

Taking Up Space—Extensions of My Body

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April 6, 2023

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Introduction

For the Honors Thesis project I have created a two-part installation that combines painting, drawing, sculpture, the moving image, and stills. The exhibition presents an overwhelming, intimate, and transient space that mirrors my psychological landscape. I create imagery within the installation that emulates my emotions depicting shame, joy, and frustration; the sculptural objects are extensions of my body and physical productions of my ongoing struggle with depression and anxiety. The installation will have two main components: “Actions towards self-fulfillment and dignity” and the 3D painting surfaces I have created to demand attention from the viewer and ask them to consider, “where am I in the never-ending process of self-discovery and growth?” and, “what space do I occupy physically and emotionally?”

Leading up to this project I have been exploring the notion of “coming of age” and the experiences that have shaped my being, which I will refer to as lived experience. I have been examining this idea within the context of patriarchal perceptions and biases of the female gender. Still today, violence against women and the LGBTQ+ community disproportionately affects the psychological and physical well-being of both groups. This is exacerbated by stigmas surrounding mental health, mental health care and access to it. These problematic perceptions have in turn affected my ideas about gender in both conscious and unconscious ways. I discovered these negative values have manifested in myself as feelings of disorientation and shame which through studies generalizes queer experiences within our heteronormative society.

I developed an interest in creating pieces that act against conformity to dismantle my feelings of disorientation and shame. Leading up to this project I have created works

from fabric, stretcher bars, paint, gesso, sewing materials, hardware, and collected/found ephemera. Often the elements of my work have felt fragmented. They generally were experimental with a concept not yet fully established until I eventually found materials and processes I connected with.

In my practice I am exploring using metaphor to discuss the dichotomy between shame and joy in relation to my queer identity. I grew up in the Southern United States where LGBTQ+ expression and happiness were often met with rejection and marginalization. Legislators of the Christian denomination I was raised in have continued to deny performing gay marriage in their churches as well as designating non-heterosexuals as unfit to hold positions of power or instruction. Furthermore, today in Tennessee politicians have banned drag performances and allowed marriage certificates to be denied to same-sex couples.

Beyond social biases, LGBTQ+ community members are oppressed politically. Lawrence v. Texas (2003, a 6-3 ruling) specified it was unconstitutional to criminalize gay or lesbian sex. This landmark case set the stage for Obergefell v. Hodges in 2015 that gave gay couples the right to marry. As my sexual identity developed, these cases and persistent anti-LGBTQ+ movements created negative psychological perceptions of gay relationships due to blowback from the majority resentment in my communities. This created an involuntary mental rift in me between believing my ways of loving are joyful and valid versus shameful and subject to government intervention. I am now interested in creating visual representations for the process of 'coming out' from under oppression. That being, living with the psychological impacts of current and generational violence against the queer community and women.

The digital imagery shows physical actions and abstract narratives that put intimacy and tenderness of queer love against opposing, hateful sources. The sculptural objects should take up space and demand attention to convey the necessity for the mentally ill and queer to do this physically and emotionally. Conformity and shame are taught in our society by how we learn and process information or how we are “supposed” to love. I would like to reinforce my status of being different by engaging in actions that confront heteronormative expectations. In creating my work, I hope to find reconciliation within my internalized homophobia by attempting to dismantle negative heterosexist attitudes that hinder my pride and dignity.

Part 1: Coming of Age

The background of my work is heavily based on lived experience, psychology, and philosophy. While growing up I encountered thousands of stimuli consciously and unconsciously that positively and negatively affected my comprehension of women, the LGBTQ+ community, and mentally ill individuals. This can be considered as constructivism which “asserts that we do not discover reality, we invent it. Our experience does not directly reflect what is ‘out there’ but is an ordering and organizing of it.”¹ My reality is dominated by male perspectives. This leads to representations that women are an object of desire and lack autonomy over their bodies. The LGBTQ+ community is full of sinners with lustful desire which contrasts my family’s embrace of diversity. The mentally ill are weak if they are dependent on medicine or therapy to survive. I learned access to help for mental health was limited and many mentally ill people were homeless.

¹ Hare-Mustin, R. T., & Marecek, J. *The Meaning of Difference*, 1988, p. 455



Fig.1. My father's change of command circa 2005. Buffalo, New York.

Growing up was marked by constant transience for my father's occupation as Navy personnel. I do not recall living in California nor Seoul, South Korea. This was the first 3 years of my life. After living in New York for preschool, we moved to Memphis, Tennessee, in 2006. We stayed till I was 8. My first concrete memories of going to church were during that time; performing in the Christmas play or playing in the gym after a sermon I did not pay attention to. Ages 8 to 12 were spent in Naples, Italy. Due to military pastors my parents did not favor, I forgot all about my religious entanglements until age 11. A Catholic friend of mine stated she pitied a mutual coach's daughter because she was "gay and going to hell." I have never forgotten that moment, nor the return to Memphis in the summer of my 12th year. I remained in Tennessee until starting university in 2018.

Memphis was not the place my child's mind remembered. About 40 minutes outside of the city center, in the small rural town of Arlington, my peers had gone to school together much of their childhood and were not as welcoming as I had once experienced. None of this seemed to matter as Christmas neared and my mother was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer. To me this meant that my mom was going to die; I was not capable of

rationalizing the situation. This trauma initiated a dependency on art to express a level of vulnerability that I was incapable of sharing with my family and was not told I had the space to do so.

