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Noise.

Noise.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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College of the Ozarks
Bachelor Arts in Studio Art, 2003

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

My research is in the realm of the psychological, the emotional and way these drives manifest physically. The works in *Noise*. aims to give a physical representation to the non-physical. Research on Affect Theory and the teachings of Silvan Tomkins were paramount to understanding emotional drives and the ways in which they manifest.

The purpose of this research is to understand how emotions are generated and communicated and to ask if specific emotions can be generated upon viewing inanimate objects. I create abstract figurative sculpture, which imitate emotion that has no specific physicality. These works exist with one foot in abstraction and the other in allusion. The work attempts to synthesize what emotions are and how they affect us on a physiological level and to give these emotions form. I take cues from body language and facial expression.

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I would like to thank my Thesis Committee: Jeannie Hulen, Mathew McConnell, Dylan DeWitt, and Leo Mazow for their insight and support. Their commitment to my success will forever keep them in my gratitude. No amount of appreciation will ever do justice to the support I have received throughout the past three years from my wondrous and handsome husband, Joseph Barnes. I would like to thank my family, in particular my mother, Becky Williams, who has always answered the phone at whatever time it rings to lend a sympathetic ear or share in my excitement over a discovery made in the studio. For those who have conquered this journey with me, Todd Pentico, Bryanna Jaramillo, Cambry Pierce, Jon McDaniel and Wilson Borja: our ties are forever.

Dedication:

Noise. is dedicated to Joseph Barnes.

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Introduction

Noise. is an exhibition comprised of sculpture and drawing that personify the effects of fear and trauma on individuals while in their pursuit of wonder, amusement, happiness and satisfaction. The work in *Noise.* references human beings in all their vulnerability. I rely on the physicality of materials to synthesize objects reflecting emotional responses to struggle and success. Our hunt to experience excitement and pleasure is in conflicts with our instinctive nature to protect ourselves from shame, disgust, pain, and rage. As I explore universalities (love, acceptance, elation, pride, bliss, nervousness, susceptibility, fear, defeat), I think about how these things overlap, collide and compile; never existing in isolation.

Extending beyond its usual sonic sensibility, noise, as I am using the word, is the summary of all inputs. It is what you had for breakfast today, what your boss said was wrong about your numbers this month, the sound of the dryer in the other room while you try to converse with your spouse and the TV won't shut up. It is loneliness. It is war. It is the crack of ice caps getting lost to the sea. It is being at the grocery store and wondering if you will have enough money when you check out. It is having to talk straight-faced with a coworker when your world has just imploded. It is the taste of a freshly picked banana.

The work in *Noise.* is meant to parallel experienced emotions. These emotions are subjective in that what causes joy for one may induce pain for another. Though the ways by which we arrive at a particular emotion may vary, their existence is fairly universal, as too is the physical language with which we express them. The physicality of emotions is an important tool in my effort to create inanimate objects able to conjure internal responses.

We have access to not only our world, but the world's world and we are rarely, if ever, unattached to either of them. It's hard not to get lost in all of the noise. In *Noise.*, I present the

viewer with seven sculptures suggestive of the human figure to varying degrees. They have one foot in the abstraction and one foot in allusion. In doing this, I aim to create resonance with, and thus engage the emotions in others, which have potentially gone unnoticed due to habituation.

Sculptures tower over viewers, threatening their personal space. The same figures, in their vulnerability, demand empathy as well. Physical strength of materials such as concrete and iron as well as the suggestion of physical strength in size, foster the belief that these works themselves are strong. This is contrasted by precariousness and an actual physical vulnerability of the works; whether it be by their narrow point of contact to the floor compared to their mass, or the extreme fragility of their materials such as in much of the ceramic work. There is physical beauty sprinkled throughout the exhibition, taking the form of color in *Philosophy of Fidgets* (Fig. 1) and *The Job*, the shimmer of broken pieces of black and bronze mirrored glass coating the cantankerous yet elegant legs of *Well it Feels Blind*.

