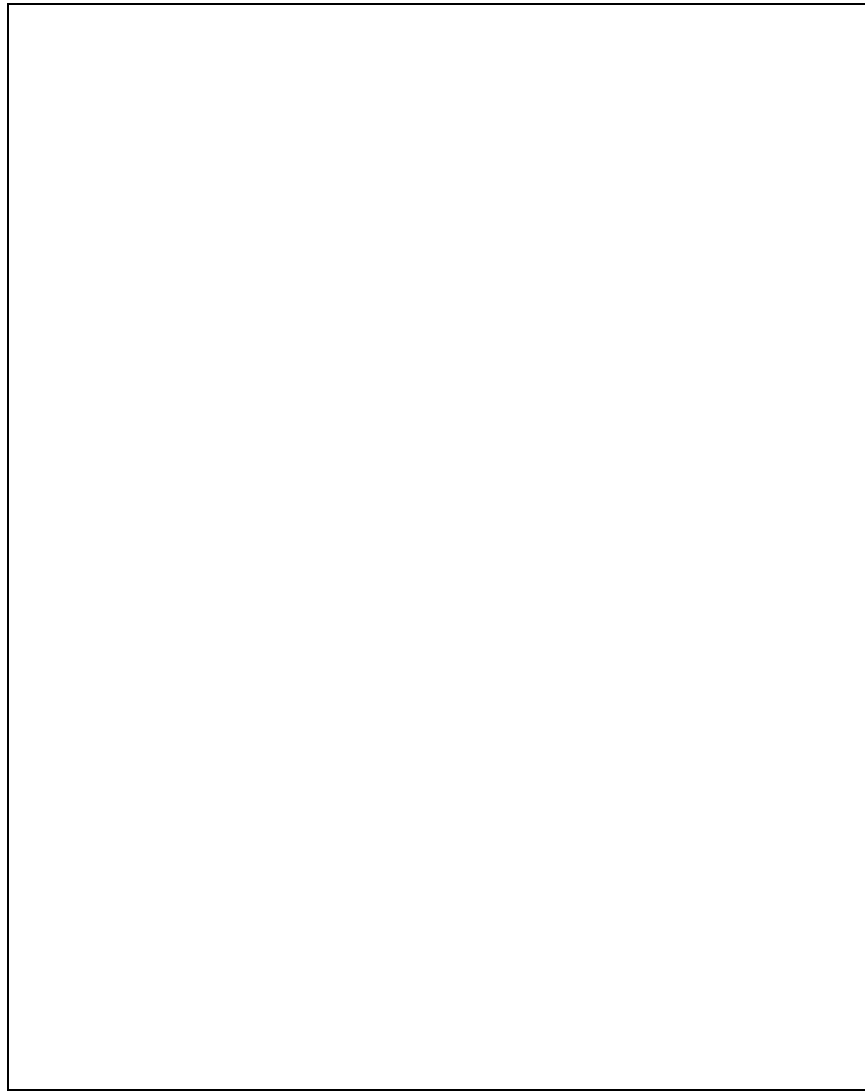


Figure 10. Alina Szapocznikow, *Self-portrait*. Polyester and polychrome wood. *Herbarium*, 1971. *Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is an image of Alina Szapocznikow's "Self-portrait" which is a casting of her own body and face and then flattened onto a wooden panel.*

Domestic Skin

In recent events such as the pandemic and political unrest in the US, I have turned to considering the home as a type of domestic skin. Like the corporeal skin, the home is also a container or barrier between the outside and inside worlds: private vs public. I want to bring

attention to the material qualities of these mundane domestic objects and the mundane yet intimate activities that are tied to them. I am also considering how these domestic items become a stand-in for the body and the body's inner and outer experiences that happen inside the home and how these objects would be interpreted by the public audience.