Middle school was key for furthering my construction of reality as an individual and woman. Because of aforementioned events, I tried to learn things independently without asking my two older sisters or mother for advice, even after she was healthy again and capable of tending to my issues instead of her own. Rather than ask them about sex, I sought out my own answers. In turn, I developed a pornography addiction. I looked at plenty of women and they were all similar. They looked like seals and could have sounded like them too. These women were loud and void of any hair aside from their heads and forearms. The images burned in my brain and faded after 8th grade, but the impression on my psyche was deep. Without a parent to tell me any different, I believed this was expected of me. I felt shame over this ideal I could not achieve, without considering the fact I was not a mature woman. Years later I would understand that pornography was developed through the fantasies of men. I learned that women were expected to live and act within the expectations or desires of men. Women were supposed to be silent, obedient, and bear children.

I first encountered being at the mercy of men at the age of 6. I was molested by my male cousin for three years whenever he would visit with my grandparents. However, to avoid traumatizing me and recognizing that he too had been assaulted by his elder brother, my parents and grandparents decided to tell us this was not okay and left it there. As I grew older this reinforced the idea of women being objects to be used at the whims of men's desires. "All the worst things that happened to other women because they were women

could happen to you because you were a woman. Even if you weren't killed, something in you was, your sense of freedom, equality, confidence."² The space my budding identity occupied was met with surprising recognition that barriers existed, which contrasted the dynamic of my family: a long line of educated and head-strong women.

These impressions were exacerbated by the traditional settings of the "Bible Belt," which includes all states beneath the Mason Dixon Line and Texas. Here, the dawning of my inner shame multiplied like bacteria and took a deep-rooted position that remains today. I had friends in high school who would openly tell me they believed homosexuality was wrong. I knew of one student that identified as gay within our school, since graduation many have come out, like myself. Friends' parents directly spoke against celebrities that were identifying as bisexual and would say it was "weird" or "unnatural," that there was no place for this in "our country, under God."

My family returned to the same church from before we had moved overseas. I became so involved that by my sophomore year of high school I was on the peer-leadership team for our region's summer camp. I felt comfortable with these people, they were loving and kind. I was at this camp when gay marriage was federally legalized, and my peers and I celebrated. However, between the summers of sophomore and junior year of high school everything changed when I experienced Seasonal Affective Disorder for the first time, which can overlap normal depression. This condition is characterized by symptoms of hopelessness, fatigue, and social withdrawal and onsets around the end of October every year when the sun is less present and usually recedes by mid-May. I liken this recurring event to Sylvia Plath's descriptions of depression in her autobiographical novel, *The Bell*

² Solnit, *Recollections of My Nonexistence*, Penguin Books, 2021, p. 48

Jar. She writes, “How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere-- the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again?”³

Going from age 16 to 17 was marked by God no longer being in whatever corner I had seen “Him” in before, and I never held as strong of a religious practice since. The world was dark, and I turned to smoking cannabis when I could get it and avidly drawing in my sketchbook. When that no longer helped my depression and anxiety, I turned to self-harm. I held large amounts of shame over hurting myself and not talking about it with anyone that could help. The night I confided in my sister, not 15 minutes later my mother walked briskly out from her bedroom and told me to explain to her what was going on. My parents had me see a therapist, no one I knew talked about seeing a therapist themselves and I felt more ostracized as a person than before. The lack of trust I held in my family dwindled and my shame only increased.

I attended camp the following summer and felt out of place. I did not feel the “love from God” that everyone was still talking about, I felt rejected and alone. I gave a morning sermon to the camp and spoke about the dark times I had gone through over the year and how I did not feel God during this period. The adults gave me adulations for being so open and that everyone went through periods like this, but to me it felt like a formal departure from organized religion and into spirituality.

During my final year in high school, I affirmed that I was in fact not straight. It was all too obvious when a classmate asked, “what the deal was between you and Alison?” I replied, “nothing, we’re just really good friends.” To which she seemed relieved and told me she had a crush on her, I was threatened, and my body felt hot, I realized I too felt this way

³ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Heinemann, 1963, p. 254

but could not speak it aloud. I feared rejection from the religious community I was so engrossed in, the students and teachers I went to school with, and even my family.

Fear of rejection is a direct symptom from the feeling of shame.⁴ This fear inside of me came from these aforementioned events. In childhood my mother could not express to me that my needs and wants were valid. Heterosexual and patriarchal examples of women and romantic relations through media and the religion I grew up in did not show my validity either. They were enforced to a point where I did not notice they were impacting my psyche. When I stopped shaving my legs and underarms, I realized it called attention to my body by strangers. Men and women. While visiting home, my sisters saw my armpits and were both repulsed. I realized that the male perspective is so dominant that women are ashamed of their own natural bodies. It is evident in statistics that, “more men are published, and men control the print and electronic media. —Although not all men have influence over language, for those who do, such authority confers the power to create the world from their point of view, in the image of their desires.”⁵ Knowing this I feel it is in my power and control to act in resistance to the power structure that dominates society.

My final year living in Tennessee, I saw this especially in church. The leaders were men and most denominations still do not allow women to preach or attend seminary school. I learned that a cherished retreat with my church community was avoided by certain members because they could not serve on the committee that ran it because they identified as queer. I felt betrayed by the people that said they were loving and accepting of

⁴ Scheer, Harney, Esposito, Woulfe, Self-Reported Mental and Physical Health Symptoms and Potentially Traumatic Events Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Individuals: The Role of Shame, 2020

⁵ See Footnote 1, p. 455

“all God’s children.” As a senior in high school, I felt far from childhood, I was taking my path into my hands, applying to college, and leaning into my artwork to think over the philosophies that called to me.