Development

I knew the intense and immersive atmosphere of graduate school would lead me to a specific place artistically. School began with an unloading of as many ideas and objects as I could think of, as quickly as I could. I took advantage of the opportunity to experiment in the space afforded by graduate school. An inventory of thoughts as they came out through my making began to clutter my studio. I recall wanting to conceal those things that felt the most honest and to put forward work based more on what I thought I should be making. The first piece I presented for critique was a black and white line drawing on rice paper presented in a glass shadow box. Directly behind the drawing was second sheet of rice paper filled with reckless and colorful marks of ink and paint, muted by its concealment. With encouragement, I quickly

started to bring the noise to the forefront; however, I did not want to lose the timid nature of hiding. People are a mixture of genuine and concealment. We cannot walk around wearing our realities on our faces all of the time. Ceramic cages in *Noise*. represent the struggle between hiding and protection, but also exclusion and isolation.

The more I made, the more exuberant to the work became though an underlying sense of precariousness and fragility remained. Working back and forth between bold punctuations and delicate moments became a hallmark of my practice. I consistently seek ways to add the sense of near destruction, collapse and even failure to my work, while simultaneously holding on to some moments of delight. Sometimes this means pieces are lace-like in construction but made of porcelain and therefore highly fragile. Other times it is placing objects atop spindly legs or something unstable such as casters or rubber bouncy balls. Producing and presenting works meant to give a sense of near destruction tends to increase my already high anxiety but the way in which they convey this anxiety defines their success. I began to see these unstable ceramic objects, which both invited the viewer with their colorful or tactile exteriors and threatened with their questionable stability as anthropomorphic. It was from this understanding that the work began to grow in scale and works became more complex. I also considered how we present our emotions to those around us even when we think we are concealing them.

Material exploration has been an important in my professional practice. In undergraduate school I would often improvise a solution with an alternative material despite the more orthodox approach to art making being taught. This did not strike me as significant until a classmate and friend pointed it out. It is not so much that my use of materials is intuitive as it is that I am a problem-solver. My mind is able to quickly assess what solutions a material can offer and if that set of solutions fits my problem. Surrounding myself with a variety of media helps to bring vital

spontaneity to the work and allows for various complexities and frequencies to exist. *Philosophy of Fidgets* is a compilation of drawing, painting and wall mounted ceramic objects. The two-dimensional works are produced in a small work space where I surround myself with media such as graphite, charcoal, paint, oil pastels, colored pencil, gold leaf, wire, putty, fabric, drills and knives. The mark in these works is immediate and without labor. They become a record of the moment they were made.

Several of the seven large scale sculpture in *Noise*. also make use of immediacy, though it is more difficult to achieve with the larger scale and the precarious nature in which these works rest. *Smack* (Fig.2) incorporates many of the same two-dimensional materials on its surface. I twist and manipulate the wire, which is included in this piece much in the same way I twist and manipulate line with graphite on paper.

The abundant use of material became one tool in creating artworks that parallel the overwhelming noise of the world. I equate a frequency to materials much in the way a note has frequency. Concrete would be a low frequency where broken glass would be much higher. I use the buildup of materials as metaphor for the buildup of life; the things that create stress, the list of things to do, the things that clutter our minds. I do this either within a sculpture or painting itself as in much of *Philosophy of Fidgets*, but also generally throughout the exhibition making use of a wide variety of material. Each material demands its own way of being manipulated and managed; much in the same way we cannot apply the same solution to situations in life.

The material sensibilities found in *Noise*. can be seen in works made throughout my education. *Deflower/Devour* (Fig.3) was a ten by eighteen foot wall installation made up of craft materials dyed red and woven onto a wire backing. I then attacked this wall with tar, resin, nails, and dirt. Artificial materials are red for the purpose of conflicting interpretation and to represent

a facade of both positivity (love) and negativity (rage). I attached ceramic poppies to the wall as if they were growing out of it providing undertones of mankind's need to alter his consciousness in order to deal with such conflict.

The list of events that can constrain, weigh down, and otherwise impede happiness is both massive and relative. Throughout my first year of graduate school I was making a stockpile of individual pieces reminiscent of my own struggles and then arranged in the style of still life. For *Enfeoffment* (Fig. 4), I placed several objects atop a glass table. These objects ranged from fluffy and cake-like to caged and precarious. I enjoyed the way they overfilled their space, leaning and relying on one another; however, I realized that it fell short. The piece was simply too celebratory to convey the multiplicity I was looking to construct. I also needed for all the disparate parts to become one wanting to put conflict within a singular work.

