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by

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**What does the body know?**

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**What does the body know?**

**by**

**Siera Jeannette Hyte**

**Report**

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## **Dedication**

To Joseph and Mimi, for changing my understanding of joy. And to Darlene Hopper and Joan Irving, my grandmothers.



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## **Abstract**

### **What does the body know?**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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This Master's Report summarizes the aims of my research and studio practice as it has developed during my study at the University of Texas. My work operates in an intersection of performance, poetry, and sculpture to investigate what we learn through embodied experience. Outlining a phenomenological, perception-based approach to embodiment, physical senses, our associations with objects, and gender identity, I use this report to construct a methodology for my decision making process in the studio.

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What does the body know? What can the body tell us?

## **1: PHENOMONOLOGY AND BODY LEARNING**

It is strange to have a body. I've felt this way since I was small. When you are a child, you are still learning to use your own body, how to care for yourself, and how to physically navigate the world. Much of your learning revolves around training your body to perform ordinary, repetitive actions, to understand your physical relationship to the world in order to walk through that world more smoothly. My mother taught me about the possibility of electrocution by pointing out the near impossibility of fitting one of my fingers into the openings of an electrical socket. Feeling unsure that I, as small children are wont to do, would not take that as a challenge to try extra hard to stuff some part of myself into one of our living room outlets, she elaborated further on this object's potential danger to my body with a graphic description on the potential effects of electrical currents to human skin. I would be warned away anytime I played near any tangle of wires or sockets. In this way, over the course of several months and many conversations about burning hair, I began to keep a few feet of distance between our household electronics and me. I thrilled a little with danger whenever I turned on one of our table lamps, its cord trailing off of the table to the space in between the furniture and the wall. In this way, I began to associate those cords and those outlets with death. Several years later, maybe past the point of acceptability, I was still gripped with anxiety at the thought of using our toaster. My parents would leave me alone during the day in

the summertime and I, preferring to steer clear of plugging in any kitchen appliances, would heat up bread in the microwave for lunch.

At the time, it seemed incomprehensible to me that I could inhabit a form so fragile as to be destroyed by something as innocuous looking as an electrical outlet, by something that seemed to me nothing but small plate of plastic bolted to the wall. And yet, I eventually became so physically trained to avoid this threat that I would recoil at the sight of an electrical cord. I bring up this anecdote as a way to illustrate the effects of body learning and body knowledge. Although I struggled logically as a child to square up the appearance of an electrical socket with the concept of danger, my body learned to navigate me away from this potential threat. As a child, I had smelled smoke and experienced both the feeling of standing a little too close to a campfire, as well as the sensation of static electricity. This sensual knowledge, in combination with my mother's physically warding me away from outlets, conspired within my body to teach me something about danger. To this day, I have managed to successfully avoided electrocution.

In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes the role of the body thusly:

“The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes,

finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world. At all levels it performs the same function which is to endow the instantaneous expressions of spontaneity with 'a little renewable action and independent existence'. Habit is merely a form of this fundamental power. We say that the body has understood and habit has been cultivated when it has absorbed a new meaning, and assimilated a fresh core of significance." (Merleau-Ponty 169)

Maybe it is strange to have a body because, if Merleau-Ponty's premise can be believed, our bodies are not merely instruments that we command to perform operations for use, but rather beings with communicative capacity within our world and ecosystems. If the body can process its own information, separately from the way we internally process our lives with language, then the act of physical and sensual perception is not passive, nor secondary to language. Rather, sensory perception and the experience of the body become an integral part of how we form memories, develop habits, and make meaning of our world.

To embody, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "to give a body to a spirit" (Merriam-Webster). Within an art context, embodying and embodiment can become a lens with which to experience the sensorial and physical impacts of a work of art. A fully embodied viewer would be someone who is present fully in both mind (spirit) and body, aided through an experience of an artwork that engages them through language and senses.

Our bodies understand the world in a way that is difficult to articulate with language—ten

people could all describe the sensation of eating an orange and each would do it differently. In addition to it being difficult to fully articulate the sensations of the body, the body is also something we can never separate ourselves from. It is impossible to live in the world without one's body. If the "inside and outside are inseparable" and if "the world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself", then we are constantly being reformed and made again by the experiences of our bodies, constituting but also constituted by our surroundings and the way we navigate within them (Merleau-Ponty 474). Understanding the body as a crucial part of how we interface with the world can affirm many of the body-centered experiences that are often downplayed depending on where a body may be situated politically. By considering the phenomenology of perception in tandem with intersections of a body's sex, race, gender identity, and appearance, space can be made within the gallery to think through our experiences of the world in a way that affirms the validity of lived experiences of socio-politically disadvantaged bodies, simply by paying attention to the knowledge that these bodies bring into a space. The body cannot be treated as an object or a sentient force, for:

"an object is an object only in so far as it can be moved away from me, and ultimately disappear from my field of vision. Its presence is such that it entails a possible absence. Now the permanence of my own body is entirely different in kind: it is not at the extremity of some indefinite exploration; it defies exploration and is always presented to me from the same angle. Its permanence is not a permanence in the world, but a permanence on my part. To say that it is always



near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is with me.” (Merleau-Ponty 103-104)

It is impossible to absent the body from our experience—the body accompanies us wherever we go. Body and mind may have different priorities, may think differently, but are inseparable from one another in the way we experience the world.

