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crying at nothing but colors

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crying at nothing but colors

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

crying at nothing but colors is an installation of ceramic works that explores the abstraction of feelings, both physical and emotional. The installation itself is a house made out of tension cables that stretch wall to wall in the gallery space. Inside the house are 7 ceramic objects placed on wooden pedestals paired with tufted rugs.

Throughout this essay, I will describe the abstract ceramic objects as Beings. They are colorful and have textured glaze on the surface with a gloopy opalescent glaze oozing out of holes that cover each piece. They are an extension of myself. They are the emotions inside of me and the sensations I feel. They are a part of the body, but not the whole body – like the heart is a part of the body.

I will then talk about the dream house as the body. This is the whole body. The dream house contains everything inside. It contains all of the Beings. All of the feelings and sensations.

I feel a lot of feelings and it's time for me to tell you how I feel.

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Autobiographical Statement

My practice as an artist is strongly influenced by how I grew up. I was an only child raised in a single-parent household; my mother is a bartender and often worked late to support me. I was raised by the whole town of Matawan, New Jersey, or at least my mother's bar patrons, until the age of ten. We began bouncing from house to house at that time. I've been fortunate to be raised in various houses, but feeling at home somewhere takes a significant amount of emotional energy. I eventually felt at home in Surf City, NJ, when I realized we would be staying put for a bit. It was there, in high school, that I learned how to use clay, and decided to pursue art, but the material was less important than the impetus to create.

When I was eighteen, my best friend (whom I met at one of those bars in Matawan, at age three) and I got matching tattoos that say, "In the daylight, anywhere feels like home." At the time, it was just a song lyric that we liked, but as I grew up, the tattoo has taken on a new meaning. Since leaving for college, moving to Philadelphia, getting a traditional job, moving to Arkansas, and starting grad school, I've moved another eight times. Throughout those eight moves, I've had to readjust to different ideas of home. These fluctuations and observations of home are what drive my practice.

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Let Me Tell You How I Feel

I do not feel comfortable in my skin, as my skin literally feels like it is going to crawl away from my body. The doctors say it's anxiety and it might be. The doctors say it's my nervous system working overtime. In truth, I don't think they believe me. I don't think they believe my skin feels like it's being scraped with a wire brush from the time I wake up to the time I go to bed. I don't think they believe that I am in pain because they can't see the pain. If this is anxiety, they cannot see what I feel — the physical stress that is put on my body.

*crying at nothing but colors*¹ is an installation that attempts to find acquiescence in physical discomfort. Each of these lumpy beings is covered in exaggerated pores, or holes, that are oozing bodily fluid, or glaze. The surfaces of the clay objects offer the analogy of being overstimulated to the point of discomfort. As a hyper-sensitive person, both emotionally and physically, I've grown keenly aware of my body's reaction to stress.

Psychosomatically, my skin will start to feel almost electric and crunchy, and the pores on my body swell up. I feel every single pore, and each one tingling; this is overwhelming enough to bring me to tears. Despite its severity, this feeling is invisible; in this clay, I attempt to create physical representations of invisible sensations.

¹ Heather Christle, poet and author of *The Crying Book*, pulls from history, science, art, and wraps it all into a memoir that dissects sadness. Within her “crybrary” of books, a chapter that stands out to her is titled “crying at nothing but colors” that is found in James Elkins’ book, *Pictures and Tears*. Elkins’ book is about paintings and my work is not about paintings, but in diving down the rabbit hole that Christle opened up, I found out that *Pictures and Tears* has amazing chapter titles. Each chapter title gives enough information to spark interest and start an imagined scenario.

Throughout this essay, I will be using the word Beings as a term I gave to the ceramic objects I make. The Beings take up space just like I take up space. As I started creating more of them, my studio felt like I was being surrounded by *things* that felt alive but weren't. The *things* that surrounded me mimicked what my body was feeling. These *things* needed a name, so I started calling them Beings. The Beings are abstract forms out of clay that are extensions of myself, my emotional self. The Beings are an extension of the feelings I feel on a daily basis, animated by way of curves and lumps and textures and gloops. I have termed them Beings because they are not quite human, but they hold the essence of being alive.