And Also This Too (Fig. 5) was my first work bordering on the figurative. Here I tied ceramic objects and a few found objects together with wire and produced an object of human scale. Using smaller pieces as building blocks for a more complex was successful in producing a more dynamic sculpture. However, I had not set out to make figurative work, but desired to make something exposing the internal, psychological makings of human, rather than any external incidents. This was influenced by a partially innate and highly trained relationship between my internal and external selves.

I grew up in a tumultuous home. My outlet for this was the sport of gymnastics. I trained daily in my youth and as an adult I have spent years coaching others to use their bodies in very specific ways. I earned my certification to judge the sport, and this required my focused attention to detail as I processed a vast amount of information regarding the body in real time. This skill is helpful in recognizing subtle body and facial movements generated by various affects which I

will discuss later.

Also feeding my interest and awareness of the body was the life-threatening diagnoses my husband received a few months after our wedding. This experience served as a crash course in human biology and led to a brief career in the medical field. It also further enhanced the relationship between bodies and emotions. We are bound by our physical bodies, which, in turn provide opportunities but also consistently let us down.

We exist both psychosomatically as well as somatic-psychically. Our minds affect our bodies, but we can also use our bodies to elicit mental/emotional states. This is very clearly articulated by social scientist Amy Cuddy in her TED Talk on body language. Here she illustrates how, on a biological level, we can become better leaders simply by standing with the posture of a leader. The way we hold ourselves changes our hormone output within two minutes.¹ I put this information to use in the exhibition through the suggestion of body language. Some works are larger than life much in the way a person puffs their chest to show dominance. Others are compacted illustrating their weakness. The vaguely human form in *Bcd fghijklmnopqrstvwxyz* (Fig. 6) is crouched against the wall, which provides it protection much in the way someone would do in an uncomfortable situation. It is an open form made of compressed clay coils and highly vulnerable to breaking. The wall provides it an amount of protection but we can see it is being compelled away from the wall by the implied motion created by progression of black lines toward the open gallery. The vaguely human form *Well it Feels Blind* is unrealistically tall, standing at nearly eight feet, and intrudes on the viewer's space giving it a sense of authority despite its gangly legs and hallowed torso.

¹ Amy Cuddy. "Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are." Lecture, June 2012. Video file. TED. Posted June 2012. Accessed April 1, 2015. http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are?language=en.

Affect and Emotion

My work is informed by emotion and how emotion manifests itself. Defining emotion is difficult, but important. For our purposes, we can differentiate emotions from feelings. This difference is perhaps easiest explained by thinking of a time we felt hunger. This was most likely not an emotional feeling. You felt hungry, you ate, and you didn't feel hungry any more. An ache or pain is a feeling that does not have to involve emotion. An emotion has to include a judgment or appraisal of a situation that is in line with one's own wishes, desires, or goals. We can feel emotional about a physical pain only when we assess that it will impede with our wishes, desires, or goals. Additionally, and to clarify that not all judgments are emotions, an emotion has a corresponding physiological response, i.e. heart rate increase, palm sweat, pupil dilation, etc.²

Emotions are powerful. Reason cannot overcome emotion; only stronger emotion can achieve this. The saying, "Nothing gets you over and old love like a new love," comes to mind. Many people have tried to think themselves out of love, but emotion undoes all that logic and you are right back where you started.

In the exhibition, this type of intensity plays out in a few ways. I run to the studio when feeling the effects of overwhelming noise within myself. This is a reason it is important for me to have a workspace at my home. I translate emotional intensity through the act of touching. In my two-dimensional works I do this via paint, crayon, and pencil often erratic in its mark as it conveys an erratic, conflicting or frustrating emotion. I also manipulate wet clay with some degree of spontaneity and it holds a record of this touch. I create all of the coils used in

² Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason. Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music and Art*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005.

constructing the ceramic sculpture by squeezing the clay in my fist rather than rolling coils out in a more traditional manner. What I am left with from this process is the negative space of this action often down to the pattern of my skin. I construct the cage in *Keep* in this manner as well as *bcd fghijklmnpqrstvwxyz*.