It is from this premise, that our embodiment and physical person are integral parts of how we understand our world, which has grounded much of my decision-making in my studio practice. My focus on a phenomenologically centered inquiry stems from a few key personal factors, including my interest and training in performance, my experience as a female-identifying person, and a desire to understand the trauma-induced condition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I will use these factors to unpack the different elements of my practice, following how my ideas and methods have developed over my two years of work and research while in Graduate School.



Figure 1: *You Are Your Own Evidence*, performance text, heat-reactive screen print, 2018

## **2: METHODOLOGIES OF PERFORMANCE AND CONCEPTUAL ART**

The trajectory of my practice as an art student has been a migration from work that would be thought of as more traditionally performative (using time and the body as primary materials to communicate ideas, existing temporarily, utilizing scripts, etc) to one that is more based in objects and installation (using objects, either found or made, to communicate ideas, existing semi-permanently, etc). I primarily place my work within the historical trajectory of performance art and conceptual art, rather than within the canon of sculpture. This distinction allows me to understand my work within a lineage of art which privileges the appearance of an “idea” or an internal logic, with an eye towards ephemerality and the passing of time, over material/process-based concerns. I do not mean to create a binary between these different ways of making, but rather to explain my own understanding of how to historically position my work in order to make clear the reasoning behind my individual methodologies in the studio.

In *The Dematerialization of Art*, co-authors Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, outline the rise of an “ultra-conceptual art” that would eventually become the subject of Lippard’s seminal text, *Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*:

“During the 1960’s, the anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive processes of art-making characteristic of the last two decades have begun to give way to an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively. As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are

losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete." (Lippard and Chandler 31)

The phrase from Lippard and Chandler's text that I want to focus on as I locate my work within this canon is "an ultra-conceptual art that emphasize the thinking process almost exclusively". Lippard and Chandler are, of course, referring to the thinking process of the artist in the making and execution of a piece. However, they also refer to the thinking process of the viewer, describing a viewer's experience as being made up of two elements:

"A highly conceptual art, like an extremely rejective art or an apparently random art, upsets detractors because there is "not enough to look at," or rather not enough of what they are accustomed to looking for. Monotonal or extremely simple-looking painting and totally "dumb" objects exist in time as well as in space because of two aspects of the viewing experience. First, they demand more participation by the viewer, despite their apparent hostility (which is not hostility so much as aloofness and self-containment). More time must be spent in experience of a detail-less work, for the viewer is used to focusing on details and absorbing an impression of the piece with the help of these details. Secondly, the time spent looking at an "empty" work, or one with a minimum of action, seems infinitely longer than action-and detail- filled time. This time element is, of

course, psychological, but it allows the artist an alternative to or extension of the serial method.” (Lippard and Chandler 31)

Lippard and Chandler codify a viewer’s experience with conceptual art as one in which time expands as the viewer thinks through the created logic of a work. This summation interests me for two reasons: one, Lippard and Chandler describe a phenomenon of conceptual art that has always personally attracted me; that is, the ability to seep into our own construction of time and reality. By making art that relies on an invented logic, the artist creates a symbiotic relationship between themselves and the viewer in which the viewer is invited to inhabit the thinking of the artist and the artist is able to permeate the thinking processes of the viewer. Secondly, if a phenomenological understanding of thinking wherein bodily experience is incorporated, like the one I have outlined in my introduction, is applied to Lippard and Chandler’s description of a viewer’s experience of conceptual art, then the viewer’s full embodiment must be understood as being included in their description of viewer participation. Conceptual art is maybe not often thought of as a methodology of art-making that engages the somatic condition of the viewer, for when it is discussed or analyzed the focus is often on decoding the rationale or concept that guides the work. However, I think my example of learning to fear electrical outlets could be applied to viewing conceptual art through a more phenomenologically focused lens. The first piece of art that I ever became completely obsessed with was “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. I encountered it in high school on a trip to the Art Institute of Chicago with my father. The piece is simply a pile of candies, individually wrapped in bright cellophane, kept in an endless supply by museum staff and

roughly equally 175 pounds in weight. Gonzalez-Torres named the piece for his partner, Ross, who suffered from and eventually died of the AIDS virus. Viewers are given the opportunity to take as much candy as they want from the pile and much of the presence of the piece relies on this relationship, as well as the expectation that the candy will never run out (Art Institute of Chicago). Logically, there is not much about a pile of candy on the floor that speaks directly to love, to grief, to the AIDS epidemic. Similarly to the innocuous looking electrical outlet, the appearance of the object belies its significance. However, as the inner workings of “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) are revealed in layers through title, through the act of taking and eating of the candy, and through observation of other viewers’ interaction with the piece, the candy is conferred with a phenomenological impact that has lasted, for me, years beyond my visit to the museum. My body has come to associate the taste of that type of candy with falling in love, that sensation of crinkling cellophane as the candy is unwrapped with the anticipation of loss. Conversely, Gonzalez-Torres relies on a phenomenological conceptual understanding in the construction of that piece: our bodies know the pleasure of shiny, wrapped candies from the beginnings of childhood. We associate them with sensual pleasure and with innocence—both key elements to understanding the conceptual framework of Gonzalez-Torres’ depiction of Ross, both as a lover and in death.