When someone gave me a hug, I felt trapped before it even happened: a two-second interaction that felt like it lasted ten minutes. Where do I put my arms? Above? Below? One over and one under? While part of me focused on arm placement, the other part of me couldn't stop thinking about the fingertips squeezing my back. Now I'm at another funeral and over a hundred people have hugged me and I feel awkward but I try to be normal and hug back.

I wrote that in 2019 and now view it as the start of my thinking about my body in space, and how intimate moments like a hug can fuel my thoughts into something more. Now when I receive a hug, I no longer just think about the fingertips squeezing my back. I think about the pressure that is put on my body and the sharp physical pain under every single fingertip squeezing my back.

Dylan Trigg talks about anxiety in a way that resonates with me and is what I felt with the hug.

He says,

“Throughout, the body will appear for us as not only an expression of anxiety but also anxiety’s object.”²

I make anxiety’s object. The Beings are anxiety’s object.

Crying serves as a visible and physical reaction to this pain, a form of communication; I am desperately trying to communicate that I am in pain. I am trying to communicate that my body is on fire. I am trying to communicate that I feel every pore on my body. I am trying to communicate that as soon as it starts to tingle, that's when I cry. I am trying to communicate that my body is exhausted. Like Heather Christle writes in *The Crying Book*,

“these tears *are* a form of communication.”³

The surface texture is layers of glaze and multiple firings that cover each form. The first glaze layer is the crunchy texture glaze that is tonally similar throughout each Being. I will layer this texture glaze with as many layers as the Being can handle. Following the textured glaze, I fill each pore with a gloopy glaze that becomes a hybrid of sweat and tears. In hopes to bring the Beings to life, I add a few more layers of glaze and luster. By adding more layers, the surface becomes thicker and deeper. The glaze becomes the skin and the bodily fluid. This texture draws the audience to look closer, to feel curious about the sensation of touch.

²Dylan Trigg, *Topophobia: A Phenomenology of Anxiety* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 36. This book is the first time I have read about anxiety and felt seen. I am a body that feels things deeply, and anxiety is the way my body communicates that something is wrong.

³Heather Christle, *The Crying Book* (Catapult, 2019), 361. Emphasis on the are.

This sensation of wanting to touch is how I think of aesthetic embodiment which is simply the way a body interacts with a work of art or the way an artwork interacts with a body In Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetic and the Arts, Arnold Berleant understands that the type of art fine art, music, dance, craft, etc. depends on what form embodiment takes within a work. or example, a sculpture takes up space like a body takes up space, so it inherently has some level of an aesthetic embodiment dance takes that even further since it is an actual body occupying and moving through space. Berleant explains embodiment with two definitions and relates them to aesthetics in art one form of embodiment is the aura of physical presence, and the other form embodiment can take is when the somatic participation of the appreciator is involved.⁴

It all comes down to the audience's connection to an artwork. As a three-dimensional artist, I like to understand embodiment in both the sense that the artwork itself, the Beings, has a bodily presence, and that the appreciator's participation in looking creates another level of aesthetic embodiment. It is one thing to make a piece of art that takes up space, but another thing entirely to have the audience look up or down or under, depending on how the artwork is displayed or placed. The Beings are displayed on stacked lamination baltic birch furniture. Much like the Beings themselves, the material is layered to form the furniture. I'm interested in the audience being just as important as the artwork itself. In some ways, the audience will inform the next piece. Does the audience feel comfortable seeing a Being at eye level? How does the audience feel crouching down to look at a Being?

⁴ Arnold Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetic and the Arts* Routledge, 2004 , 3- .

Beings Being

I started doing yoga even though I hate doing yoga. I wake up every morning, flopping my way over to the living room, and for 30 minutes I am aware of my body. An uncomfortable awareness. I move my body, breathe in, breathe out, and move my body again. I am just a lumpy Being. At minute 25, I make my way down to the yoga mat, just like the instructor says. My body is splayed out on the ground, corpse pose. As I lay here listening to the soft voice of the instructor, I am aware of my body in this living room. I am aware of the other Beings in this living room. They aren't living Beings, they are Beings that are an extension of me. The Being sitting on the coffee table is also my anxiety. The Being on the staircase is also my depression. The Being on the footstool is also my uncomfortable stress on my body.

