

Disruptive Body

Catherine Hois

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Abstract

This support paper describes the development of my exhibition, *Disruptive Body*, based on my personal experiences with an eating disorder and my studio research. In my paper, I aim to engage a conversation about the dangers of normalizing body management by creating an immersive, confrontational environment for the viewer. I highlight a reflection as the root of my process, as I began reading through my collection of journal entries that record my experience recovering from an eating disorder. I discuss the inspiration behind *Pageant of the Vulnerable*, beginning with research into art therapy, eating disorders, and artist Yayoi Kusama. Kusama is an important reference for my large-scale sculptures, because of her approach to expressing her own fears and obsessions by surrounding herself with forms that represent the source of her trauma.

I discuss my need to confront my past and present struggles with body dysmorphia, and my decision to create large-scale sculptures that are inspired by different parts of my body. It is important to me that the viewer is immersed into the environment I create, and I explain how I achieve this through researching aspects of the home, memories, and familiar materials.

Disruptive Body is an objection to the obligation of unhealthy body standards in society, and an expression of healing my own relationship with my body.

Acknowledgments

To the following supportive people,

My partner

My mother, father and sister

My professors and classmates

I thank you all, from the bottom of my heart.

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Introduction: Disruptive Body

I am a healing body. I am a healing mind. I create what gives my mind peace. I confront what brings my mind disruption. I create what gives my mind disruption, in order to confront it. I surround myself with disruption. I am disruption. I am at peace with disruption.

- Catherine Hois, January 11th, 2022

Disruptive Body is an exhibition about the evolving relationship I have with my own body, and the space it inhabits. It is a reflection of many years struggling with an eating disorder and recovering, through art therapy and journal keeping of my history. It is an expression of confronting my body dysmorphia by surrounding myself with sculptures representing my obsessions and fears, integrating myself into the environment. It is an investigation into spaces and things that trigger specific memories, and immerse the viewer deep into an environment. It is a story about a body that learned to reject itself in a society that normalizes extreme body management. *Disruptive Body* puts the secrets of the home and the body on display to the public eye.

I will describe the development of this exhibition like a timeline, each thought process and creative action layed out in chronological order. This is the story of my process. I like to think of my process like a tree; the trunk being the core, or main idea of my current work. Then, as time goes on, the trunk grows and begins to branch out into different paths of creative research; all attached to the main core thought (or trunk).

Process

To begin telling the story of the development of *Disruptive Body*, I must first describe what process means in my practice. I describe my process by combining two theories that truly resonate with how I work. The first is in Kim Sawchuk and Owen Chapman's *Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments*, and the second is found in Gabriel Levine's *Art and Tradition in a Time of Uprisings*. In *Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments*, Chapman and Sawchuk write about research-for-creation, and research-from-creation. Research-for-creation is "the gathering of materials, practices, technologies, collaborators, narratives, and theoretical frames that characterizes initial stages of creative work and occurs iteratively throughout a project" (Chapman and Sawchuk, 1). Throughout my artistic practice, the act of making is often inspired by a book, article, or a conversation I have with a peer. For example, I will read something that piques my interest, then highlight and take notes in a journal or sketchbook. I will create artwork based on what I have read by sketching, then branch out to drawing, painting, and/or sculpting. Research-from-creation is "the extrapolation of theoretical, methodological, ethnographic, or other insights from creative processes, which are then looped back into the project that generated them" (Chapman and Sawchuk, 1). I experience this method when I create something born from emotion, or a concept that comes from within that then nourishes a new branch in research. For example, the many drawings I have accumulated that are inspired by a strong, emotional relationship between my body and I, have been inspiration for many research avenues, such as eating disorders and art therapy, and the female body in a neoliberal society.

Gabriel Levine writes about fermentation in *Art and Tradition in a Time of Uprisings*; a process accomplished by hard working microbes, unseen to the naked eye, that serves the purpose of slow but worthwhile decay and creation. Levine brings up the Latin root of the word ferment, meaning to boil (Levine, 203), just as the research and creation ideas bubble and boil in the crock pot of my mind, processing and refining into actions. Levine brings up Sandor Ellix Katz multiple times in his chapter on fermentation. Katz is a fermentation enthusiast, DIY activist, and writer of many books on the controlled decaying process including *The Art of Fermentation*. Levine attended a sauerkraut workshop by Katz, and says “fermentation, Katz told his audience, is nothing more than controlled decay. It works with invisible creatures in the air and soil ...Not only kraut or kimchi, he emphasized, but many of the substances prized by humans— - from intoxicating drinks to regenerating compost— owe - their existence to the patient reproduction of these quiet and powerful partners [microbes]” (Levine, 196). Levine goes on to discuss other examples of fermentation which do not include food, or mysterious microbes at all, but within the act of creating other DIY projects including knitting, drawing, and gardening. Levine brings up artist and DIY defender Meg Wade, with her writings about the healing prospects of these slow, mindful activities. “Wade argues that the kitchen, the garden, or the workshop offer spaces of retreat where ‘signs are less dense.’ In an ever-- accelerating spectacular economy, these spaces create the possibility of a certain ‘scaling down and slowing down’ ...The slowness of microbial growth, the patient work with organic matter in garden and kitchen, can be a kind of healing, regenerative activity” (Levine, 207-208). In my work, the period of fermentation presents itself in note taking, sketching, and thinking. It happens while I am in the car, thinking about something I read the night before, then needing to pull over - safely

- to jot down an idea, or a “eureka” moment. It happens while I am lost in a sketch, then suddenly a thought pops into my head and I need to write down an idea, at the side of my drawing. It happens during the quiet moments, the moments of involuntary and voluntary reflection; the moments I am lost in the calm, meditation of making. Not only is the fermentation period important in my artistic practice, but it acts as a healing agent in my life because of the meditative state I am transported to when creating. It brings on a sense of calm, peace, and purpose.