One domestic object that was brought to my attention was my son's pillow and the marks that were made on it from my nine year old's nose bleed during the night. The pillow was left with two large blood stains on it from two different occurrences. The first stain is lighter and brownish; the other is much darker and overlaps the first with a more defined shape and it's much more reddish. At first I was horrified to discover the stains and I was going to throw the pillow away but decided to keep it because it seemed to me to be very beautiful and somewhat sentimental because it contains my son's blood and some more subtle marks made by his drool while he was sleeping. I decided to make a sculpture from it by emptying out most of the stuffing and inserting wooden stretcher bars in it that are normally used to stretch a canvas. The stretcher bars provide structure to the pillow enabling it to stand freely. The wooden stretcher and down feathers are seen through the semi translucent fabric of the pillow.

With this body of work I'm interested in the idea of the stain, the mark that was left behind, the stamp of a moment of time that there was a bodily experience, the act of unconscious mark making. I like the very literal connection the stain has to the body. I am also concerned with the emotional responses that are evoked by stains from the body. They are generally viewed as disgusting and a little shameful. I felt ashamed when I first saw the condition of my son's pillow, something so intimate that it needs to be hidden under a pillowcase, thrown out, bleached out. As a mother I also felt worry for my son and felt helpless in trying to remedy his recurring nosebleed.



Figure 11. Jill Saxton Smith. *Nightly Nose Bleed*. Pillow, wood stretcher bars, feathers. 20" x 28". 2020.

This piece opened up a lot of questions surrounding motherhood, the invisible daily experience of women engaged in domestic labour and what it means to have my son's personal object and blood in the work. As I have reflected on these questions, I have turned to Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, where she challenged the conventional images of mother and child with the use of found domestic objects. The use of the stain both on the diapers she displayed and the stains on my son's pillow link our pieces together but I am more interested in the section R3 where Kelly describes her anxiety following an accident in which her son drank liquid aspirin and had to be rushed to the hospital. This is an excerpt from her handwritten note: "Sometimes I forget to give him his medicine which makes me feel totally irresponsible or I just feel I wish it was all over i.e. he was "grown up" but my mother says it never ends the worry just goes on and on" ("Post-Partum Document"). I can relate to this raw statement as she depicts motherhood as a demanding and complex relationship and the stress, anxiety and great responsibilities that mothers carry as they take care of their children.

Colombian born artist Doris Salcedo is an artist that also often utilizes private domestic items that are emotionally charged by wear and tear of everyday life. Her visceral work which focuses around historical incidences of mass violence, trauma, racism, and colonialism. In one of Salcedo's haunting series she uses furniture of victims of political violence such as dressers, armours and chairs and fills the empty spaces with concrete while encasing the under clothing and other personal items inside. The wear marks left on the furniture and the glimpses of personal items conjures up the ordinary, everyday life of the victim which brings the viewer to relate with the victim in a very raw, intimate way. By filling the empty spaces of the furniture up with concrete she is representing the body or rather the absence of the body. It is also signifying the emotional void that comes with the immense grief from the loss of a loved one.