“The body by itself, the body at rest is merely an obscure mass, and we perceive it as a precise and identifiable being when it moves toward a thing.”⁵

In the moment of making, I am a choreographer. I work on multiple pieces at once; this allows me to move throughout my studio and give attention to each Being in process. I think of the process of moving in the studio like a dance, and once I get the moves figured out, the Beings grow and multiply. A choreographer has a particular awareness of bodies in space and particularly the way the body moves in space. I am a ceramic artist first, but my mind and the way I navigate the studio are akin to choreographing a dance. I consider Rethorst's text, *A Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings*, often when I start a new body of work:

⁵ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 3.

“Dailiness requires a simultaneous tuning into time and the absence of time. One has to know and not know, prefer and not prefer, empty oneself and acknowledge one’s fullness, be passive and charged. It has to happen to you and from you. It has to be too fast for you to take in, and done in baby steps, one leaking into the other.”⁶

While making this body of work I acknowledge the dailiness of being in the studio, working. Each piece is made at the same time so that as one piece becomes too wet to work on, I can jump to the next piece. I move from one piece to the other like they are different dance partners. From beginning to end, these pieces carry an aliveness. Rethorst refers to this act of seeing as a pathetic fallacy, which is the treatment of inanimate objects as if they contain human feelings, thoughts, and sensations. Like she says,

“We project our bodies onto everything.”⁷

My body is projecting anxiety and pain. As I pinch the clay my hands become inflamed and my wrists become stiff, and the Being I am making feels that. I make peace with the pain in the studio. It is something I know will happen and I know will fade away. I enjoy the making, the choreographing of a dance. I have learned to live with the pain. The doctor says it's anxiety. The Rheumatologists say it's nothing.

⁶ Susan Rethorst, *A Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings* (University of the Arts Helsinki, Theatre Academy Helsinki, 2016), 5.

⁷Rethorst, *A Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings*, 20.

Is it because I am a woman?

This thought comes into my head every time I leave the doctor's office without any answer for why my skin feels like it is burning off or why it feels like a thousand needles are stabbing my back or even why I have menstrual cramps every single day of my life. These are not normal feelings, but the doctors think I'm fine. I didn't know how common it was to be misdiagnosed as a woman until I read *Unwell Women: Misdiagnosis and Myth in a Man-Made World* by Elinor Cleghorn. In the 1980s women were diagnosed with “hysteria disorders,” which was a catch-all for chronic conditions in women; it could affect any part of a woman’s body. As Rebecca Solnit mentions in her book, *Men Explain Things To Me*, hysteria literally translates to the uterus in Greek.⁸ Psychosomatic has been a better term to describe an illness that affects the mind and body. Psychosomatic doesn't feel like an attack on women's emotions or women feeling anything at all.⁹ The problem is, it is 2022 and women are still being misdiagnosed because pain can be invisible. A year ago I was prescribed Cymbalta, which helps with anxiety and nerve pain. Even though it is helping, my doctor says it is just school stress and nothing more.

Let me tell you more about these Beings, specifically the Beings that are residents of the current house that is my thesis show. See section *The Dream House* to understand the house.

we will ever be, crying for these days (Figure 1) is the first Being that you find yourself confronting as you enter the house. It is the largest of the Beings with the most saturated glaze

⁸ Elinor Cleghorn, *Unwell Women: Misdiagnosis and Myth in a Man-Made World* (Penguin Random House, 2021), 30-69.

⁹ Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things To Me* (Haymarket Books, 2014), 105.

color and sits on a small stool that is specifically made to match its dimensions. The Being sits in the corner of the house on a green rug; it looms.

reach around and pull away my spine, if it'll make me feel alright (Figure 2) is a Being that took the form of my living room lamp. The lamp is a vintage brass floor lamp that has a circular glass table in the middle, like a skirt. It carries an aliveness that I attempt to give the Beings. I made this Being with the intent of it being reminiscent of my floor lamp because that is the most crucial piece of furniture in my living room. It is the only light source I choose to use. This Being doesn't have light because it is only about the presence of the furniture in space and not its intended purpose.

its a long way back to a high from where i am (Figure 3) takes up the most space in the house. It is a Being that sits on top of the coffee table, with a rug of a similar size. The table is wiggly and wavy with a cantilever created by the undulations. The Being fits perfectly in the area that overhangs. The tension of the Being sitting in a precarious spot at the table is in conversation with the emotional tension this Being holds. Unlike the other Beings, this being has larger pores and larger drips: it is experiencing something completely different than the other Beings yet under the same roof.