Figure 2: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), 1991, candies individually wrapped in multicolor cellophane, endless supply, dimensions vary with installation; ideal weight 175 lbs

Using an embodied framework to help decode and construct the impact of conceptual art broadens the potential of what is being communicated to the viewer. When I choose materials in my own work, I consider the embodied knowledge that a viewer has of those materials. I am more interested in the physical memory or lived associations that a person has with a material, rather than an aesthetic value. I try to incorporate an unfixed or non-archival element into each of my works. By utilizing materials and objects with an unfixed element, I allow the viewer to experience their own corporeality in a tangible way. I rely on the viewer’s physical knowledge and experience with these types of

materials to inform their understanding of the progression of an installation. A ripe piece of fruit, embedded with our knowledge of future rot, stands in for the fragility of a body. Slippery materials, like wet clay and ice, create unstable situations with the potential to wreak chaos on other objects. Many of my works are also predicated on some type of interaction from the viewer. The work becomes more, or less, visible depending on the care and participation of others. The corporeality of the body begins to have a distinct weight in the viewer's understanding of the work.



Figure 3: *I change with your atmosphere*, 2018, clay, snakeskin, Vaseline

In *I change with your atmosphere*, the gallery floor is covered in a thin layer of ceramic clay while it is in a liquid, spreadable form known as “slip”. The slip is allowed to dry



over the entirety of the gallery space, and tubs of Vaseline and snakeskins are placed on top of it, in order to create an installation that viewers are allowed to walk over. This piece operates conceptually by providing a gallery environment in which viewers participate in the making/unmaking of my work through their own physical presence. The mark of their footsteps, the dirt on their shoes, their movements, all function as agents of change onto the new floor of the gallery. The gallery transforms into an environment that shares certain characteristics with our own body, constantly in transformative flux and vulnerable to the actions of others. Further, the Vaseline and snakeskin both provoke a deep, visceral type of body knowledge. Vaseline, as a ubiquitous and viscous material, has a texture and character that is easy to recall without having to physically interact with it. Its container recalls bathrooms, bedrooms, and the treatment of our own skin. Similarly, snakeskin incurs in the body a sense of familiarity, its mere texture and form calls out to us that we are in potential danger, even when made inanimate. The resulting installation is one in which the viewer at once develops a heightened awareness of their own transformative capabilities as they enact change onto the floor of the gallery and encounter materials with the power to change their own physical states.

This installation relies on the memory and bodily experience in order to function. It creates a space that, similar to a stage setting, has all of the performative elements needed to act out a performance. The viewers' bodies are necessary to charge the work and infuse it with greater meaning. In this way, I posit that I am utilizing a type of phenomenological/conceptual framework in which my rationale for the construction of

the piece is transferred, affirmed, and echoed by the viewer's own bodily experience in the space.

I embrace time as a restraint in my work and think about my artworks as performers, beholden to time constraints or moving similarly to human beings. We do not last forever; in fact we do not last very long at all. Why should the life of an artwork far outstrip the life of a person? Bodies are fragile; both in their form and in the way they experience the world. Corporeality requires tender, ongoing care of tenuous anatomies and infrastructures. I make it almost impossible to fully archive any of my work. Rather, the work is in constant reaction to its surroundings. I craft installations of my work as a response to the architecture and environment—objects creep across floors and into the crevices of walls; pieces are often hidden in the unseen areas of the room; smells, sounds, and movements evaporate into air. I approach my work by arranging objects that create a taxonomy of an experience. By exhibiting work with consideration for the environs, I ensure that each viewer's experience is singular and fleeting. The sensation of instability echoes the body's own constant negotiation with time and place.

By making art that mimics the temporality and fragility of our own condition, I place my work more within the tradition of performance art. I do make concessions to posterity; mostly by documenting my work so that it can be understood in some format after it experiences a state change or disappears altogether. However, I am not interested in my own work escaping some type of material death. I bristle under the best practices for archiving and preserving artwork, which I understand as maybe an illogical stance as someone who also enjoys visiting museums. Something about creating objects that are

not beholden to the same material threats and constraints as human beings does not sit well with me, especially in a political landscape that treats so many bodies so poorly. Intellectually, I understand that works of art serve a different, perhaps more timeless function, than our own bodies. Emotionally, I dislike the idea that we prioritize the material safety and longevity of things over people.