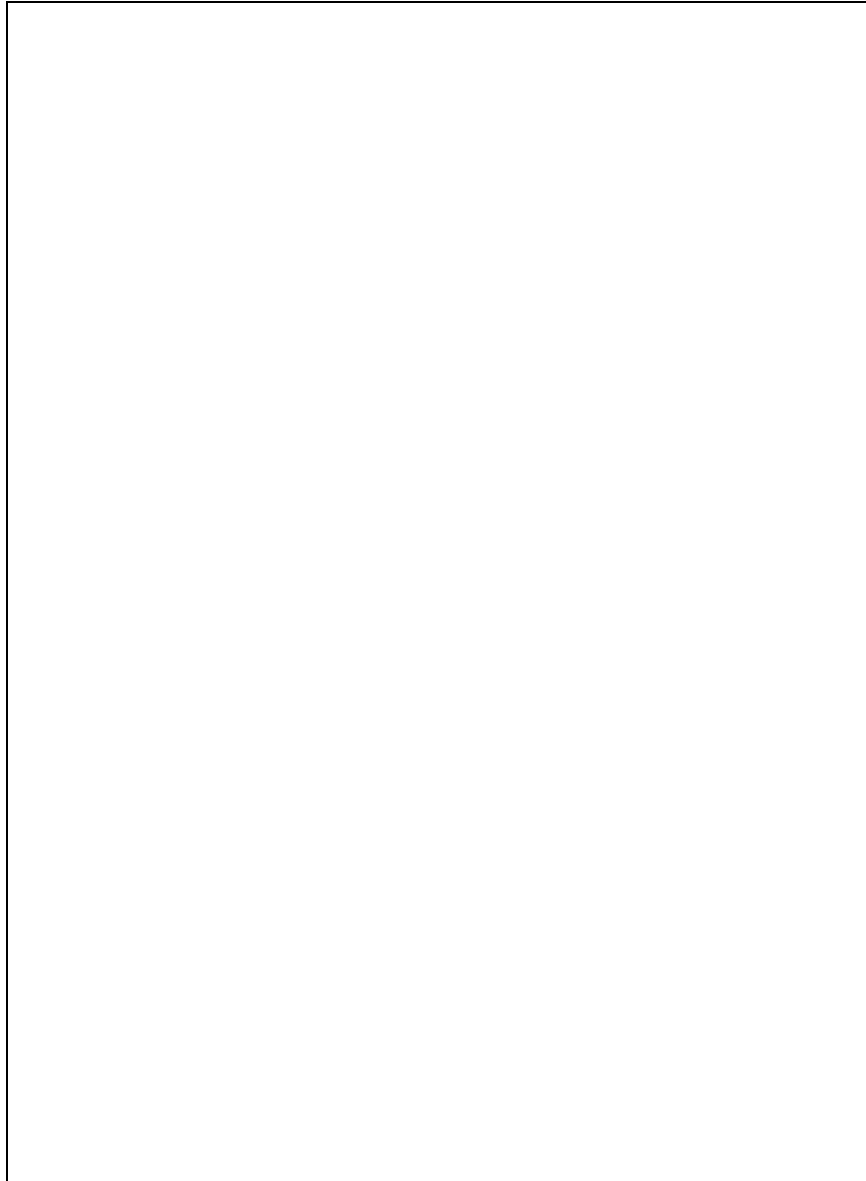


Figure 12. Doris Salcedo. Untitled. 1995.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is an image of Doris Salcedo's "Untitled" work which is a large wooden wardrobe where the empty spaces between the shelves have been filled with cement.

Emotional Understanding through Materials and Processes

I am seeking to communicate an emotional experience in my work similar to Louise Bourgeois' aim when she said, "It is not an image that I am seeking. It's not an idea. It is an

emotion you want to recreate, an emotion of wanting, of giving and of destroying" ("Moma | Louise Bourgeois"). I often feel an emotional overload in my body. My material practice leads me towards emotional understanding and is a space for me to unpack and process the sensations, impressions, and encounters that I experience daily. This provides me with a sense of comfort and a feeling of being centered and rooted. The process of working intuitively by following my impressions and feelings leads me to explore the many levels between the subconscious and conscious. As I engage with the materials in this intuitive manner it allows the subconscious thoughts and emotion to float to the surface and solidify as they become embodied into the tangible form of a sculpture. It is not until after the work is made that the emotions and thoughts can be more fully comprehended and leads me to a deeper understanding of myself and the world. I relate to what Deleuze refers to as the "encountered sign." Deleuze first uses the phrase in his early work 'Proust and Signs,' referring to a sign that is felt rather than perceived cognitively. He argues that this encountered sign is a stimulus towards critical inquiry and deeper thought. He states, "More important than thought there is 'what leads to thought'...impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think" (161).

Neurologist Frank Wilson talks about this in his book called *The Hand*. He thinks of the hands as sensors which, when personal desire prompts anyone to learn to do something well with the hands, an extremely complicated process is initiated that endows the work with a powerful emotional charge. He explains that it "is not until one touches the material, as the hand begins to understand it, that one's life may be changed through knowing it is right." He also states, "For those of us who allow ourselves to be directly influenced by materiality and the physical world, instinct is a behavior that we are especially prone to trust."(34).

Much of my work draws on a variety of repetitive and labour intensive processes and materials that include repetitive actions across a long period of time. This provides me with both a meditative space and a somatic experience in the art making process. An example of this hand-worked process occurred in my Hammock sculpture that was a part of my interim installation called *Comfort Enough*. I used needle felting to attach dog hair and goose feathers to a large piece of fabric. The repetitive piercing motion provided a somatic experience felt through touch and sound and provided me with a space to think and process. I am conscious of the actions associated with my processes of making, actions such as tearing, stretching, cutting, stitching, mending, piercing, bending, and unraveling have both psychological and conceptual connotations.