I found existentialism through my senior English teacher. This philosophy swept me off my feet. It told me I could define my own meaning within the world based on lived experience. Sartre wrote, “What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing.”⁶ I began as a blank sheet of metal that had been hammered continuously and I was able to analyze and observe how these creases made me who I was. I was drawn towards self-portraiture to capture a moment of my experiences. In



*Fig.2. Tory Harris. (2018).
Fortitude. 11x14 inches.
[watercolor, Micron pen,
colored pencil, paper].
Memphis, Tennessee.*

⁶ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 3

Figure Two I was investigating how coping mechanisms like religion or self-harm distract from existential dread.

Part 2: Coming into Identity

I came to college eager to express and define myself unhinged, my first trials in adulthood. However, I found myself emotionally blocked and could not make trusted friends, outside of my roommates living off-campus. I remained incapable of expressing my needs. In the summer of 2019, my mother told me she had been considering why I never opened up to her or my family. She felt it was her fault due to her lack of energy while going through treatment. She was sorry for not developing the same relationship she held with my sisters. That being, "I could tell her anything." Mother said I did not have to respond then, but to think about it.

I went abroad to London that fall and found I was angry; I was in anguish over this part of myself that my mother made me realize completely. I was gradually getting more depressed and smoking more as the semester continued. For the first time, I sought out a therapist. The shame I once held towards my mental health was evaporating out of my own desperation for my own safety. Her name was Arabelle. During our sessions she was affirming, it was okay to be mad at my mother despite the mere happenstance that she was unable to form the relationship I craved. Arabelle also was able to discern that I was approaching all issues as if "I had a sick mum," meaning I placed others' needs ahead of my own because they simply lacked significance no matter how self-deprecating. Arabelle made me realize that my emotions not only needed but deserved space and recognition.

This would still take four more years for me to fully integrate into how I lived. In my self-portrait, *Figure Three*, I captured the anguish of this moment in time.



Fig.3. Tory Harris. (2019). *Untitled (Self-Portrait/Anguish)*. 5x7 inches. [colored pencil, Micron pen]. Queen Mary University, London, England.

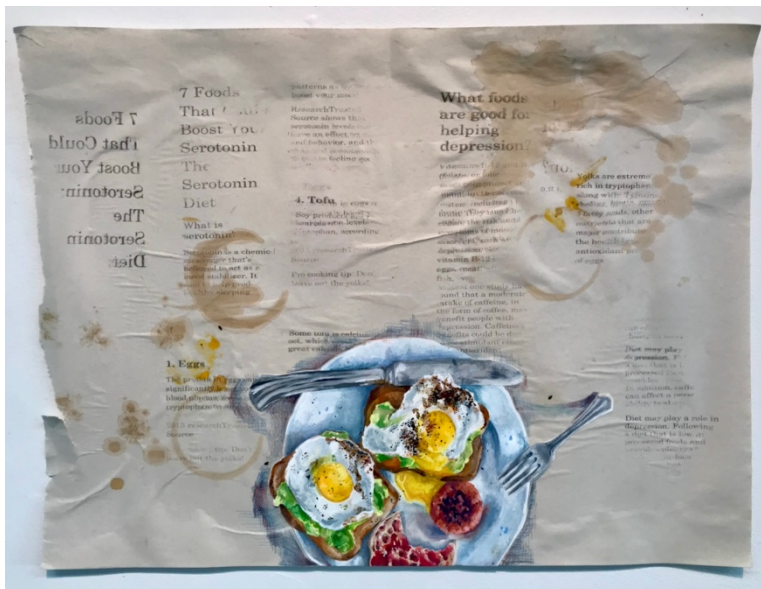


Fig.4. Tory Harris. (2021). *The Most Important Meal of the Day*. 18x24 inches. [acrylic paint, articles discussing depression, tea, egg yolk]. University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.

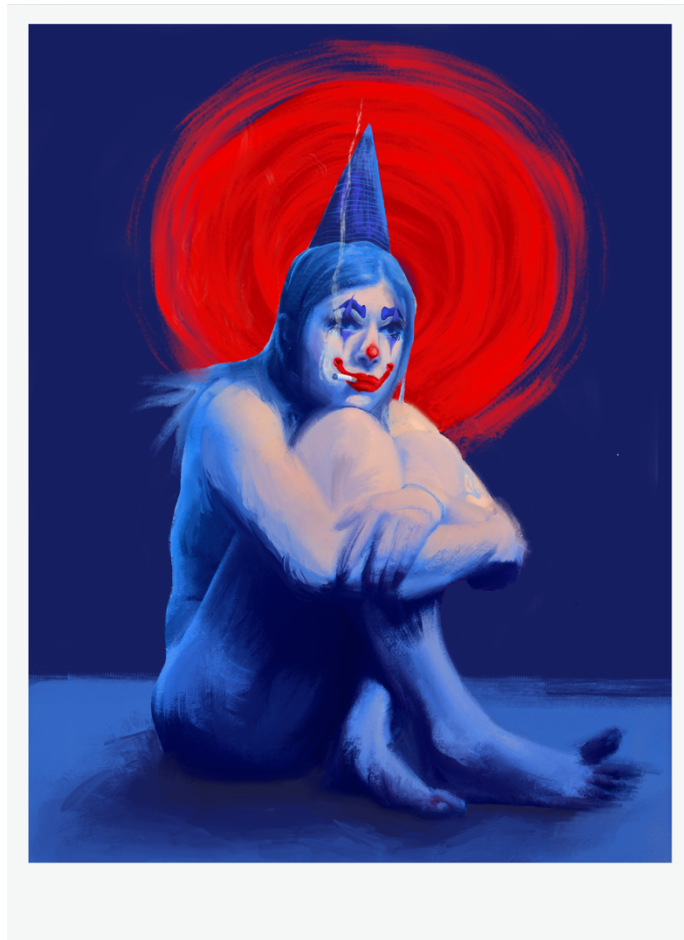


Fig.5. Tory Harris. (2021). Untitled (Self-portrait/Putting on a Poor Show). 11x14 inches [print, digital painting]. University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.