Behavior is often driven by the intense force of emotion and is known as the affect. Some psychologists argue that behavior is necessary for emotion but this is really only a condition of emotion if the opportunity is presented to respond (I cannot punch you in the face when you upset me if your face is not in front of me). Affect, unlike biological drives such as hunger and sex, does not have a specific place on the body that corresponds to the drive. We can point to where we feel hunger, but we cannot point to where we feel fear. This is part of why navigating our emotions is difficult. They exist in our entire being.

Our behavior drive oscillates between the affective and the cognitive.³ I would argue that behavior exists in more of a Venn diagram with affect and cognition overlapping since we have discovered that emotions are constructed in conjunction with judgment and appraisal, regardless of how secondary to our nature these may become.

I create through a similar pattern. I often begin working out of the affective. Sometimes this happens through materials as described above, many times it starts in a form of moving my physical body either in walking, running, or dance. It is while moving my own physical body that I find inspiration for the overarching body language of various sculpture and drawings. The sketching of crude ideas into my sketchbook usually follows this phase. My immediacy is the beginning. Cognition then responds. It has to solve the problem created by the affect, it has to make something out of disparate parts. Cognition is required to make an eight foot sculpture stand

³ Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*. New York, NY: Springer, 1962.

on two, narrow, five-foot legs. It takes cognition to resolve the technical problems in creating work that aims to defy laws of gravity or to manage construction out of materials that fracture effortlessly.

Affect Theory, as developed by psychologist Silvan Tomkins, posits nine categories of subjectively experienced emotions. Of these, two are positive, one is neutral and six are negative. We seek out positive affect and try to avoid the negative. In our search to experience life's pleasures, we have to expose ourselves to the overwhelming possibility of life's misery. The positive affects are enjoyment and interest/excitement. The negative affects are anger/rage, disgust, distress, dissmell, fear/terror, and shame/humiliation. Additionally is the neutral affect surprise/startle; that is neutral inasmuch as it can go either way. Tomkins claims that it is our desire for these positive affects that drives our behavior.⁴ We seek as much enjoyment and excitement as possible, but with overwhelming odds, we must be prepared for the possibility people will fail us, shame us, scare us, and mistreat us. Situations will go awry. Our loved ones will pass away. We cannot escape the horrible wretchedness that can slam any of us into the ground at any moment in time.

This dichotomy is found within *Noise*. as a whole, but also within individual artworks. The seven-foot, black silhouette in *Dirty Diana* (Fig. 7) evokes fear but we also empathize with this form in part due to its narrow attachment to the floor. Many of the pieces lack color giving them a kind of starkness such as in *bcd fghjklmnpqrstvwxyz*. Close investigation, however, will inform that there are vibrant colors behind and peaking through the skin of black and white. This harkens back the concealment found in my initial graduate work.

Silvan's research also reveals, with much specificity, the body language and facial

⁴ Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*. New York, NY: Springer, 1962.

expression, which relate to our experience of affect. Each of Silvan's affects has a corresponding basic biological expression. Our first language has nothing to do with words. Long before we talk, read or write, body language and facial expressions are used to communicate. We begin to understand feelings through physical language. As babies, we make a successful discovery in, for example, how to hold a toy and mom smiles and waves her shoulders: positive response, positive affect.⁵ The ways in which our bodies reflect our emotional states is compellingly close to universal. Cuddy also discusses how those born blind often engage the same physical response as those with sight.⁶ This collective language is what I employ when assembling sculpture, which can be understood and related to by the viewer.

I used to speak of my work in terms of the unconscious, how what we are unaware of exists somewhere out of reach. But this is incorrect; it is about over-consciousness. It is about the reality of reality and the reality of possibility. Threat is a reality whether or not it ever comes to be. If I perceive a situation is threatening, then I am afraid. It will always be true that I was afraid regardless of a threat never becoming a reality, or never even if that threat only existed in my head.⁷ The timeless nature of affect plays out in *Philosophy of Fidgets*. These works are not laid out linear as to denote time, but arrange salon style allowing multiple paintings to be seen at once.

Trauma forces what we don't want to know into our conscious. It forces us to navigate areas within ourselves that are undesirable. Our affect is tied to our fight or flight response. This

⁵ Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*. New York, NY: Springer, 1962.