Reflection: My Eating Disorder Story

I knew I couldn't create art; a thesis, and an exhibition, without it being autobiographical, with a focus on inner struggles with self-image. These relationships changed from extremely toxic at times, to a mending relationship. I wanted to reflect on my process of finding love for myself, for my body, and for food. I wanted to reflect on the important role visual art has played in this recovery. I thought a good place to start in looking back on my story of recovering the tattered and malnourished relationship I had with my body was from a collection of journals I had written during these difficult times. After struggling with a bingeing and purging eating disorder, I decided to start an Instagram page that documented my recovery process; each post was a journal entry. The following is the first entry:

Hi! My name is Catherine, I am 23 years old, and I am recovering from an eating disorder. Long story short, I started bingeing and purging in about 10th grade. I used food as a temporary way of dealing with anxieties and developed a bingeing and purging eating disorder. I have been bingeing and purging on and off for about 9 years

now. This past year, I have been working hard at dealing with my anxieties rather than turning to food, and I am happy to say that I have made progress in minimizing bingeing and purging - not to say that I have stopped fully. I have come to the conclusion that I want a different relationship with food. I want to feed myself delicious, healthy things. I want to be artistic with my cooking and baking. I want to love food, rather than be afraid of it, and I want to inspire those who are struggling with similar issues to come out and talk about it! I have made this account to document meals and recipes, and to share my journey to a better relationship with food. I welcome any questions, stories, recipes; basically, anything in my DM's. Bon appetit!

- Catherine Hois, August 17th, 2018

The bingeing and purging started in my late teen years and early twenties, but the hyper body consciousness began when I was a young child, as I was always the biggest body in class and was teased by my classmates. The hyper body consciousness only grew into an obsession with the way my body looked, and with the food that I took in. I was obsessed with every inch of my reflection and would stand in front of the mirror for hours, pinching and lifting back my skin. As a young teen I would restrict food, go on extreme diets that left me feeling weak and tired, excessively use laxatives, and starve myself. A much larger issue began when I discovered that I could eat whatever I wanted, when I wanted it, so long as I made myself purge it straight after. It was like erasing what had been done, taking one step back as if I had never eaten at all. I could finally be like some of the other girls I knew, who could eat and eat and eat, and still take up less space than I would feel anxious after eating foods that I had deemed “unhealthy.” These foods were of the high carb, or high sugar variety. I would also stress eat, and this would cause me to feel more anxious as I felt like I had no control over myself. Making myself sick immediately

after, made the anxiety go away. It was like magic: horrible and dangerous magic that ended up creating a whole new world of problems for me in the future. My occasional purging turned into full-on binges that lasted weeks at a time. Sometimes I would spend the entire day bingeing and purging; it was a never-ending cycle. The bingeing was triggered when I was anxious about something, or when I had restricted foods for a long period of time. I could go a month without bingeing and purging, but during these months, I would calorie count, work out excessively, and only eat whole foods, or foods I deemed as “clean” such as vegetables, fruits, nut butters, and 0% fat yogurts. After restricting myself for long periods of time, it didn't take much to trigger bingeing and purging. It was extremely exhausting to go through this cycle, yet I could not find a way to stop. I felt trapped in this repetition, and could not picture my future being binge-and-purge-free. Reflecting on this time in my life was necessary research, as branches of inquiry, new topics of exploration, and creative sparks began to arise and flow.

Although most of my coping mechanisms were unhealthy and harmful, I had another outlet, which was art making - a passion of mine, ever since I was a young child. Painting, drawing and craft making transported my mind to another place, soothed my spirit, and temporarily freed my mind from harsh and restrictive thoughts. Visual arts is something I excel at, and one of the only activities in which I show true confidence. When I make art, I lose myself in creation, becoming one with the environment I am representing. As I read through my journal entries, I realized how essential this process has been. It allows me to move forward, and has acted as a period of fermentation for my recovery, and for my artistic process. Now I feel I can acknowledge how much I have changed. I can see the progress I have made since writing my

very first journal entry. It has given me comfort, despite the hard days that still come from time to time.

Making the Body and Art Therapy

The process of going through my recovery journals made me think about the transformation of my own self-perception. In the past I would have smoothed out my curves and bumps, stretch marks and cellulite in my reflection. I do struggle with these intrusive thoughts periodically, but they are more like whispering clouds that I allow to float by, rather than thunderous clouds that are loud and angry, bursting with the lightning stings of harsh self-criticisms. I started to investigate my interpretation of my outer skin further. Each day I drew, painted, or sketched out a section of my body. Some sketches are a little more abstract. Some zoomed-in parts of my body, and others, an abstract rendering of the essence of my curves and skin. These drawings are on white drawing paper, and most of them are watercolour or charcoal sketches. While drawing, I thought about my body as a work of art. As I drew certain curves and freckles, I began to see different landscapes, rolling hills and oceans on the page. In the more realistic sketches, I would look in the mirror and draw what I saw, trying to capture my relaxed, unposed body in its calm, nourished, restful state. I found this exercise to be useful in terms of getting to know my own skin in a different way. As I spent time with my skin, I was not critical: I admired my curves, and in my drawings I accentuated them at times with thicker lines and brighter colours. These body studies let me sit and look at myself in ways I had never before: I looked at myself with an appreciative and accepting gaze, not wanting to change any of the

lumps and bumps. In doing this, I also felt a sense of strength and power, as I embraced the body that I used to look at with such disgust and embarrassment.