While COVID-19 had its major surges I took time away from school to work and focus on my own projects. Come October, I could not find work after driving an ice cream truck since May 2020, the perfect job during COVID. Depression was setting in for the winter and I reached out to a farm and was told to contact again the following spring when I would return to my studies at university. I began to focus on my depression through the work with little success. I continued to work with materials I was familiar with and enjoyed with some additional experiments like layering paper and ink transfers, seen in *Figure Three*. In *Figure Four*, I wanted to make my subject clear without being too vulnerable. It proved unsuccessful and I continued to rely on my self-portraiture, as seen in *Figure 5*.

Something was missing from my processes for making artwork, it was not fulfilling or bringing me joy. Rather it was reinforcing feelings of isolation within my depression because I was not feeling connected to the work, or the viewers. They were simply, “well done.”

Come summer I worked no less than 50 hours a week 5 days a week, rain, or blazing shine at \$12.50 an hour. Aside from sustainable farming, I learned a very important thing about myself on the farm: I loved physical labor and what it did for my all-around health. (Copious amounts of Vitamin D surely aided my state.) I was drawn to the tactility of the earth and the energy that came from making something out of a mere seed. I wanted to learn everything that I could, this translated into my class choices during my “first Senior year,” so I called it.

This was the first time with a studio space of my own, no more cramped artwork in my bedroom. I was enrolled in my first sculpture and printing class, and I had the space and freedom to delve into new processes for making. Many ideas from the summer were anxiously waiting in my notepad for me to put into motion in Fall 2021. However, two things altered my trajectory. I met Eliza on the farm that summer, she became my girlfriend in September. The values I grew up around in Memphis came flooding back to me, I discovered the shame that lied dormant till I was actively expressing this part of myself.

The first Friday of classes I got a call from my eldest sister telling me I needed to speak with my mother urgently. Mother was diagnosed with breast cancer again. I felt like I was thrown back into 7th grade. I still do not think I can fully express how this made me feel. I think this was evident in the art I turned to making throughout the semester but could not find the words to describe accurately. I was deeply focused on my smoking habits

and the major bullet points from growing up. I thought it would show me a way to process what my mom was going through without reverting to disregarding what I needed and keeping me from being ashamed of my newest relationship.



Fig. 6. Tory Harris. (2021). *I am still that child*. [paper, crayon, string, clothespins]. University of Colorado, Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.



Fig.7. Tory Harris. (2021). Detail. *I am still that child.*

I found the farm helped me process these things more than the unsuccessful pieces I was making as catharsis. Physical labor and cultivation by hand to make food brought total gratification. It made me feel alive. As if a part of me was in the product that came from arduous processes. I left sweat, skin, and in essence, myself in the soil. This was a missing piece in the process of creating my work. I wanted to use my hands more than for merely painting or drawing. That fall I started to collect things from my life that took me out of my constantly heightened emotional state: the ashes and waste from smoking and my

girlfriend's cigarette butts. In *Figure Eight*, I attempted to leave a part of myself in the work by addressing my substance abuse in relation to my mother's condition.



Fig.8. Tory Harris. (2021). *Mother's Breasts, My Lungs*. [ephemera, jars, tape, sharpie, lung residue, anxiety, depression]. University of Colorado, Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.

The following spring when my mother's cancer had finished being treated, I began to focus on disorienting self-talk that followed my new relationship to Eliza. These homophobic thoughts were involuntary and were counter to how I felt towards her. This manifested as shame, which "represents a psychological state involving global negative evaluation of the self in which the individual feels inferior, helpless, vulnerable, and *desires to hide*."⁷ I emphasize the end of this definition because it was critical to understanding how I was making art in the spring and into the fall leading to my thesis.

⁷ See Footnote 4, p.132



Fig.9. Tory Harris. (2022). *Beautiful Sins/Covered*. [bed sheet, ephemera, ashes, acrylic and oil paint, stretcher bars, canvas, sewing]

I intended *Figure Nine* to speak on shame that was occurring in my brain and to critique religious influences that created it. In the piece I retreated to the safety of the color white. This kept me from confronting my internalized homophobia. By choosing to write my feelings of joy, sadness, and anger in white, my shame persisted. This included the text, which identified the sheet as shared by Eliza and me. I lacked the courage to shout instead of whisper.

Figure Nine was my first introduction to finding flow in a process that did not employ traditional methods. I stretched a four by six canvas by hand-sewing. This required effort and challenged me. By doing so I had tapped into the methods that flow demands. Flow is “a state in which we are singularly focused on the task at hand, our senses heighten,

and we lose track of time.”⁸ While in this state I was able to have conversations with myself that did not occur while anxiety riddled my brain. I had significant breakthroughs, insights, and a sense of fulfillment.⁹

Yet, this was only one part of the piece and in totality it felt fragmented. Inside I was and am happy with a woman but presenting as ashamed and hiding. I was afraid to talk to old friends and mentors from Tennessee, I was exhibiting a “minority stress framework.”¹⁰ This defines “how prejudice and stigma lead to specific stress processes, including expectations of rejection, concealment of a stigmatized identity, internalization of negative beliefs about one’s social identities, and experiences of discrimination.”¹¹