⁶ Amy Cuddy, "Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are." Lecture, June 2012. Video file. TED. Posted June 2012. Accessed April 1, 2015. http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are?language=en.

⁷ Brian Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 52-70. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

response is activated not only by threat to our physical bodies, but by threats to our emotional wellbeing as well. *Bcdfghijklmnpqrstvwxyz* (a title selected for its difficulty to navigate and the removal of the soft edges of language) is in the process of making the choice to run and hide, or to confront the threat around it. It is tucked against the wall but perched as if ready to spring into action. The segments of squeezed coils that comprise the piece are themselves difficult to navigate.

The motivation to escape those things that overwhelm drove the production of *The Job*. This piece references my desire to run off to the moon in hopes of escaping the clutter of noise that overwhelms me. It is based off of two Italo Calvino writings, *Lightness* and *The Distance of the Moon*.⁸ For this work I recorded my strides to the moon by tying them off with strips of fabric. I then strung the knots of hundreds of footsteps onto wire and suspended the sort of tether this made from near the ceiling on one side, to near the floor on the other. This is the most colorful sculpture in the exhibition but hues and values lighten as they approach the ceiling.

Noise. employs body language as means to communicate emotions in the hopes of creating affect resonance. Affect resonance is the phenomenon at work when walking into a room and feeling the tension among those who occupy it. What we are able to pick up on is due to the physical language of the persons involved. A stranger smiles on the street and we feel happiness because of affect resonance. Each sculpture or drawing has its own gesture or posture, which, in turn, may relate to a particular affect response, most often, a negative one.

This negativity does not stand on its own but is joined by hope. Along with the general stances of these biomorphic objects, textures, colors, and materials are built up to represent the psyche

⁸ Italo Calvino. 1988. *Six memos for the next millennium*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

not as singular states, but rather as a web of complex simultaneity. Black represents the antagonist. A large, broad-backed silhouette is central in the gallery. Its stance and mass gives it physical dominance over much of the surrounding work.

Materials are often pushed to their limit (or past) to parallel overwhelming emotional states. I enhance the fragile nature of ceramics by creating sparse, open forms or firing the clay past its point of maturity causing it to collapse and deform. This failure, or near failure, is balanced by hints of vibrant color brought in to represent the hopeful, excited, tenacious side of being human. The objects resulting of this back and forth act as a bridge between pleasure and violence, delight and grief.

As I constructed the works in *Noise*. I thought of each piece is a fraction of a whole, a part of a personality. Humans are ever changing, with multiplicities, complexities, peculiarities and challenges that we cannot study in terms of isolating. We are an interaction of multiple variables.⁹ No personality is singular, but there is generally a dominant affect which causes body language (expression) and this is also true of the work in *Noise*. Dirty Diana is a solid black mass which stands seven feet tall. Its presence is threatening with a swelled upper body and broad back much like a cobra with its hood expanded. In this way it serves as both threatening and threatened.

Susan Best explores expression of emotion in her book *Visualizing Feeling*. She argues against expression as direct communication of what the artist herself is feeling (i.e., Abstract Expressionism); she rather outlines the process by which artworks become anthropomorphic objects. She cites the views of the philosopher Edward Casey, "Expression for Casey is a property of the aesthetic object. He argues against the idea that the aesthetic object conveys

⁹ Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*. New York, NY: Springer, 1962.

feeling or thought; these are ingredients *of* the object itself." With this he means that objects are capable of possessing thoughts and feeling and not simply projecting them. It is with this view that I place my work in front of the viewer.¹⁰

Body Language and Micro-expressions

Through the topography of the body, we can, at minimum, suggest what is going on internally. Words often fall short of our need to communicate. Nonverbal language fills in these gaps. We often experience a lack of nonverbal communication in the form of text communication though we have even found a way to capitalize on nonverbal language within this context with the rise of emoticons. My sculptures and drawings utilize the power of nonverbal language.