Figure 1: Catherine Hois, *Watercolour Body Sketches* 2021

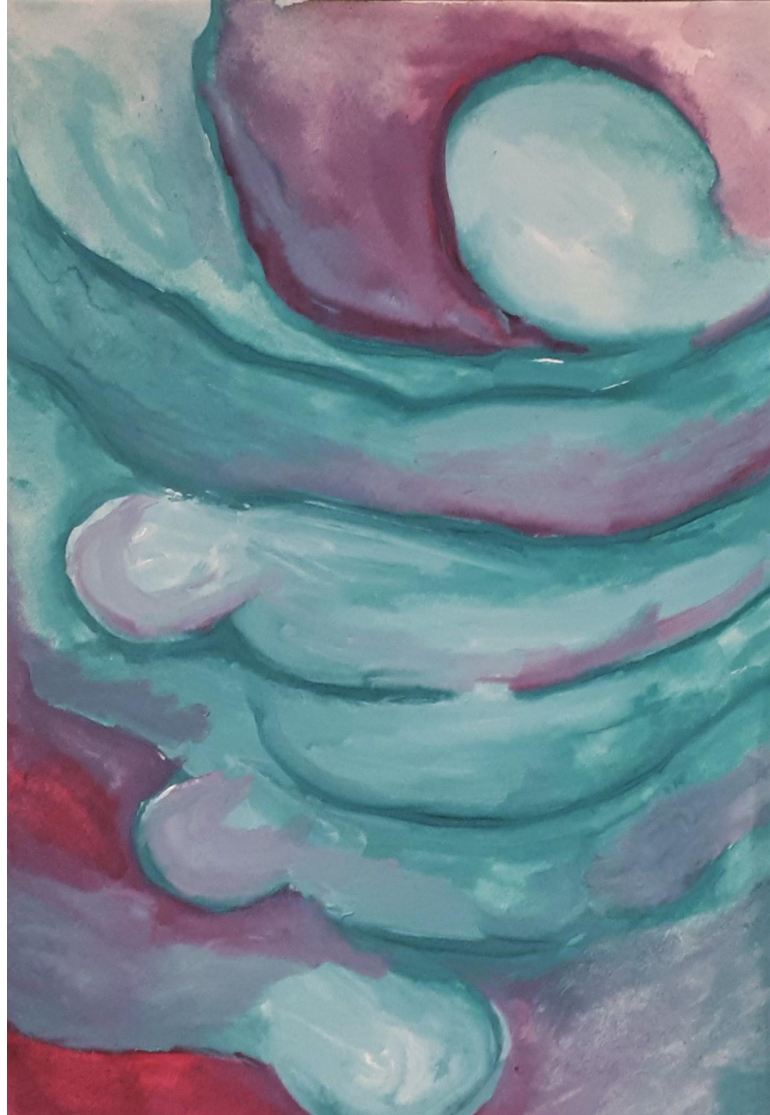


Figure 2: Catherine Hois, *Watercolour Body Sketch* 2021

As I thought about embracing my insecurities through the art I created, I began to research artists with mental health struggles who created art with a similar subject. In researching artists of the 1960s, I came across Yayoi Kusama. Born in Japan, Kusama moved to New York as a young woman, to pursue her dream of becoming an artist. I was interested in Kusama's sculptural works from the 1960s, particularly her work from her exhibition *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* at Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York 1963 was tremendously important

for me. There is a well-known photograph of Kusama herself, standing naked in front of a life-sized boat. The boat is covered from one end to the other with white phallic forms, all sewed, stuffed, and placed by Kusama. Kusama and the boat are surrounded by exactly 999 prints of the phallic covered boat, plastered onto the walls. For this work, Kusama had transformed the space into an environment that appeared to be moving, “leaving you seasick and hallucinating” (Kusama, 27), in Kusama’s own words. The reasoning behind Kusama’s obsession with covering the boat in penis shaped objects is what drew me closer to her. She stated:

The reason my first soft sculptures were shaped like penises is that I had a fear of sex as something dirty. People often assume that I must be mad about sex, because I make so many such objects, but that’s a complete misunderstanding. It’s quite the opposite – I make the objects because they horrify me. I began making penises in order to heal my feelings of disgust towards sex. Reproducing the objects, again and again, was my way of conquering the fear. It was a kind of self therapy, to which I gave the name ‘Psychosomatic Art’. (Kusama, 29)

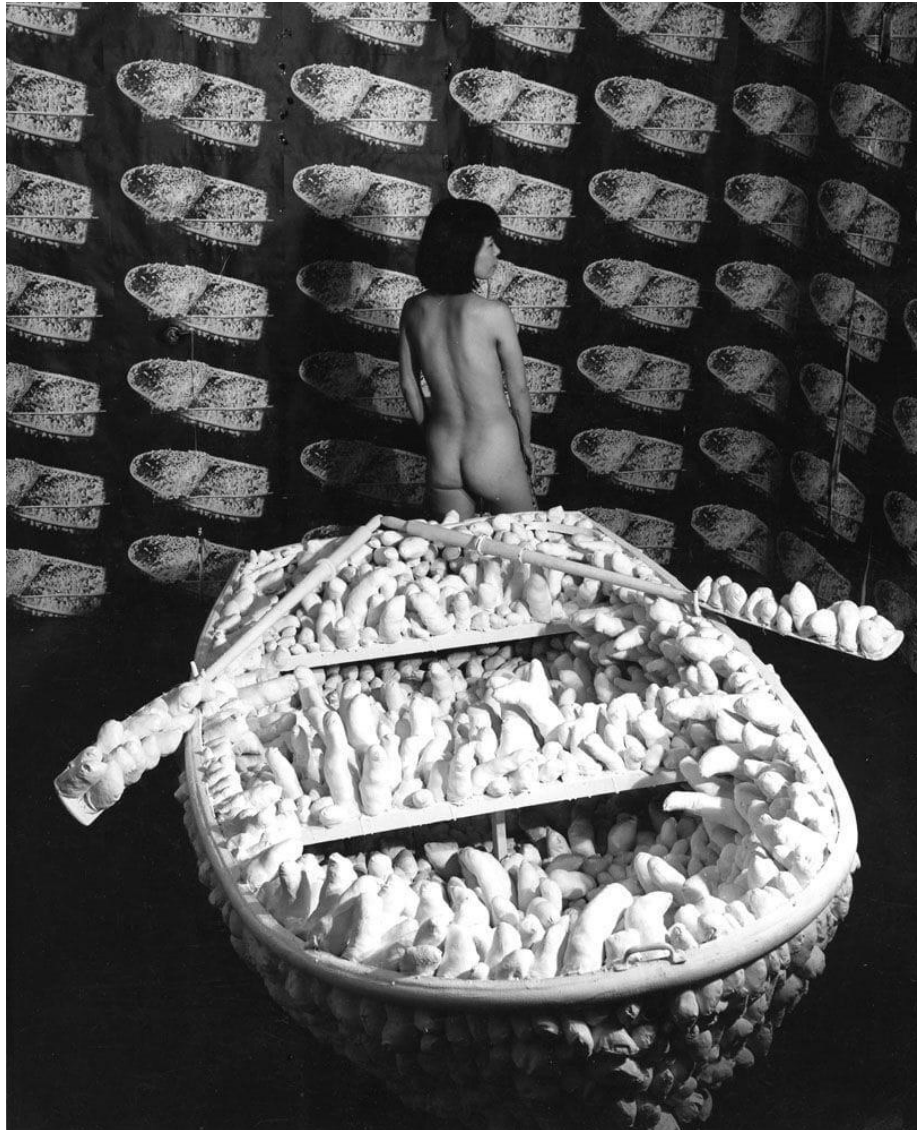


Figure 3: Yayoi Kusama, *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show*, Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York