I faced minority stress on three different levels. I feared for the security of body autonomy, the right to love and marry who I wanted, and access mental health care. Despite the more recent progressive consciousness on these issues, two are at risk and under attack. Friday, June 24, 2022, the government overturned the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court case which ruled it unconstitutional for states to restrict access to abortion and birth control. I made *The Curse of Femininity* (Figs. 10 & 11) the weekend following the decision. I used black and white oil pastels to draw over a relief print I had pressed by hand to continue my pursuit and employment of flow. Once again, I wrote the more personal details in white, hiding the shame of being molested, being a woman. Feeling

⁸ Rao, S. (2018). *An Audience of One: Reclaiming Creativity For its Own Sake*. Portfolio/Penguin, 2018, p. 129

⁹ Rao, S. (2018). *An Audience of One: Reclaiming Creativity For its Own Sake*. Portfolio/Penguin, 2018, p. 127

¹⁰ Frost, Hammack, Wilson, Russel, Lightfoot, Meyer, *The Qualitative Interview in Psychology and the Study of Social Change: Sexual Identity Development, Minority Stress, and Health in the Generations Study, Qualitative Psychology*, Advance online publication, 2019. p. 3

¹¹ Ibid. p.3

like my freedom was taken away, heart broken by politicians and possessive men. The shame I held directly connecting what was happening in the body politic to my own, “the body of the individual.”¹² Since *Roe v. Wade’s* overturning, multiple states have banned abortion and introduced anti-LGBTQ+ legislation targeting marriage equality, transgender, and non-binary rights. The overturning of this case has set an example for interest groups and politicians to push for religiously motivated policies.

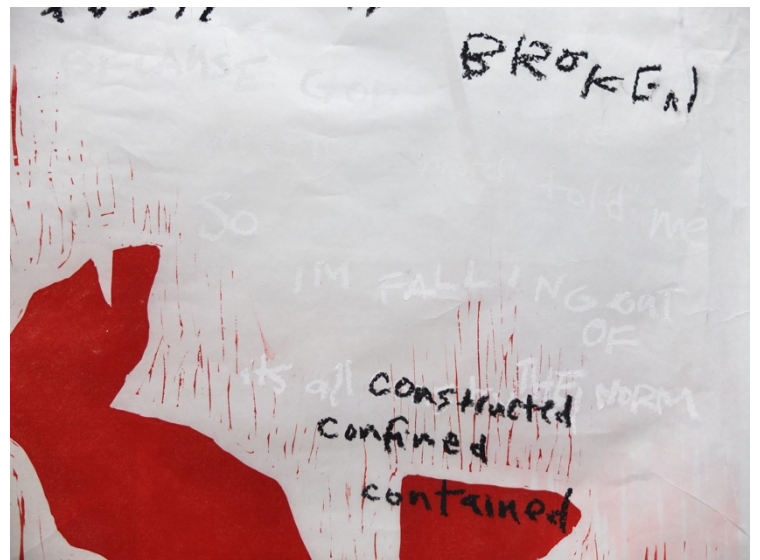


Fig.11. Tory Harris. (2022). Detail. *The Curse of Femininity*. University of Colorado, Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.

Fig.10. Tory Harris. (2022). *The Curse of Femininity*. 24x48 inches. [relief print, oil pastel]. University of Colorado, Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.

¹² See Footnote 4. p. 132

Though written in the 80's, Rebecca Solnit's memoir still comes to mind, "women's bodies are targets and queer bodies are hated for blurring the distinction or rejecting the metaphors."¹³ Solnit gives insight to the duration of current issues and a time when larger groups of women and LGBTQ+ began to voice their dissatisfaction with having to hide as was required by law. It was not until the landmark case *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1971) that decriminalized premarital heterosexual sex by allowing unmarried couples to obtain contraceptives. It would be another 32 years before the same would be granted for same-sex couples. I was born before *Lawrence v. Texas* would allow this, but I came of age with the comfort of knowing it was allowed yet surrounded by groups that actively condemned the government's decision and called for action from their political parties. However, "in spite of a more positive climate for sexual identity diversity, young sexual minorities continue to experience minority stress."¹⁴

During the fall semester I developed a greater sense of pride in my identity and began therapy to officially work through my issues of vulnerability and depending on others. I wanted the work to alter my perspective of being a bisexual woman and caring for my mental health. This is related to "positive psychology,"¹⁵ which are events and influences in life that yield happiness, joy, inspiration, and love.¹⁰ At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro they performed a study to determine if creativity in daily life increased well-being. It found that "people who reported feeling happy and active were more likely to be doing something creative at that time. Engaging in creative pursuits allows people to explore their identities, form new relationships, cultivate competence, and

¹³ See Footnote 2. pp. 183-184

¹⁴ See Footnote 8. p. 3

¹⁵ Ackerman, *What is positive psychology & why is it important?*, PositivePsychology.com, 2023

reflect critically on the world.”¹⁶ This relationship to creativity results in new knowledge and can “serve as sources of strength and resilience.”¹⁷

Moving forward, physical action was imperative to my artwork. Following my drive to participate in “actions” that alter my deep-rooted shame in Fall 2022 I created an installation that I intended to be a labor of love. I decided to paint a 30 by 10 feet mural with large-scale brushes I fashioned from old mops and brooms. I listened to music Eliza had given me and essentially danced with the indigo watercolor across the wall space. After the mural was complete, I built a wooden frame to hold a veil which would obscure my labor of love. I did this because of anger, I felt my expression of love did not deserve to be seen by the public and I hoped viewers would go under the veil to be intimate with the painting. I spoke to Misuhng Suh, CU Boulder faculty, a few days before critique and she told me I was not defending my love but masking it. I was still in the same place as spring, but Misuhng reminded me that I must stay dignified. The nay-sayers are never going to disappear and by letting myself be angry and protective of my love I was still allowing the shame to push me into safe spaces.