Figure 4: installation view of *I change with your atmosphere*, 2018, clay, snakeskin, Vaseline

In my book *little oceans*, I obtained the archival logs of the University of Texas at Austin’s Blanton Museum to illustrate the careful preservation of artworks in contrast with the physical vulnerabilities of bodies. I asked for copies of the Blanton’s “bug logs”,


logs kept by gallery workers of any insect activity that they observed near or on the Blanton's art collection. I wanted to examine the focus on this physically minute phenomena in order to heighten my own discomfort with an institutional caretaking of objects within a state (Texas) that routinely endangers the safety and wellbeing of its own residents through a denial of affordable healthcare, abortion access, and safety for undocumented people and people of color through racist policing and public policy. Again, I logically understand that the preservation of art serves a different purpose than the enactment of policies that would potential alleviate some of the above institutional/structural issues mentioned above. Be that as it may, it began to seem repugnant to me that we could track even miniature, negligible threats to an art museum's collection, but that that same art museum could exist in a location where so many people live under constant threat of physical harm. Posterity in art began to seem at odds with my own political ideology; something that I have yet to fully reconcile but try to continually center in some way at the forefront of my studio process by choosing to work with unstable materials.

beginning again, with:  
 AUSTIN, TEXAS  
 because that is where this book is being written

we will also begin with:  
 AN ART MUSUEM  
 the closest space where things are well protected

Here is a list of things that threaten art works:  
 Dust  
 Light  
 Insects  
 Camera flash  
 Touching without gloves  
 Government  
 Water  
 Temperature

**NYMPH**



"nymph, nymph, nymph, nymph"

**IPM Log**  
 June & July, 2015

Date	Location	Description
		Dead bug found inside case. Removed, and no other bugs observed in other cases.
		Larva skin found in another case. Removed. No other bugs observed in cases.
		Larva skin found on print.
		Nymph bug found
		Bug found high up on wall
		Insects found - bug and larva (dead) - 2 webs on back, 2 hard exoskeletons found (dead) - significant debris
		Gallery assistant reported seeing bugs throughout, having killed at least 5.

(these are preservation logs, meant to track insect activity within Our Museum--dates, locations, and titles of art works have been redacted for privacy; leaving us with only the bugs;

**IPM Log**  
 August-October, 2015

Date	Location	Description
		4 larva
		1 larva
		1 larva found
		Suggested action: remove artwork, vacuum case
		Bag in vicinity to the left of the one where bugs were previously found
		Larva found on base of sculpture
		2 cases cleaned, artwork removed & inspected
		(inhabiting found on artwork), base vacuumed
		3 larva found, 2 larva skins found
		Bag found on wall near door, alive
		1 larva found

I'd like to focus on the Nymph bug, only for the romantic sound of the name

a **Nymph** bug is: an immature invertebrate, which undergoes gradual metamorphosis (a child)  
 a nymph's form resembles that of an adult, except for a lack of wings (can't fly, stuck on the ground)  
 named for **nymphs**, or naiads

Dust,  
 Light,  
 Insects,  
 Camera flash,  
 Touching without gloves,  
 Government,  
 Water, and  
 Temperature

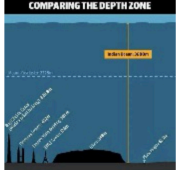


Figure 5: Excerpted pages from *little oceans*, hardcover book, 2016

Further, my reasoning behind unarchivable materials also lies in a simple personal preference. I like when things are slippery. I like when things don't function, act surprisingly, and appear in unexpected ways. We live in a state of constant acceleration and interconnectedness, with a limited chance of experiencing the unknown, unnamable, or intangible. The body, despite all of humanity's strides in science and medicine, continues to represent some level of the unknown, the uncontrollable. The body is a sensuous, feeling entity. We feel our bodies most in moments of vulnerability; illness, violence, erotic encounters. Although contemporary life arches towards smoothness, towards achieving peak performance, and towards corporate synergy, we can never fully escape the fallibility, and the mystery, of our physical selves. I like mysteries. Solving mysteries requires sensitivity to the smallest changes in our atmosphere, an attunement to fractured things. I find pleasure in making the stable unstable, in privileging the unpredictable. Humans are not containable beings—we are wobbly and prone to mistakes. When the viewer locates points of instability or dynamism with my work, they also locate themselves. By subverting our expectations of stability, I make instability or uncertainty the sensation within an artwork that we can rely on. I believe that uncertainty has more power in that it necessitates us to becoming hyper aware, hyper sensitized, hyper curious. Relying on unstable ground can become a route through which understanding, empathy and transformation can take place. Instability requires the viewer to trust me as an artist (and vice versa). The emotional effect of this trust generates empathetic intimacy and vulnerability, which is mimicked in the viewer's ability to see and cause entropy within my work.

### **3: METHODOLOGIES OF SHE**

Merleau-Ponty's construction of the body as an active/knowing being has been both criticized and used by feminist theorists. Judith Butler's work in constructing a relationship between the phenomenology of perception and feminist theory uses Merleau-Ponty's writing to assert gender as an unstable identity, an "identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 519). Butler's analysis of Merleau-Ponty articulates a use for his phenomenological approach in which the ascribed gender traits and experiences of women and gender non-conforming people can be partially understood through learned physical behaviors and attenuations over the course of one's life. Through Butler's writing, we can form an understanding of gender and sexuality that is at once both societally ascribed and self-affirmed. Further, the relevancy of the bodily experiences of women and gender non-conforming people are often discounted or called into question. Butler values the experiences of these groups by building an argument for embracing the validity of embodiment and bodily learning in order to more fully understand gendered experiences. Butler's ideas about the formulation of gender identity as it is located within the body has helped me understand how I characterize a state of embodiment that specifically addresses women and gender non-conforming people.