1963

I was amazed by Kusama's approach to healing, and I admired her courage and determination to surround herself with something that she found horrifying and traumatizing. After learning her reasoning behind repeatedly creating these forms, I realized a much deeper meaning in the photograph of Kusama standing nude in front of the phallic-covered boat. She is standing there, in the most vulnerable position one could be in, subjecting herself to her deepest

and darkest fears: publicly exposing not only her body, but her longing to heal from her traumas. I could make connections to my own practice at the time; I was also surrounding myself with my own insecurities and fears in my own way. As I drew more and more bodily forms on paper, I found myself enclosed by this congregation of drawings scattered on the floor. Everywhere I looked there was a bodily form drawing. I could feel my relationship with my own body change, the more I sketched myself. After reading about Kusama's courageous acts of creating forms that horrified her, and thereby healing her relationship with. I was inspired to bring my sketches to another realm. A realm that would surround me and swallow me up, a realm that transformed the environment of my choosing. I wanted these forms to breathe, to have a form of life at the sight of them. I knew I had to sculpt.

I began with material: old t-shirts, bed sheets, used canvas, nylons, and any other fabric that I could find in my studio and home. These materials reminded me of my own tissue: the pinchable, foldable, creasable material that covers my organs the way the fabric would cover the stuffing. I would take a piece of fabric, and with my eyes on my body sketches I would try to create similar bodily forms by stuffing the material. These bodily stuffed forms vary in size and shape, none of which look the same. After making a few of these stuffed bodily objects, I began to think about my own body, and how I wanted to restrict and manipulate it in the past. I took some string and began tying it tightly around the forms, pulling the string around them to manipulate their structure and create a feeling of restraint. I felt the need to bring the sculpture closer to my physical body, inside and out, so I decided to paint it with acrylic paint. I used colours inspired by my skin, undertones and veins, and also the inside of my skin, with reds of the deep and bright variety. I repeated this act until I was surrounded by dozens of these abstract

body parts, scattered around me like the stuffed animals on my childhood bed, only I was not surrounded by comforting plushies - quite the opposite - I was surrounded by constructions of my own insecurities.



Figure 4: Catherine Hois, *Body Sculpture in Process* 2021



Figure 5: Catherine Hois, *Body Sculptures* 2022

1 - 32" x 30," 2 - 34" x 24," 3 - 43" x 28"

During the process of creating these bodily stuffed forms, I was curious as to whether there were any studies on art therapy and eating disorders; a moment of research-from-creation. I came across an article by Mary Levens titled *Borderline Aspects in Eating Disorders: Art Therapy's Contribution* that strongly aligned with my fermentation process of making, in relation to my own healing. In her research, Levens describes her five-year experience practicing art therapy, in a housing facility for females with diagnosed eating disorders, including bulimia, and anorexia nervosa.

Resistance to definition, to line leading to form, can possibly be understood as relevant to the particular concerns of patients for whom form and shape are intricately connected with their own bodies. The eating-disorder patient has specific difficulties relating to her or his body and shape. Therefore, the issue of creating shapes external to oneself and considering these images or clay objects as traditional in the sense that they bridge an inner and outer reality can be of great value. (Levens, 279-280)

According to Levens, in creating shapes and sketches based on myself, I actively strengthened my relationship and perception of my own physical body. The more I sketched myself and spent time looking at myself in a way an artist would look at nature, the more calm sense of acceptance, tranquility, and rest I felt within. Just as Levine writes fermentation acts as a healing agent, I could feel my own mending processes at work. I found Levens' writings on the experiences of her patients to be quite relatable, especially this particular quote:

In art therapy sessions I have frequently found that the undefined, merged-type of painting, particularly by the more bulimic patients, is associated with desires to lose themselves in something bigger than themselves, to feel at one with, for instance, the sea or air. The desire is for the relegation of self-other boundaries, which simultaneously evokes in some patients tremendous fears of loss of personal identity. (Levens, 280)

Creating something I can get lost in, both mentally and physically, is an action that I naturally drift towards. I often feel satisfied when I am consumed by my work; when it towers over me and transforms my environment as I fill my studio with massive pieces, like Kusama and her self-obliterating environments. It then dawned on me that this ‘need’ to lose myself in my work might be a learned symptom from the eating disorder and body dysmorphia I had been struggling with for years.

The Home: A Dreamy Installation

After reading Levens’ research, I had the idea to take all of my bodily forms and stack them on top of each other against the wall. I wanted to experience the feeling of being engulfed, and be more intensely surrounded by the forms. I thought the best way to create this overpowering feeling was to dress at least one wall with the abstracted bodily sculptures. I began stacking each form, tying and gluing them together as I strategically placed each little part of me in distorted patterns. This created a deconstructed human sculpture that reached around 8feet in height, and around 4feet wide. As I stood back to view the new composition I had just constructed, I could already feel a sense of environmental change as a large portion of the wall

suddenly had different vibrations, and I enjoyed the atmospheric change. I decided to call this piece, *Pageant of the Vulnerable*. I knew that I had to keep creating these forms, so that I could grow my humanistic accumulation of insecurities to cover the entire wall. I had the idea of creating a sense of continuous growth to this congregation of abstract body parts, and so I made some of the forms reach the floor, and across the walls to mimic the growth of a climbing vine slowly taking over a structure. Each time I stood back and stared at this collection of human parts, I noticed how the other objects in the room began to stand out against it. I was working in the basement of my home at the time, and so accompanying my wonderful monstrosity was a couch, a television, a rug, and a stool. These ordinary living room objects began to adopt a new characteristic; they began to feel unordinary, almost sinister when viewed alongside this sculpture. And so sparked another pique of interest for me.