Micro-expressions are another form of physical communication. They are brief facial expressions exhibiting our most honest thoughts regardless of our attempts to conceal. They were first discovered by Haggard and Isaac who refer to them as micro momentary expressions and believed they were undetectable in real time. Later, Paul Ekman found that if trained, one could spot these facial expressions that last 1/15 to 1/25 of a second. A cloaking of emotion through intention or repression generates these expressions. Ekman claims that by studying micro expressions one can gain an increase in their emotional intelligence by learning how to recognize emotions in others and become better aware of one's own emotions.¹¹ I spent a great deal of time researching these expressions in hopes of creating a greater awareness of how emotion is

¹⁰ Susan Best. *Visualizing Feeling. Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde*. New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

¹¹ Paul Ekman Group, LLC. "Micro Expressions." Paul Ekman Group. Last modified 2015. Accessed February 27, 2015. <http://www.paulekman.com/>.

physically articulated. I wanted facial expression and body language to become second nature to me.

Verbal language is often limiting in its specificity and this limitation varies from language to language. An example of this is the Swedish word specific to the experience of witnessing moonlight on the open sea. Norwegians can describe the specific feeling of falling in love with the word *forelsket*. If English does not have such words, can we communicate these experiences? Can words ever describe experience? I often ask myself leading questions as I begin my work. What does anguish look like? Pleasure? Pleasure from the satisfaction of helping someone? Pleasure from having defeated an enemy? The work in *Noise*, relies on nonverbal communication to explore the expressive possibilities within the human experience.

Process

Psychology provides us with the idea that the self is made up of three categories. These are affect, behavior and cognition. As discussed, our behavior is driven by either cognitive drives, or emotional drives (we have also seen how these overlap). My process parallels these ABCs of psychology. I often begin a work from the gut, in other words, its origin is emotional. I then allow for a cognitive response to the outcome of this initial phase. This toggle is repeated until a piece reaches a point of completeness.

Making for me, to use a Steven Connor term, is a philosophy of fidgets. Connor equates fidgeting to thinking. Touch becomes a record of thought. Fidgeting becomes a record of seeking.¹² Clay is an appropriate fidget material. It resists me and gives in to me. It can be

¹² Paul Domela, Paul, ed. *Touched*. Liverpool, England: Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, 2011.

confident or tenuous. It is capable of being formed and deformed. It can live in a state between forever and barely. In these ways it parallels with the self, both the internal and external self. Where clay cannot, other materials are brought in that can. The malleability of wire and its ability to hold up and to snake in between also lends itself to the contents of the work. Wood speaks of growth and destruction. I am interested in a material that is all played out. There is the challenge of resurrection. There is a reacting to the outcome, which was unknown. I create out of affect and respond out of cognition. It is the back and forth between these motivators that creates the interest and ultimately the character and "life" of a piece.

When someone confronts my work, I hope there is sympathetic resonance that wakes up the dormant. There is conscious striving to make the work as "real" as possible. I have struggled with allowing a sort of rawness in without an overly specific narrative. These objects hold their secrets but they do not hold the effects of these secrets. Experience has taken its toll but there is still a sense of hope existing within most "personalities" offered up.

Practitioners

There are two artists whose work enabled me to accept the genesis of my own work and investigate emotions. Louis Bourgeois' unashamed, unabashed delving into her psyche resonates with me (though her disregard for audience does not). Maria Lassnig's body awareness paintings validate the power of an external portrait based on internal subject.

Bourgeois' generated work based on experiences of her past. These experiences lived in her present through the emotional states that remained with her, seemingly, through the entirety of her relatively long life. Her works speak to those extremely personal experiences often with little (if any) reverence given to the viewer. There are many places in which I feel kindred spirit

with Bourgeois, but her lack of concern for the viewer is not one of them. For her, art was a way to acknowledge a state that one could never work through, never get past, and they were all generally negative for her.^{13 14} It is my hope that she is wrong. If at the very least, there are constant new influxes of things to drive our affects and we don't have to land on the lily pad of despair for long.

Lassnig generates paintings through introspection using the figure as means of documenting a felt experience. She makes her body awareness paintings through a process combining gestural marks and slow, considered paint application. Lassnig describes her approach to painting; "I confront the canvas as if naked, devoid of intention, devoid of a plan, without a model, without photography and I let things happen. I do work from a starting point, though, rooted in the insight that the only real things are the feelings unfolding within the shell that is my body: psychological sensations, a feeling of pressure when sitting or lying, feelings of tension and spatial expansion – aspects that are difficult to put onto canvas."¹⁵ She tells us that she works from a psychological understanding but still very aware of external forces such as a chair or the floor. Her paintings are very clearly figurative. I merely try to suggest the figure leaving more room to give form to psychological forces.