I want to articulate the lived experiences of women and others who experience gendered oppression. Aside from being a self-identified member of this large category, almost every person I have ever deeply loved and who has ever loved me in return has also belonged to this group. I have personally benefitted immensely from the love, emotional

labor, and histories that have been shared with me by others in this common group. My investment in their lived experiences stems from wanting to explore something that I have found to be often ignored, in contemporary art and in life: the power and poetic potential of that shared love, labor, and history.

In Butler's essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, she outlines Merleau-Ponty's and others use of phenomenological theory as

“seek[ing] to explain the mundane way in which social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign. Though phenomenology sometimes appears to assume the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language (who poses as the sole source of its constituting acts), there is also a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts. (Butler 519)”

Butler and other scholars have been critical of what they view as Merleau-Ponty's implied longing to assume or privilege what is referred to here as “the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language” (Butler 519). That criticism is based “in opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts” (Butler 520), a model that seeks to dispute “naturalistic explanation of sex and sexuality that assume that the meaning of women's social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology” (Butler 520). However, aside from criticisms that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology potentially privileges a consciousness that



essentializes/collapses sex and gender identities within a hegemonic framework, a phenomenological framework that includes both the body and mind, as Butler argues, can denaturalize the category of woman:

“In Merleau-Ponty's reflections in *The Phenomenology of Perception* on "the body in its sexual being," he takes issue with such accounts of bodily experience and claims that the body is ‘an historical idea’ rather than ‘a natural species.’ Significantly, it is this claim that Simone de Beauvoir cites in *The Second Sex* when she sets the stage for her claim that woman,’ and by extension, any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural fact. (Butler 520)”

Because the “body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities, a complicated process of appropriation which any phenomenological theory of embodiment needs to describe” (Butler 521), one can view both socially inscribed traits of gender as well as self-affirmed traits of gender as being a part of the process of constituting and constituted outlined by Merleau-Ponty.

The possibilities implicated in Butler’s reading of Merleau-Ponty help me to construct a framework from which I can understand both the potential of my own bodily experience and identity as it relates to my production of work, but also to understand how the personal phenomenologies of my viewers can affect the work. Throughout *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Butler emphasizes the performativity of embodiment of gender/ sexuality. She opines that embracing embodiment ultimately as an “act”, one that can reaffirm one’s own experience of self, has enormous transgressive potential. I rely on this interpretation of

gender as a constituted and constituting form of transgressive knowledge in my approach to incorporating bodily imagery in my practice:

“That the body is a set of possibilities signifies (a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities. Hence, there is an agency which is understood as the process of rendering such possibilities determinate. These possibilities are necessarily constrained by available historical conventions. The body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well. (Butler 521)”

If we can translate Butler's vision of bodily materiality that bears meaning, rather than mere matter, into a situation where art is exhibited, then it is impossible to imagine that one could view art without also “doing” one's body. This would mean that in addition to understanding an artwork through a personal archive of sensorial experience that would include some of the examples that I have previously mentioned (including learned physical habits, object associations, and the knowledge of sensory stimuli), a viewer would also not be able to shed their own gendered embodiment in the way they

understand the work. This is a powerful notion for me, as a viewer and an artist, because it affirms what I believe to be a common experience for non-dominant gender identifying people. That is, the impossibility of escaping your own embodied self.

My work centers its view of gendered phenomenological perception around this experience of constant embodiment. I address how traits of our bodies have bearing on our lived reality. Some bodies receive more care than others. Meaning and value are culturally or institutionally ascribed to bodies. Violence, physical or otherwise, is often perpetrated because of a body's race, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. This type of violence confiscates the body's independence by using physicality as a justification for violence. Violence and trauma shape the experience of bodies. Bodies remember differently from minds. Living in a body that is identified as she, or other, is a state of being which continues to be the basis for oppression. The way a body can navigate the world is heavily bound up in gender presentation, sexual assignment, and perceived desirability; in other words, a body's gender can be negatively constituted through a person's phenomenological perceptual experience with the world.

I want to know what it feels like to have a body that is she. I think it might feel like wanting to disappear, to experience the safety and freedom of not having a body. A body that is she is never allowed to fully disappear, rather begins life inscribed with the knowledge that invisibility is a luxury. Sometimes I want my body to disappear, so I let my work function invisibly. By using smell, touch, and taste as tools on par with the more traditionally utilized sight and sound, I carve out a space for my work to act without being seen. I take found objects and strip them of their intended use, instead allowing

them to function poetically to describe an experience or condition of being. In this way, my work becomes fugitive, inhabiting a state of disappearance that sometimes feels unreachable within a body that is she.



Figure 6: *Body Heat*, ice, silk pajamas, heat lamp, union jack suit dyed with strawberries, 2017

If “every perceptual habit is still a motor habit”, then the embodiment of gender, especially as it relates to those that embody as she, is felt in some way through perception and bodily experience. The discomfort, and also the resonance, of this idea is one that has propelled me in my use of imagery.