Figure 6: Catherine Hois, First assemblage of *Pageant of the Vulnerable* 2021

I began to think about Claire Bishop's writing on Ilya Kabakov and her notion of "total installation" in her book *Installation Art*. Bishop explains the meaning of "total installation" as: "familiar circumstances and the contrived illusion carry the one who is wandering inside the installation away into his personal corridor of memory and evoke from that memory an approaching wave of associations which until this point had slept peacefully in its depths" (Bishop,16). This "total installation" is appealing to me, and at the time I began to brainstorm ways in which I could let the viewer feel a similar submergence to what I felt in my basement

studio. Bishop writes about an installation by Kabakov titled *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment* (1985), which consists of a life-sized room with the doorway halfway boarded up, leaving room for the viewer only to peek inside. “Peeping through the cracks you see a small cluttered bedroom, strewn with posters, diagrams and debris, a home-made catapult with a seat, and a hole in the ceiling ...Kabakov refers to this type of work as a “total installation” because it presents an immersive scene into which the viewer enters" (Bishop, 14). I found myself wanting to create an immersive, dreamlike environment for the viewer, similar to Kabakov’s “total installation” works. Bishop brings up Freud’s three dream aspects, which include “the sensory immediacy of conscious perception, a composite structure, and the elucidation of meaning through free-association” (Bishop, 16). These characteristics can be found in Kabakov’s immersive installations, making them dreamlike, and in turn, activating the imagination and memories of the viewer. I thought the best way for me to immerse the viewer and tap into their memories would be to start by defining what is familiar to me. My own memories began to kindle and spark, and I found myself going back into a deep reflection.

Reflection: Change Within the Home

As I looked back on my experience with an eating disorder, I noticed many repetitive patterns, particularly concerning the rooms of my house. I lived with my parents and sister in a small home, in a rural farming town. I lived in this house from the age of 5 to 25. The four of us loved this small house; it was like a cottage that family and friends loved to come and visit, to experience its warmth and coziness. The house felt like a family member; as I grew from a child to a teen, the house was a comfort to me because of its familiarity. I knew every corner, every

wall, every door frame, and every wooden floorboard like I knew my own body. I knew its parts like the features of a longtime friend, aging over time but unnoticeable to the eye, until reviewing pictures of the past. I could walk from my attic bedroom, down the stairs and around the corner to the bathroom in the pitch dark of the night, because I had memorized which specific creak in the floor meant I had to make a right turn.



Figure 7: Catherine Hois, *My Fridge*, Oil Pastel 2019



Figure 8: Catherine Hois, *My Toilet*, Oil Pastel 2019



Figure 9: Catherine Hois, *My Sink*, Oil pastel 2019



Figure 10: Catherine Hois, *My Bed*, Oil pastel 2019

As comforting as this house was, I also went through times of absolute fear and discomfort in the midst of my eating disorder. Comfortable rooms began to carry a dual meaning for me. My bed was no longer simply a place of safety and rest, but it also became a place where I would hide away in fear of being perceived by the outside world, where I would feel too weak to get out of bed unless it was to purge in the bathroom, or to go to the kitchen to collect binging foods. The pillows on my bed, fluffy and comfortable became heavy weighted from times I felt trapped, as if my head would melt into the pillow like a burning candle. The fridge, a keeper of wonderful ingredients that my mother curated to create magical tastes, became a place I would shamefully sneak to in the middle of the night, grab an armful of foods that would make me feel okay for a little while, only to be forced out of my body within the hour.

In thinking about these familiar pieces of furniture, walls, floorboards, and bedsheets, I realized that they had absorbed another meaning altogether, or a double entendre of sorts. I could see this change in atmosphere happen before my eyes as I placed more of my homemade insecurities onto the wall; the other objects in the room began to absorb my sculptures' curious, malignant energy. These assemblages of things in my home triggered certain memories and feelings as I walked past them. They had different vibrations to them, and so I had a new fascination with the agency of things.

Vibrant Things, Big and Small

Theorist Jane Bennett writes about *shi*, which she defines as the agency of an assemblage of things. Not things that are alive organically, but things that are unnatural, such as a lamp, a couch, a light switch, and my pillow. These things depend on each other's assemblage of accompanying vibrations to achieve this energetic agency. "Shi is the style, energy, propensity, trajectory, or élan inherent to a specific arrangement of things" (Bennett, 35). Bennett explains this further with the example of a coffee house.

A coffee house or a school house is a mobile configuration of people, insects, odors, ink, electrical flows, air currents, caffeine, tables, chairs, fluids, and sounds. Their shi might at one time consist in the mild and ephemeral effluence of good vibes, and at another in a more dramatic force capable of engendering a philosophical or political movement, as it did in the cafés of Jean-Paul Sartre's and Simone de Beauvoir's Paris and in the Islamist schools in Pakistan in the late twentieth century. (Bennett, 36)

Bennett theorizes that when we think of a thing as an object, we reduce its unique ecology because it is linked to other entities around it, an assemblage of things. As I looked around the room I was in, I could see my art piece communicating with the other furniture in the most interesting way. Bennett wants us to view things on the same plane as humans and other organic matter. The *thing* I made on the wall had a strong sense of agency. Perhaps, because it resembles the human, and it is strongly connected to my human emotions and memories. But this creation helped me understand what Bennett is talking about: looking at things on the same energetic plane as humans and other things of organic matter. This material thing I created acted as a bridge to things that surrounded me in the room, and to myself. After reflecting on Bennett's writings, I had the idea to include a living room set in my installation. I felt the gravitational pull of the furniture, and the wall creation. I felt a sense of belonging with the ecology and assemblage of things that surrounded me, in a similar way to when I felt a part of the furniture as I laid in bed for a day, melting into it.