The night following this conversation I transformed the piece into *Untitled (my labor of love)* and tore the veil down, captured in my video piece, *Action No.1 (Regaining dignity)*. This was liberating, I truly felt deep down I deserved this space and visibility that had inherently been granted to heterosexual expression of love. I knew the danger that existed with being “out and proud,” but through unveiling my work I began to resist the “cultural narratives that shape my sexual identity development.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Footnote 8, p. 8.



Fig.12. Tory Harris. (2022). Video still. *Action No.1 (Uncovering a labor of love)*. [mural/labor of love, indigo, water, painted wood, veil]. University of Colorado, Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.



Fig.13. Tory Harris. (2022). *Untitled (Labor of Love)*. 30x12 feet. [labor of love, indigo, water, painted wood, veil]. University of Colorado, Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.

I entered winter break exhausted from thinking of every concept, material, and process that made up my work. I was still stuck on what exactly they were going into my thesis semester, but I was determined to rest. Winter heralded the renewed onset of depression, my bell jar, the worthlessness. I was determined to put all school related art to the side and create off whims. While watching TV and feeling melancholic I took out familiar materials, my sketchbook, markers, pen, and pencil. I started to draw lines and continued to form different shapes and groupings of color. I lost myself in the repetitive process. I finished the sketch and I felt addicted, I had to make more, I had to have them expand. The flow I achieved by making forms through mark-making was unparalleled to any drawing I had done before. I learned that our brains crave this idea of flow because the activity that creates the headspace is rewarding alone.¹⁹ The process of making these “masses,” as I call them, is just as rewarding as the finished product.

¹⁹ Rao, S. (2018). *An Audience of One: Reclaiming Creativity For its Own Sake*. Portfolio/Penguin, 2018, p. 33.



Fig.14. Tory Harris. (2022). Detail. *Mass No.1.* 11x14 inches. [paper, pen, Tombow markers].

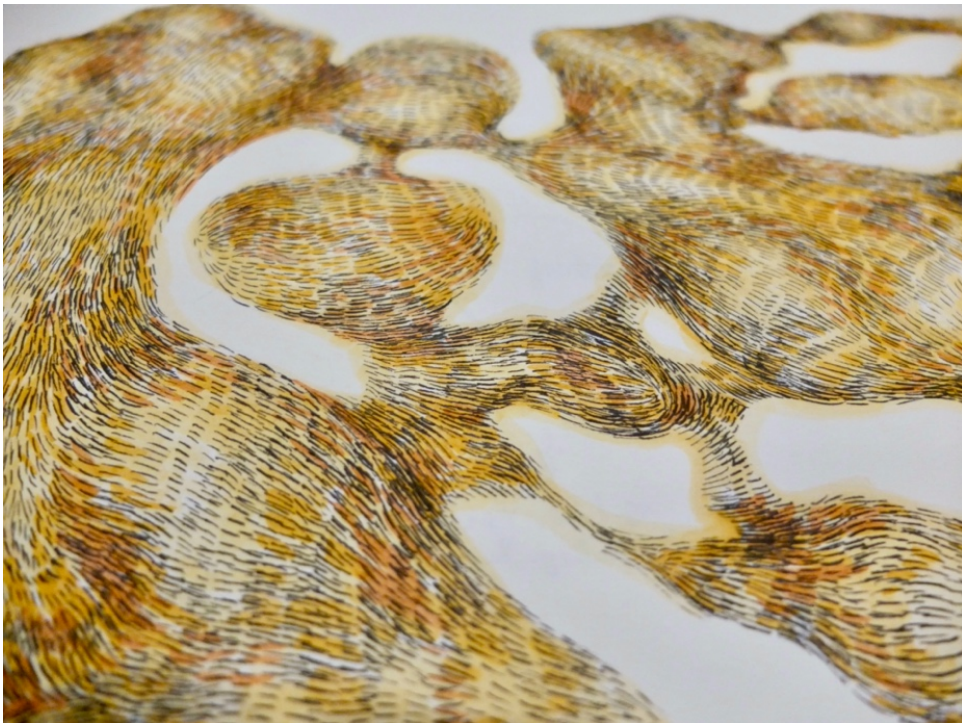


Fig.15. Tory Harris. (2022). Detail. *Mass No.2.* 11x14 inches. [paper, pen, Tombow markers].

These pieces were serene and calming which was exactly how they made me feel. They alleviated the mental strain caused by my anxiety and depression. My appetite for the lines to take up more space on the page could not be satiated; I wanted the masses to enter physical space. I knew what I wanted the thesis to be, the work that made me reconcile with my identity and the comfort of taking up space emotionally and physically. I wanted people that feared and hated women and the LGBTQ+ community to be uncomfortable and face their prejudices. I was coming out from their oppression that existed within me. *Mass No. 4 (A Battle of Gender)* is my most recent 2D piece. I mix the gendered colors to create purple that is attempting to overwhelm and overtake pink, the color of femininity, to show the transformation of evolving into myself.