Descriptive Analysis

Formal concerns are employed for a two-fold effect. One is to address the "eye-machine",

¹³ Josef Helfenstein (*Loise Bourgeois: The Early Works* (Urbana-Champagne, Ill.: Krannert Art Museum, 2002).

¹⁴ *Louise Bourgeois: The Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine*. Directed by Marion Cajori Cajori and Amei Wallach. Pretty Pictures [France], 2008.

¹⁵ Madesta, Andrea, ed. *Maria Lassnig; Body Awareness Painting*. Werderstrasse, Koln: Snoeck Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2006.

a term coined by the Art Concretists.¹⁶ This is to say that there is a visual pleasure in the work. Color in conjunction with an array of textures, lines, forms and dimension work to create the various frequencies that make up *Noise*. Fuzzy pinks, brazen gold, vital red and cool blues unite to bring the effervescent side of the work to life. The work, however, is not about jubilation, rather it is about the battle between seeking and possessing good and the things that challenge, suffocate and entrap those positives. Black, erratic lines and massive forms set the tone of the antagonist.

The second formal consideration works to serve the eye-body, or the reactions created by seeing a body and relating with our own body. Overall forms are produced with body language in mind, noting the prideful stance of the adversary against the wrenched bodies, reaching, clawing, and gritting teeth. The slightness of the *Feels Blind* along with its sense of hollowness works to create the eye-body connection.

Selected Works

A Philosophy of Fidgets

I have created the largely two-dimensional works in *A Philosophy of Fidgets* with immediacy in mind as reflected in my choice of materials (as previously laid out) as well as scale with works averaging roughly eight by ten inches. As much as possible, I would translate the physiological reactions of emotion out of my body and record them onto paper or into clay. I did not want to over think the creation of these rather I aimed to use the materials to take the shape of my emotion, I wanted to make these an extension of body, or perhaps an extension of my

¹⁶ Susan Best. *Visualizing Feeling. Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde*. New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

affect.

Dirty Diana

Dirty Diana is a bidirectional portrait in that it vacillates between role of antagonist and that of protagonist. The seven-foot silhouette of solid black may be easy to dismiss as the bad guy. It appears to be consuming aspects of its surroundings through the mouth, its only feature. Its precarious and narrowing stance starts to call this into question. It informs us that it is not only dominating, it is vulnerable. A pool of gold paint on the floor next to it streams either out of or into this figure at its base. It is unclear whether this is something the figure is consuming or expelling. The gold signifies the protagonist. Ideas of alchemy and wanting to transform something bad into something good are at play in this work.

Well it Feels Blind

Well it Feels Blind is the most straightforward figurative work in the exhibition. Standing at roughly five feet on two legs no greater than one inch in diameter at any point and a torso that has seemingly been blown out by an internal explosion of the last of its joy, *Well it Feels Blind* evokes sympathy and empathy. The slightness of the *Well it Feels Blind* along with its sense of hollowness works to create the eye-body connection.

Conclusion

Upon researching the ways in which humans respond emotional and physiologically to activators, I was able to produce artworks that elicit specific responses. Presenting artwork suggestive of body and facial responses associated with such things as fear and hope, conjure

reciprocal emotions in viewers. In this manner, they work is successful.