In displaying the space of the domestic, I hope to transport the viewers' consciousness into the *oneiric*, which is a term Bachelard frequently uses to describe a dreamlike imaginative state, or a daydream. Gaston Bachelard speaks about the memorial engraving of spaces within the home in his book *The Poetics of Space*.

But over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways; we would recapture the reflexes of the 'first stairway,' we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house's entire being would open up, faithful to

our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands. (Bachelard, 15)

The poetry of my living room installation, this space that reflects the safe (and unsafe) nest, tells a story of my strong attachment to a domestic space: my childhood home, struggles with the relationship I had with my own body, and the memorial items in my home space that triggered these struggles and emotions. Bachelard states, “the house is not experienced from day to day only, on the thread of a narrative, or in the telling of our own story. Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days” (Bachelard, 5). The living room space pulls the viewer into an imaginative state, a state in which the furniture items trigger a memory of their childhood, a flashback to the space in which is engraved into their minds. I am aware that the viewer may be pulled into a distant memory of their own, as Bachelard suggests when he describes one who reads poetry in which narrates a room:

“Very quickly, at the very first word, at the first poetic overture, the reader who is ‘reading a room’ leaves off reading and starts to think of some place in his [their] own past. You would like to tell everything about your room. You would like to interest the reader in yourself, whereas you have unlocked a door to daydreaming. The values of intimacy are so absorbing that the reader has ceased to read your room: he sees his own again [they see their own again].” (Bachelard, 14)

In entering this room, they are entering a dream, a vision of their past that triggers a subjective emotion, and so the colours of the furniture and wallpaper are faded as if they are from a dream, or a distant floating memory that flashes by, dissipating like mid-morning condensation over a pond.

In Bachelard's chapter titled *Miniature*, he talks about natural imagination that is awakened by fairytales and miniatures. He uses the example of children playing with toys and creating storylines that are generated by daydreams and imagination. "Here the mind that imagines follows the opposite path of the mind that observes, the imagination does not want to end in a diagram that summarizes acquired learning. It seeks a pretext to multiple images, and as soon as the imagination is interested by an image, this increases its value" (Bachelard, 152). This chapter especially caught my attention because, as an artist in a time of COVID-19 lockdowns and working from my small apartment, large installations were beginning to be less sustainable. I knew that I had to start thinking small, and so I explored this chapter with great interest. According to Bachelard, philosophers ignore the world of the miniature, but those that open themselves up to this world and accept the smallness as a way of communication, they enter a memory of their childhood, and with this, "representation is dominated by imagination" (Bachelard, 150). He says, "values become engulfed in miniature, and miniature causes men to dream" (Bachelard, 152).

Heart House

After reading this chapter, my fascination with the miniature grew as I began to think about myself as a child playing with dolls, how I would lose myself in the storyline of a small fantasy world. What if I narrated my own story in a way that triggered the viewers' imaginations in a deeper way than the living room set installation, where they might find true value in the work? I remembered working with my good friend Olivia Loccissano. She is a Toronto-based filmmaker and writer, and I am the concept artist and storyboard artist for her work in progress stop-motion film *Pocket Princess*. After being exposed to stop-motion and thinking about the magnificent miniature, I decided to create a metaphorical storyline that would tie in with all of my current exhibition works, another vibrant thing to add to the assemblage, if you will. I would go back to my recovery journals and create a short narrative that would be based on this journey, with a realistic ending pertaining to what I am experiencing in the present. I decided to name my short film *Heart House*.

Heart House is set in a domestic environment: a cottage house inhabited by a young woman named Isabelle who appears to live alone. She appears in front of the television; an easel and blank canvas sit in the background corner. She suddenly hears a startling noise. The noise sounds like the growl of a hungry stomach and a human throat, grunting in unison. Frightened, she turns around and hesitantly looks behind the couch. There, she can see a ghastly pile of fleshiness which oozes slime and broken up tissue. It is *the muck*. She gasps in horror and makes her way to the kitchen with the intent of feeding it, to satisfy its hungry growls and moans. She comes back to the living room and looks behind the couch - sure enough - it is there still,

impatiently awaiting its hunger to be satisfied. She throws some food to *the muck* and it quickly absorbs it into its repulsive flesh. It stops its horrid moans and Isabelle is relieved for a second, but to her shock she sees *the muck* suddenly grow before her eyes!

This story is a metaphor that I am using to describe the temptations of someone who has an eating disorder; to repeat the cycle only to have stronger temptations after repetition. At times it would feel like the monster would get stronger every time I fed into its needs, and it would call me back to feed it once more, only with louder, more ear-piercing shrieks. I decided to end the story with Isabelle finally feeling like she defeated *the muck*, and she happily begins to paint on her canvas. As she goes to dip her paintbrush in water, alas, the jar is full of *muck*. I am using this image to suggest that recovery is always in process - the monster never leaves for good, and it still makes an appearance from time to time. The change is that one gets stronger and better at avoiding the monster with healthy outlets and alternative coping mechanisms, a skill that is learned through time and practice. I thought of this concept after re-reading this journal entry:

I don't want to be negative, but I made this account to record what I honestly go through. Recently, I have been struggling. This time of year is hard for some reason. I binged on and off this week, and on my days off I slept for most of the day. Today is one of those days. I am fully aware of what is happening because it happened last year, the year before that, and the year before that. I'm not hopeless, though. I have learned a lot about myself this year. This year is going to be different. This December and February are going to be different. I am working on a little list of things that have helped me overcome times like these in the past, so I can have healthy coping mechanisms recorded and hopefully help others that are struggling. I hope you all are having a good night.