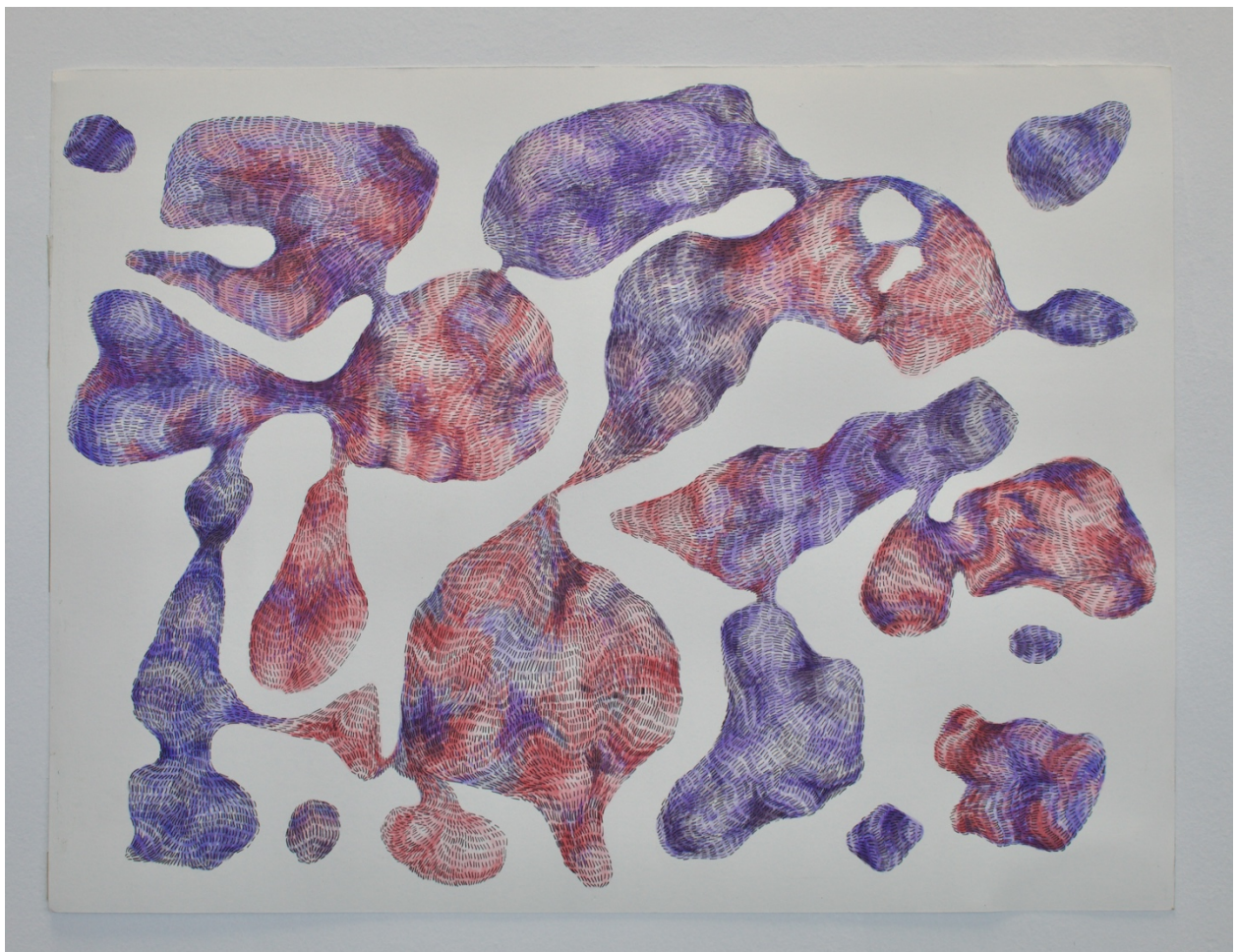


Fig. 16. Tory Harris. (2023). *A Battle of Gender*. 18x24 inches. [paper, pen, Tombow



Fig.17. Yayoi Kusama. (2004). *Kusamatrix*. Installation at the Mori Art Museum. Tokyo, Japan.²⁰

Leading up to the project I took interest in two artists. They are Yayoi Kusama and Kate Gilmore. I favored Kusama because of her personal motivations behind her installations, such as *Figure Seventeen*, *Kusamatrix*. Her obsessive use of dots creates an illusion of a never-ending or growing body. Kusama, 94, has dealt with mental health issues her entire life. She has resided in a psychiatric hospital since 1977 that lies near her studio. I am drawn to Kusama's work because of dichotomy between the motivation for and beauty of the pieces. In an interview Yayoi stated, "I fight pain, anxiety, and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieves my illness is to keep creating art."²¹ I connected with the sentiment and leaned into the critical nature of art making for managing my mental health. Unlike Kusama, my repetition of lines is more addictive than

²⁰ Cole, *Yayoi Kusama*, Encyclopedia Britannica, (2023, March 18).

²¹ Lamberg, *Artist describes how Art saved her life*, Psychiatric News, (2017, September 14).

obsessive. The repetitive lines paired with active motion to create something beautiful relieves my anxiety, much like Kusama's dedication to having others see splendor as result of her illness.



. Fig.19. Kate Gilmore. (2010). *Standing Here*. Video/installation. Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York.

Kate Gilmore inspired the moving images that is my ongoing *Action* series. In her videos and video/installations Gilmore explores the physicality of the contact with her materials. Through the actions she experiences failure, frustration, injury, and elation.²² In conjunction with her curated outfits and sets she alludes to female oppression. In her video/installation *Standing Here* (Figure 19), Gilmore beats and kicks the walls that confine

²² Institute of Contemporary Art, *Becoming Sculpture: The Work of Kate Gilmore*, University of Pennsylvania, 2008.

her. By studying the piece, I noticed the capability of obscuring a concept simply. Her set and dress are plain but speak to the tyranny women continue to face.



Fig.17. Tory Harris. (2023). Video still. Action No.4 (is this what you mean by protecting the Sanctity of Life?). University of Colorado, Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.