patience is waning, im growing tired (Figure 4) is the smallest of the Beings and sits on top of a buffet style table with a navy blue rug underneath. This Being stands out the most not only because of its size, but because it is a brighter orange than the others and has a lot of lumps.

stare outside now, watch the dreams pass (Figure 5) is a Being that sits on a rolling side table inspired by 1960s space age furniture. The Being is situated in the house in the gallery facing the glass wall of the gallery.

sitting, its been dark here before (Figure 6) is in the far back corner of the house. This Being sits high at eye level. There is a light blue rug underneath with a cut out where the pedestal stands. The top of the pedestal has the cut out light blue rug on top as if the pedestal pierced through the rug.

and we should learn to live more on the staircases (Figure 7) This Being takes the form of the pedestal staircase. It sits in the middle of the stairs. There is a purple rug runner that extends onto the gallery floor.

The Dream House

The dream house is a metaphor for the body. This dream house is a metaphor for my body. The house as a metaphor for the body is not uncommon. I choose to think about the house as a dream house because what is inside is not real. It's invisible. It's a dream. A nightmare? It is just my emotions. It is nothing to worry about. Or it is everything to worry about. But, if no one can see it, how can it be real? It's not just a panic attack. I know this. It is more than a panic attack, I just can't prove it. *crying at nothing by colors* is my attempt at proof. It is my dream house filled with physical representations of the body stressed, overwhelmed, and full of emotions. The dream house is very much real to me. In *The Architecture of Happiness*, Alain de Botton says,

“We need a home in the psychological sense as much as we need one in the physical: to compensate for a vulnerability.”¹⁰

The installation of the dream house in *crying at nothing but colors* is a frame of a house, enough information for the audience to know it's a house. This house is a physical representation of a house as well as a psychological representation. Steel cable is stretched from wall to wall, creating a subtle drawing of a house in space. Tension holds the house together, literally and figuratively. Each piece inside the house is a vulnerable depiction of what happens to the body under stress.

¹⁰ Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (Vintage Books, 2006), 107.

Traditional craft materials such as wood, fibers, and ceramics have a role in each individual piece. The Beings themselves are ceramics with the intent of only using ceramic finishes on the piece. Each Being is then placed on a wood furniture pedestal. The pedestals live in this wonky cartoon-like world while also grounding each Being in a familiar form like a coffee table or buffet or staircase. The pedestals are placed alongside tufted rug pieces that are made to the specifications of each furniture pedestal. The tufted rug allows each piece to have a small comfort of home, the familiarity and physical softness of the yarn.

de Botton said: “Once we start to look, we will find no shortage of suggestions of living forms in the furniture and houses around us.”¹¹

It is my body, this house. It is always changing. It will not look the same in SCUL Gallery as it will look in the next space. The Beings also change but in a different way. The Beings are made permanently but are meant to be rotated in and out with other Beings. What I feel changes, so what goes in the house changes. In this installation, the Beings are placed in a similar setup to the home I currently call home. More specifically, it is set up as a living room. I spend a lot of time in the living room, laying down on the couch, trying to ease the pain. It only made sense to place the Beings, the feelings I feel, in the location where I sit with my feelings the most – my body and the living room.

¹¹ de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*, 84.

Conclusion

I made a body of work beginning with the feeling of my body under stress and in pain. That experience led me to make *crying at nothing but colors*. The conclusion of this body of work is installing the work with the house. Each Being intentionally placed to mirror the place I call home at the time of this installation. This body of work is only the start of the Beings. I developed a material language through this research. The language of textures and glazes in ceramics. The language of cutting and stacking plywood. This material language is not done. The Beings are not done. My pain is not done.

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Appendix: Figures



Figure 1: *we will ever be, crying for these days*



Figure 2: *reach around and pull away my spine, if it'll make me feel alright*



Figure 3: *its a long way back to a high from where i am*



Figure 4: *patience is waning, im growing tired*



Figure 5: *stare outside now, watch the dreams pass*



Figure 6: *sitting, its been dark here before*



Figure 7: *and we should learn to live more on the staircases*



Figure 8: *and we should learn to live more on the staircases* (Detail)



Figure 9: *crying at nothing but colors*



Figure 10: *crying at nothing but colors* (Detail)