Figure 13. Jill Saxton Smith. *Untitled* (detail). Fabric, dog hair, goose down, string. 25'x 2'. 2019.

The physical act of making is not only intuitive but also instinctive for me which satisfies the primal desire to be grounded to a tangible world amongst emotional and physical upheaval. I have a desire to create objects that exist in three dimensional space with materials that are familiar and common, extending beyond the scope of aesthetics into the realm of the haptic and the subconscious. This desire in me seems to increase during difficult times of transition in my personal life and the increasingly unknown future of current politics and the pandemic. When I am working in partnership with materials I find it extremely satisfying and grounding. Artist and educator Warren Seelig gave a presentation to the American Craft Council on the meaning of materials in craft and art today. His talk focused on the biological drive and the immense fulfillment in physically handling materials. He says, “through the engagement with materials and the process of making with our hands it satisfies an artistic and human need to be connected to the physical and sensual world in an uncertain world that we live in” (Seelig) . It is important that my work retains evidence of my actions with the embodiment of physical labor.

The instinctual drive and the physicality of creating with my hands promotes a deep empathy for materials which leads me to view the materials as my collaborators. I have discovered when I engage in the materials with a mindset as co-creator of collaborators, this allows the materials to further speak about the ideas and emotions I am trying to embody in them and oftentimes this leads to new discoveries and ideas. David Abram conveys similar ideas when speaking about engaging with natural objects such as rock and trees; “If we speak of things as inert or inanimate objects, we deny their ability to actively engage and interact with us—we foreclose their capacity to reciprocate our attention, to draw us into silent dialogue, to inform and instruct us” (54).



Figure 14. Jill Saxton Smith. *I Bruise Easily* (with detail). wire, fencing, cement. 14"x 67". 2019.

As I partner with the materials and let the materials guide my process which often results in a type of alchemy. In this case, the materials' actions of rusting, decaying, solidifying, growing and transforming allows them to speak to both the psychological and conceptual ideas that I am trying to convey. This was so in my work titled *I Bruise Easily*. I took an experimental approach as I poured colored cement through gauze and chicken wire and let the cement settle as it wished. After it was dry, I then poured vinegar on the cement, resulting in an unexpected chemical reaction that formed a crystal like substance on the surface of the cement.



Figure 15. Jill Saxton Smith. *Untitled*. Rust, cloth. 32" x 67". 2018.

My rust prints are also a good example of the material guiding the process which requires me at one point to step out of the way and let time and the materials process themselves. Working this way reaches beyond “what’s comfortable.” I enjoy this uncomfortable zone as it creates a space for the unknown or natural things to happen and allows the intelligence of the materials to speak to the content or subject behind the work. Jane Bennett speaks on the relationship between humans and nonhumans in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. She states, “an actant never acts alone; its agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies or forces” (21). This collaboration between me, the artist, and the materials allow for the materials to speak about and hold my somatic and emotional experiences and aids in linking together the physical and emotional worlds. This is the territory where our experiences, memories and sensations, both emotive and somatic, intersected, interlock and blur, a place where the artwork creates proximity and empathy between the artist, the materials and viewers.

Conclusion

Going forward, I will continue to base my work on material research and process-focused while narrowing in on the alchemy and the transformations, marks, residues, and impressions that are left behind. I plan on delving deeper into materials and the ways the materials can embody emotions and somatic processes that are involved in the making of the work. I would like to continue to explore questions regarding the sense of home, displacement and the role and nature of comfort in our daily lives, how the desire for comfort connects and disconnects us, the movement from sub-consciousness to consciousness. I would like to

broaden my focus on how these inner emotional experiences and desires manifest in everyday interactions and contributes to cultural politics. I intend to further investigate the body's relationship in which the body encounters my work and how my audience interacts and their reading of my work. This may lead to more performance or interactive work, involving more immersive environments through installations.

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