For this thesis I have focused on two pieces, a video, *Figure 20*, and *Untitled (Extensions of my body)*. The pieces are in conversation by presentation and content. By proximity in exhibition, they connect the abstracted processes of confrontation, personal growth, and self-love with a more concrete or accessible iteration through the visual and audio of *Action No. 4*.

In the video I continue my series of documented *Actions*. The intent of creating the series is to subvert and disrupt heteronormative expectations of women and the LGBTQ+ community through displays from my own intimate relationship. In *Figure 20*, I do this by

contrasting extreme anti-LGBTQ+ religious references with demonstrations of tenderness, and affection. I cling to a sculptural iteration of my 'masses' and paint my body to become a part of it. I do this to find reconciliation with the audio from a sermon that encourages oppressive forces to encroach into government policy and safe spaces in which the LGBTQ+ community exists. Additionally, I overlay videos taken on a separate occasion with Eliza to compare the embraces we share to the affection I show towards the mass which exists as an extension of my body. I ask the viewer to consider their own preconceived notions of intimacy and if the rights for their respective relationships have always been given.



Fig.21. Tory Harris. (2023). Untitled (Extensions of My Body). University of Colorado, Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.

Following the physicality of my documented *Actions, Figures 21-23* came from the ambition for my 2D drawings to take up physical space. I desired to make the abstract process for positive psychological development of my identity tangible. The pieces engross the space and seem to be frozen amid growing and splitting off from other masses as if they were cells dividing and multiplying. The viewer is forced to walk around the masses that sit on the floor to closely examine the larger pieces that sit suspended or clinging to the walls. Upon intimate observation a viewer can see the texture of my 3-dimensional painting surface that I have filled with lines. Furthermore, upon close examination there are, “beads of sweat” that lay on the surface as physical manifestations of the lines themselves. I chose blue to replicate the feeling of calm and serenity I felt with the 2D pieces. I had an affinity with blue since my first run in with seasonal depression (“winter blues”), but after I read Maggie Nelson’s novel *Bluets* (2009) I was in love. She writes on how it comes to be, “blue is

something of an ecstatic accident produced by void and fire.”²³ Blue represented worthlessness and passion at the same time, the voids, and fires within me.



Figs.22 & 23. Tory Harris. (2023). Untitled (Extensions of My Body). University of Colorado, Boulder, Boulder, Colorado.

²³ Nelson, *Bluets Wave Books*, 2009, p. 62.

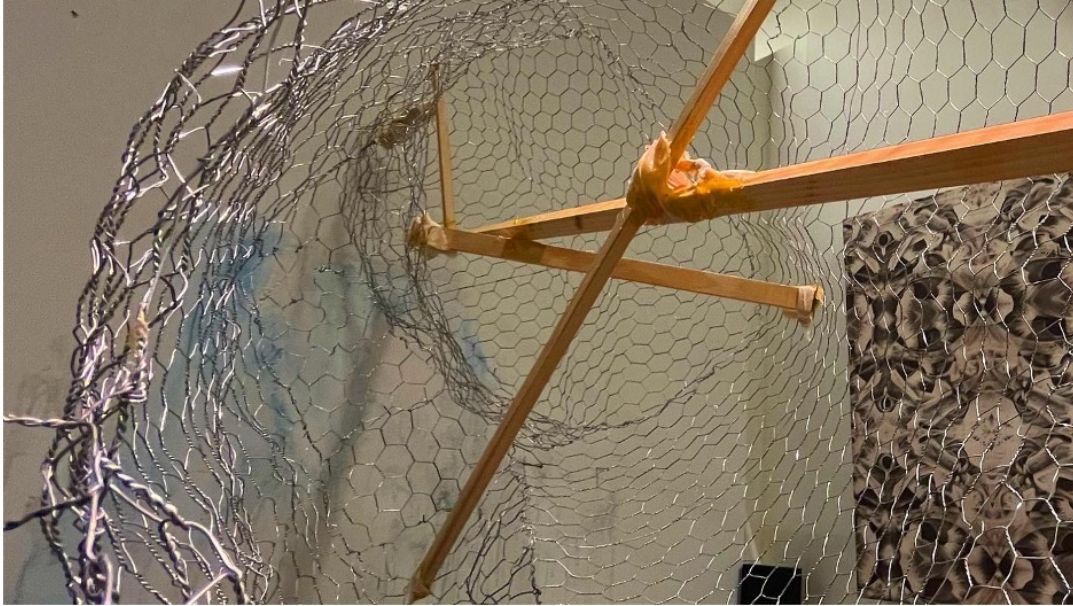


Fig.24. Tory Harris. (2023). Process image.

During the process of making the masses I found I was making a body, in essence it was my body. I was creating an internal structure with chicken wire and wood like bones. I applied papier-mâché to create the “skin” with two layers, the underlying with paper and the final surface with muslin fabric which I dyed with an indigo-colored wheat paste. While extending my body, I lost myself in the bending and wrapping of wire. This resulted in a synonymous form to my drawings. I continued to find flow each day returning to the forms. By engaging in my work every day, a psychologically healthy state followed which fostered personal growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this work has been my entire life in the making. As an emerging artist my lived experience has culminated into an identity I have not fully understood. Deep

introspection and years of being open to new ways of making landed me in a place of peace and resilience against the violent odds of external and internal prejudice that exist. I have made leaps and bounds of progress on accepting and adeptly comprehending my identity. I am compelled to remain practicing taking up space in my work. Shame continues to reside inside of me, and I look towards my work to process and excel beyond it. Self-discovery and progress are never at a resting place until we are in the final one.

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