To go back to my earliest cited example of being a young child and learning the physical dangers of electrical outlets, a different type of embodied learning takes place from our

earliest experiences. Along with learning what Merleau-Ponty would classify as “actions necessary for the conservation of life” (ie, learning through repetition of bodily habit and management of fear of physical harm, like learning not to stick your finger into a socket), children constitute their own gender identity and also have identity constituted upon them through their physical person. Before language and memory, adults constitute the gender and sexuality of the children in their lives through language, embodied actions, and physical items, such as clothing and toys. Conceptions of gender could be classified as the second level of knowledge outlined by Merleau-Ponty, that is “[elaborated] up primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, [manifesting] through them a core of new significance”. For example, a small child who is male-sexed at birth is often roughhoused with from a young age, given the opportunity (or pushed into the opportunity) to try more physically daring acts and allowed more leeway when acting out violently on other children. Whereas a small child who is female-sexed at birth will be often be offered an array of toys and activities more geared towards imaginary play and caretaking, rather than activities grounded in physical strength or daring. She will be isolated from roughhousing and her violence towards other children will be greeted with more surprise, rather than as an expected trait of her sex/gender. There are bodies of research on this subject not only within the realm of Feminist/Gender Studies, but also within Early Education and Childhood Development, Sociology, etc, that I do not feel I have the time to unpack within this research that is mostly aimed at articulating my own practice. However, I think, anecdotally, that the example of what children experience in terms of their gender embodiment from an early age should register with

people from many different types of environments. Aside from the potential erasing of individual identities and reification of harmful sex/gender stereotypes implied within this facet of childhood, I am also interested in the ways that gender is inscribed within the body (as stated above) vs the ways in which it becomes self-affirmed within the body. The tension between traits that are self-selected rather than prescribed are more particular to an individual and something with which every viewer must grapple. For this reason, clothing, cosmetic items, and other objects that are used in the upkeep and presentation of the body find their way into my work. The application of Vaseline on the skin or the donning of silk pajamas become stand-ins for the type of self-negotiations that we make consciously and unconsciously with regards to our outward presentation. Embodiment is an inescapable condition, one which needs to be addressed by virtue of its continued presence in the way in which we construct our reality.

The concept of potential invisibility, of navigating the world without an ever-present sense of the gendered meaning of the body, is in opposition with a phenomenological framework in which the body absorbs knowledge of its gender and sexuality from earliest consciousness. That is to say, that a body which constitutes and is constituted in terms of a *she* appearing gender, can doubly not disappear by virtue of that inseparable relationship between the body and the self as previously outlined by Merleau-Ponty. That impossibility of invisibility, as I understand it from inside of my own learned (and self-identified) gendered body, has become a generative starting point in terms of my content and materiality.

I use disappearing and changing materials as a way to engage with this notion of operating within a highly visible body, exploring a fugitive state through my work in the absence of feeling able to experience a fugue state in my own body. As previously discussed, we are most vulnerable when our bodies feel most present, as in situations of potential violence. My personal experience with embodiment, with a body that is *she*, has been accompanied by a variety of violent acts that I would consider to be related to my gender, sexuality, and sexual identification. Again, this is the type of statement that, as above with my example of early childhood gendered learning, has decades and decades of research around it. I would like to bypass citing that here in favor of anecdotal, embodied knowledge, in which the lived experiences of others and myself may stand in for academic research. I would rather cite the relationship between embodiment and violence by reflecting on the following: on my grandmothers, both victims of life-threatening domestic violence at the hands of their spouses; on the daily commute by bus of one of my best friends, a transitioning trans woman, during which she negotiates a constant state of fear and barrage of stares based on her chosen mode of dress and expression; on the bonds of my relationships with my best friends in high school, friendships which were, like many relationships between young women, strengthened by the keeping of confidences around shared experiences of sexual assault; on the health of my neighbor, a mother of three children with no medical insurance, who cannot get any local clinic to follow up with her on months of issues related to her reproductive health; on my own inability to find a stable job while pregnant with my daughter; on the women (for it has exclusively been women) who have taught and taken care of my daughter in

daycare centers and now public school for a relatively low wage when compared with the deluge of male faculty employed in the institutions of higher learning that I have attended; on the stories of my friends, most of whom are women or non-binary, that engage in sex work, either by choice or lack of options, in either case dealing with johns who want to hurt them or posses them or both; on the countless times I've sprinted down a dark street, by myself or with another woman, to escape faceless men who voiced a desire to hurt me; on the conversations I've already had with my daughter, a four year old, on the difference between good touch bad touch because it's unavoidable because it's the safe thing to do because I feel I have to teach her until I see her absorb, through my words and maybe through her own early experiences in the world, what it is to walk around without ever shedding your body, what can happen when your embodiment becomes a liability, becomes a target, because I have learned that these are necessary things to talk about in order to protect her. These learned experiences are common enough, such a part of our everyday understanding of how the world works, that to not cite them as relevant research to a condition of being *she* would be facile and dishonest. It is this condition—a condition in which your body learns through experience with the world what the world values about your body. Ever present bodily visibility and the implied dangers of that state are an integral part of how I understand an embodied *she* to be phenomenologically constituted.