- Catherine Hois, December 7th, 2018

I began to make my little doll out of wire and polymer clay, and made her home out of cardboard. Her furniture is also constructed with cardboard, hot glue, polymer clay, and second-hand fabrics, and coloured with wood stain, watercolour, and nail polish. My intention for her home is to be simple and dated, framed by memories of my childhood home. In fact, the entirety of the set is based on my childhood home. The miniature couch, the layout of the kitchen, the colour of the counter, the bedroom, the positioning of the closet, and other aspects that may have been subconscious additions and details. In the animation, the first scene begins with Isabelle sitting on a couch, watching TV. In this frame, the TV itself is not shown; Isabelle sits facing the camera (or the viewer) and appears to be watching the viewer. The experience of the viewer watching an animated miniature on a TV, with the miniature watching them back, acts as a deeper immersive experience. This pulls the viewer into Isabelle's world, and attaches them to this character by experiencing an intense staring contest. Here there is a common ground; something that the viewer can already identify with in the storyline. The animation is shown on a small television screen with an armchair placed in front, jogging the memories of one's long past, when these machines were one of the only entertainment media outlets.



Figure 11: Catherine Hois, *Process: Isabelle in the Living Room*, 2021



Figure 12: Catherine Hois, *Process: Isabelle in the Bedroom*, 2021



Figure 13: Catherine Hois, *Isabelle in Heart House*, 2022

The Abject

As I began to create *the muck*, I used cotton balls, red dyes, white and clear glues, and liquid latex. This turned into a rather disgusting miniature concoction, which I was happy with, but also got me thinking about the disgusting. What makes something disgusting? And why do I identify with this repulsive, gross image? With this image, I began my research journey into the abject, and the more I researched the subject, the more I made connections with how I have looked at my body in the past. The abject is the taboo, the rejected, the other, that which is not discussed within society but that we cannot possibly escape. It is the off-putting part of our humanity that is not typically shared, that is only experienced in privacy, yet it is permanent and absolute to the human experience. Confronting this private matter in an open manner is what triggers the experience of abjection; it heightens the element of horror, disgust, threat,

embarrassment, and discomfort because we cannot escape it; it is a part of us, or as Rina Arya puts it “the other that comes from within” (Arya, 4). Arya asks similar inquiries in her book *Abjection and Representation*, in questioning why we humans react the way that we do to the experience of abjection, theorizing that there is a “basis of social and moral thinking” (Arya, 2) that rejects the abject in our society. Arya references Julia Kristeva’s writings in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, saying “the experience of abjection both endangers and protects the individual: endangers in that it threatens the boundaries of the self and also reminds us of our animal origins, and protects us because we are able to expel the abject through various means” (Arya, 2). Arya uses the example of bodily fluids, or any type of human excrement as an image to trigger abjection. Arya goes on to discuss social abjection, meaning the certain people in society who are rejected, or the outcasts; “the individuals in society who are on the fringes and are stigmatized because their differences are not understood” (Arya, 7). Arya mentions AIDS survivors as an example group of people, along with other groups who are discriminated against because of the false fear of being “contaminated,” which highlights social abjection. She also says, “there is nothing essentially abject about homosexuality, for example, but it is defined as abject and is made abject in order to reduce its threat” (Arya, 8). In reading this, I could not help but think about myself as a child, rejected for being the largest body in the classroom, and all of the other children who experience the feeling of being outcast from their peers because they were deemed abject. With this, the disgusting, growing *muck* I created felt more familiar, and perhaps explains why I was so comfortable creating it. It was a representation of a person that I once was.

Another strong connection to my art and Arya’s writings is contained in this quote: “what can be described as abject art that involves the body being undone and taken apart. This is often

conveyed by flesh, in the particular viscera, bodily fluids, and wounds. The presence of a naked body of flesh causes feelings of vulnerability because it is a reminder of our animal nature” (Arya, 85). Animal nature is brought up throughout this book, usually making the point that society tends to move away from animalistic nature to uphold social conventions, which when disturbed or challenged, disrupts these conventions and brings us back to the awareness of the functions of our inner body, rather than focusing on the outer. The author uses the example of overindulgence, and the pain of being overfull. We are thrown off and put-off by this feeling because it reminds us that we are made up of bodily function (Arya, 86).



Figure 14: Catherine Hois, *The muck in Heart House*, 2022

The animalistic nature of humans is also brought up when Arya references Georges Bataille. She begins by explaining how the body has become a symbol, or expression of the

sacred throughout the development of society. “Body management rituals became more advanced through the centuries as humans strove to move away from their animal origins. In spite of this, there were resurgences of bodily-centered expressions, such as the revival of the carnivalesque and the Dionysian in modern life” (Arya, 65). Bataille attempts to bridge the ever-growing gap between the sacred and the abject, by looking back through societal development and trying to reconnect the body to its animal origins. He connects the normalized management of the body to capitalism, making the sacred body a symbol of productivity and “health” in a society of wealth accumulation. Bataille touches on “how both the political organization of society and social institutions, such as religion and the law, work collectively to repress libidinal impulses and to keep society working functionally” (Arya, 66).

Managing the Natural Big Body

One of the problems with normalizing body management is that there begins to be an expectation: a requirement, a standard, an obligation of image. Is it true that “better looking people,” or people furthest away from the canon of beauty have better quality of life? Isabelle is an expression of how harmful the pressures of this societal standard can be. Isabelle does not appear to be overweight in the film, and this is intentional. Because *Heart House* is based on my own life, I decided to stay true to my experience. As an older teen and young adult, looking back at photographs of myself, I know that I was a healthy weight for my age and height. But because I grew up as a bigger-bodied child, I was rejected, and when I went through a growth spurt, I was congratulated by my peers, aunts, uncles, and teachers. The world seemed to look at me differently. I was suddenly shown attention; I was rewarded for my natural change in

appearance. It was because of this that I developed a fear of gaining weight, and began to try to become even smaller - I never seemed to be small enough. This fear activated a distorted perspective of myself, and I began to show signs of body dysmorphia. I was no longer the biggest body, but I *thought* that I was. This is why Isabelle does not appear to be a large body - *the muck* not only represents her ever-growing fears and loss of control, but it represents how she sees herself, an experience of abjection - rejectable and growing in mass.