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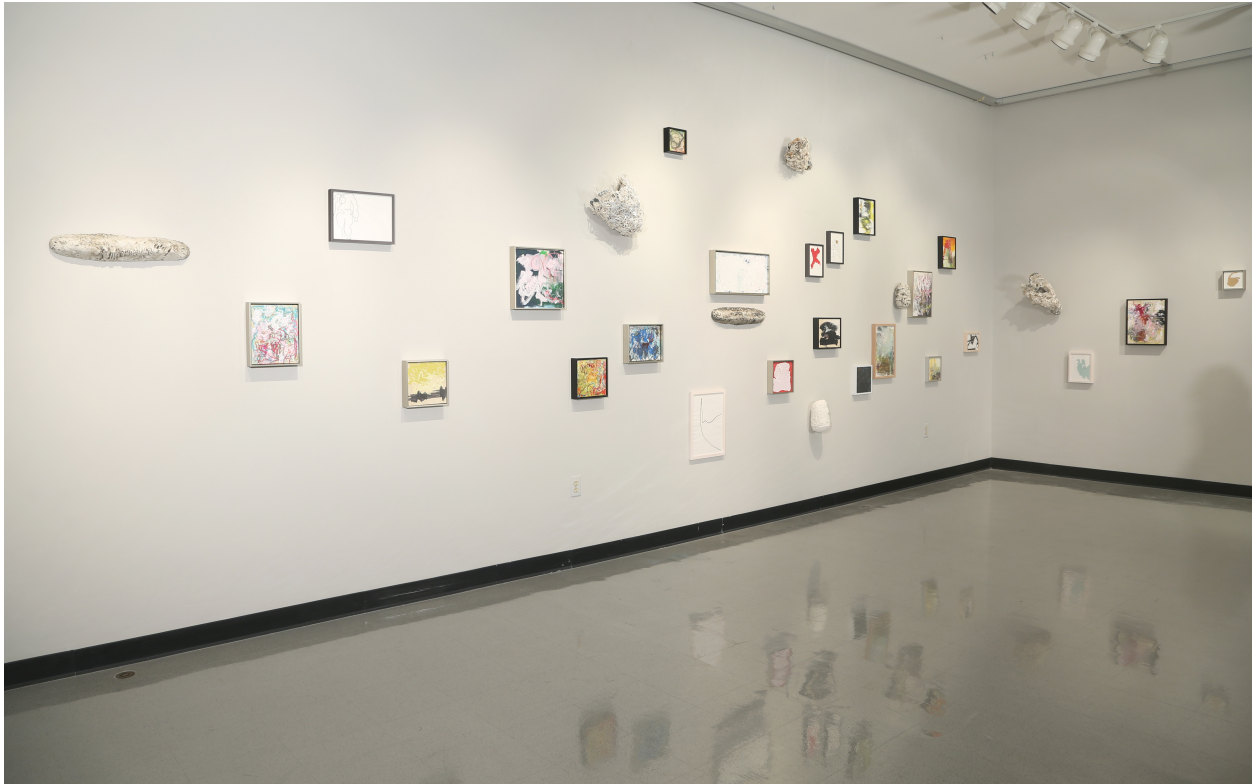


Fig. 1, Laura Polaski, *Philosophy of Fidgets*, 2015.



Fig. 2, Laura Polaski, Smack, 2015.



Fig. 3, Laura Polaski, *Deflower/Devour*, 2013



Fig. 4, Laura Polaski, *Enfoeffment*, 2013

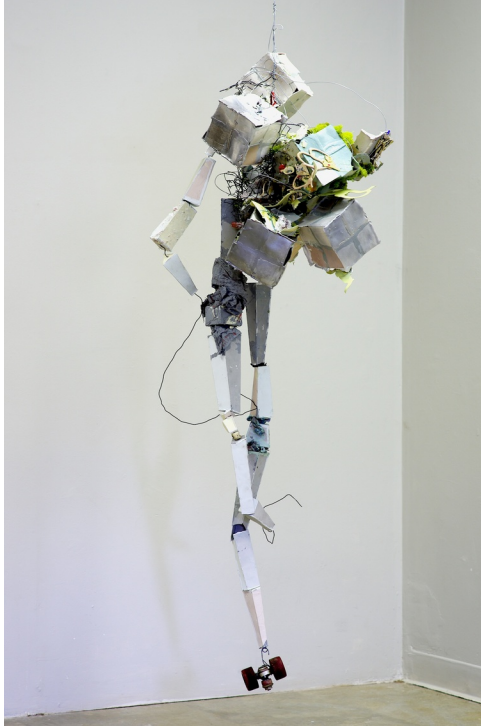


Fig. 5, Laura Polaski, *And Also This Too*, 2013



Fig. 6, Laura Polaski, *bcd fghjklmnpqrstvwxyz*, 2015



Fig. 7, Laura Polaski, *Dirty Diana*, 2015