Figure 7: *Speculum*, medical exam table, ceramic, scented paraffin body wax, citrus fruit, medical paper, 2017

#### **4: METHODOLOGIES OF TRAUMA**

I outline many negative experiences associated with inhabiting a body that is *she*, partially from a desire to center the experiences of the people I love. I also want to highlight the resilience and power of these experience. My focus on violence incurred due to gender, sexuality, and sexual identity is also borne out by statistics. As a final methodological lens in my studio practice, I focus on trauma, specifically on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as a condition whose effect and treatment influence the way my work functions. Physical manifestation of PTSD and the methods used to treat it allow me to locate violence, potential for healing, and resilience within my work. PTSD was first added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980 (Friedman 2007):

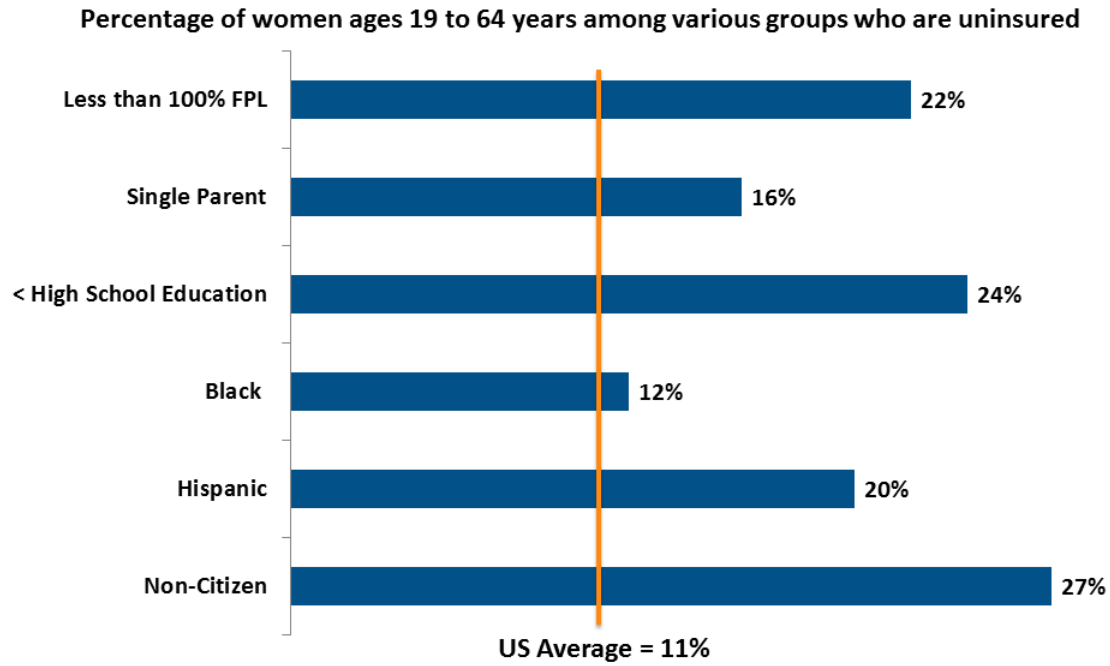
“In its initial DSM-III formulation, a traumatic event was conceptualized as a catastrophic stressor that was outside the range of usual human experience. The framers of the original PTSD diagnosis had in mind events such as war, torture, rape, the Nazi Holocaust, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, natural disasters (such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and volcano eruptions), and human-made disasters (such as factory explosions, airplane crashes, and automobile accidents). They considered traumatic events to be clearly different from the very painful stressors that constitute the normal vicissitudes of life such as divorce, failure, rejection, serious illness, financial reverses, and the like... This dichotomization between traumatic and other stressors was based on the assumption that, although most individuals have the ability to cope with ordinary

stress, their adaptive capacities are likely to be overwhelmed when confronted by a traumatic stressor. (Friedman 2007)”

I have personally been in treatment for PTSD for several years and some of my interest in adapting aspects of the disease and its treatment stems from my own knowledge; however, as with my choice to focus on gendered violence, statistics also bear out that women and other non-dominant gender identities suffer from PTSD at a much higher rate than men (National Institute of Mental Health 2017) (APA Practice 2015). The statistics are lacking in terms of capability to survey both under-insured and uninsured individuals who may not have access to a clinical diagnosis, in my opinion most likely lowering the percentages of reporting amongst poor women, women of color, and non-citizen women, all of whom are at risk for being underinsured/uninsured (Kaiser Family Foundation 2017). Further, information about the diagnoses of transgender and non-binary people with PTSD is relatively slim, again mostly likely ensuring lower rates of reporting among this population, especially at the intersection of these identity traits. Even accounting for these gaps in the research, the results are frightening and illustrate a relationship between violence and gender/sexual identity.

Figure 3

## Women at Greatest Risk for Being Uninsured, 2016



Note: The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in 2016 was \$12,486 for an individual under 65 years old.  
SOURCE: Kaiser Family Foundation analysis of 2017 ASEC Supplement to the Current Population Survey, U.S. Census Bureau.