This ties in with Samantha Murray's writings in *The Fat Female Body*. On the first page of her book, she includes a shocking quote written in 1924 by Dr. James S. McLester in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. It reads: "Overweight is a mar to beauty... An excess of fat destroys grace and delicacy. A fat face has a monstrous uniformity. No theatrical producer would hire a plump actress to mirror the real depths of the human soul (Kersh & Morone, 2002, p. 166)" (Murray, 1). Murray highlights the absolute absurdity of this quote, from a medical journal written by a doctor no less. But even though this was written in the 1920s, it is persistent in its accuracy of what women with bigger bodies undergo today. Because I did not fit this societal standard as a child, which represents "health," I was an outcast, despite my doctor telling me I was a healthy child. Murray brings up the point that McLester is not focussed on the hardship of the "fat" female herself, but he explains her being more as an obstacle for others. Murray points out, "what is also imputed in McLester's account of "fatness" as aberrant is that "fat" women's bodies are the product of their own failures of will. McLester suggests, albeit tacitly, that "fat" women are to blame for their own "deviance," and that the task of normativity is one grounded firmly in a liberal humanist logic of individual responsibility" (Murray, 3). The irony of this quote is that most of the time, larger bodied women regulate themselves constantly,

because of the pressures of looking a certain way. Isabelle is shown to be on constant alert, keeping tabs on *the muck* throughout the film. The avid promotion of weight loss remedies, secrets to being “skinny,” and endless diets thrown at us in pop culture seem to be omnipresent; therefore most large bodied women are constantly trying new restrictive diets, counting calories, tracking their food intake, and weighing themselves daily. Murray adds “I constantly resist my own flesh” (Murray, 4). Murray’s writings are significant to *Heart House* because Isabelle appears to be extremely resistant to *the muck*, which is an example of resistance of the self.

Walkthrough

Walking in through the doors of the gallery, to the left you can see *Pageant of the Vulnerable*; a monstrous, fleshy pile of bodily sculptures, and to the right, a living room set with an armchair, lamp, wallpaper, and a tube television playing *Heart House* on a loop. Walking up to *Pageant of the Vulnerable*, the viewer is suddenly consumed by the towering accumulation of fleshy, meaty sculptures that cover the walls from top to bottom. This compilation of bodily forms appear to be growing from one another, attached to form one functioning organism that grows alongside the walls and onto the floor like a vine. As the viewer approaches the large accumulation, their body is solicited by the new environment that surrounds them. The meaty and fleshy appearance of the sculptures reflects Jana Sterbak’s *Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987. This sculpture is made completely out of raw flank steak, sewn together to form a dress. Jennifer McLerran writes in *Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies in the Work of Contemporary Artist Jana Sterbak*, that the shape of the dress changes as it hangs in the gallery,

drying out and decaying before the viewer's eyes. This change in shape gives the *Flesh Dress* a lifelike quality; similarly in *Pageant of the Vulnerable*, these meaty shapes covering the walls appear to have a *growing* appearance, creating the illusion of being alive. When writing about the term *Anorectic* used in Sterbak's title, McLerran references theorist Susan Bordo:

Bordo argues that the bodies of women suffering from somatic disorders such as anorexia can be read as texts enacting in parodic fashion contemporary normative constructions of femininity. Enacting to the extreme the contemporary feminine ideal of slimness the anorectic literally embodies the ideal of woman as unobtrusive and unassertive, lacking physical presence. She further parodies the expectation that women provide sustenance for others at the expense of their own self-nurturing. By enacting a feminine ideal to the extreme, claims Bordo, the anorectic comes to feel that she has supreme self-control; and, when those around her battle with her over her self-destructive behavior, she comes to see that her actions can have a dramatic impact on others. Thus, the feminine ideal deconstructs into its opposite, offering the anorectic the illusion of power and control usually reserved for those in our culture occupying masculine subject positions. (Jennifer McLerran, 540)

Pageant of the Vulnerable is not a display of the anorectic, however it is a display of a different kind of eating disorder, bingeing and purging, another possible outcome of the pressures of female body ideals. As the structure towers over the viewer, it intimidates them with its height, width, and repulsive appearance. It is *the bigger body*. The bigger body that does not fit in the tiny box of female body ideals is no longer unassertive, but is extremely confrontational and demanding

of the viewer's attention. The bigger body is not on display for the viewer's satisfaction or pleasure, but it displays itself boldly as it is, and takes up space in a power and control dynamic, which in McLerran's words is "usually reserved for those in our culture occupying masculine subject positions" (McLerran, 540).

As the viewer walks to the right, they enter a new environment; a living room with a television playing *Heart House*. The bodily sculptures in *Pageant of the Vulnerable* creep into this scene, integrating the two environments and letting the viewer know they are a part of the same storyline. In the living room, the use of second-hand recycled material is mirrored within two domestic scenes; the objects within the living room set, and the objects within the stop-motion film. The living room set is made up of thrifted, scavenged, and collected items such as the armchair, the television, the lamp, the wallpaper; all objects assembled to invite the viewer deeper into the space, physically and psychologically. Similarly, the objects within the stop-motion short film are hand-made out of collected, recycled materials. The materials used to create the miniature furniture and wallpaper in *Heart House* bring associations to the human use of fabrics in the home. Cotton used to clean surfaces, polyester used to clothe, linen used for bedding; all slightly worn and accumulated together, evoking a sense of "sensuous immediacy," as Bishop puts it, of familiarity. This "involves an emphasis on 'real' materials rather than their depiction or illustration. The associational value of found materials - which had been used in the 1960s and 1970s to connote 'everyday life' (Kaprow) ...were by the 1980s harnessed for their sensuous immediacy, but as a way in which to subvert out ingrained responses to the dominant repertoire of cultural meanings" (Bishop, 41). Associational value in the living room set is

significant, because the viewer finds nostalgia in this collection of objects, immersing them further into the scene.

The integration of the living room set with *Pageant of the Vulnerable* brings in a certain unease to the familiarity. This is because the integration of the environment of *Pageant of the Vulnerable*, the living room set, and *Heart House* exposes the body's vulnerable experiences within the home, and within society. This creates a confrontational atmosphere as it exposes the typically private and unspoken: stigmatized 'fat' bodies, the issues within the normalization of body management, and the struggles of mental illness.

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