Figure 8: Illustrated graph of Women at Greatest Risk for Being Uninsured, Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017

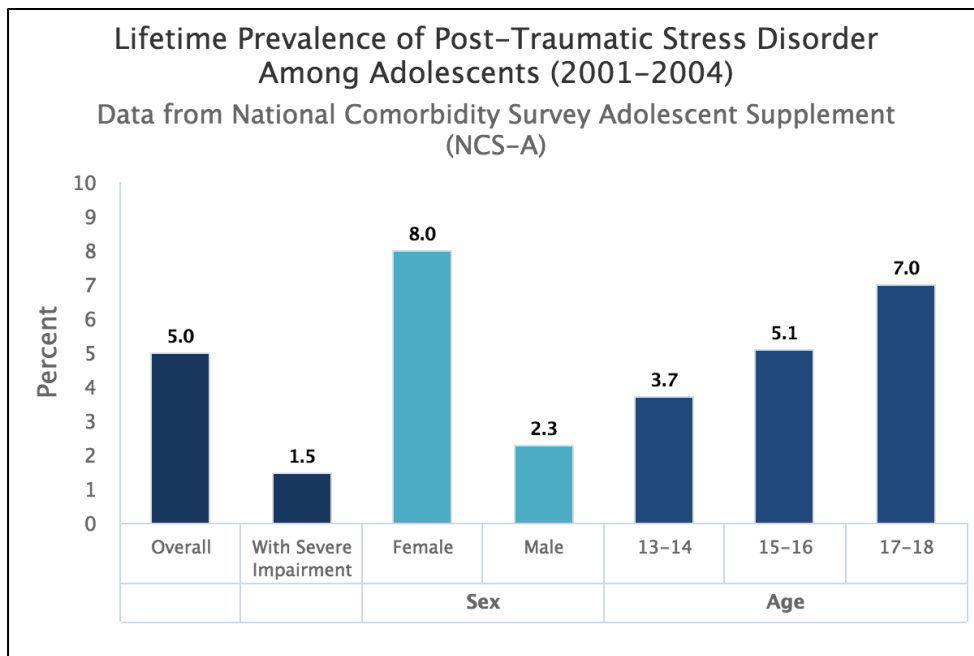
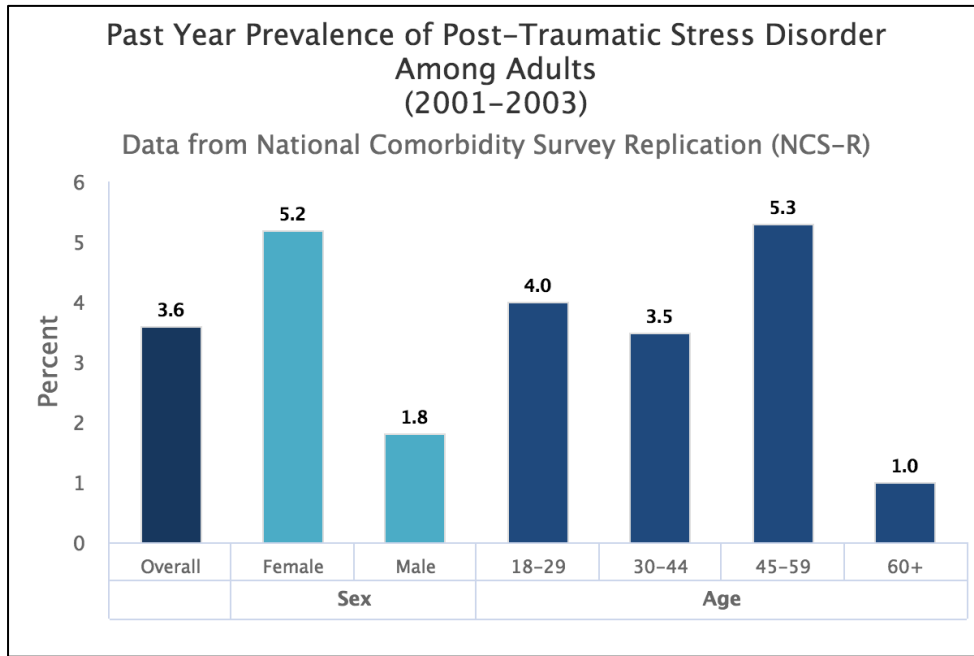


Figure 9: Illustrated graphs showing rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among adults and adolescents, National Institute of Mental Health

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, Medical Director of the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute and author of *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on the Mind, Body and Society* and *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, discusses the evolution of PTSD as an officially recognized medical diagnosis, outlining a trajectory that helps to illustrate a crucial and cruel dynamic to the gender/sexuality component of this disease:

“Later on [after becoming interested in trauma diagnoses in Vietnam War veterans], I became aware of all sorts of colleagues who had been working with abused kids and rape victims. And they had been trying to get a diagnosis in. And that group was too small to have any political clout. And it’s really the Vietnam veterans that brought this in and the power of the large numbers of psychiatrists and patients at the VA. That was strong enough to make it an issue and a diagnosis (Tippett & van der Kolk 2017)”

Without diminishing van der Kolk’s important work and research, which I will continue to reference throughout this section, I do think it is important to begin a discussion of a PTSD-oriented lens by unpacking van der Kolk’s summary of the evolution of PTSD as a diagnosis. If statistics illustrate, as they have done in the above figures, that women/transgendered/non-binary people are disproportionately affected by trauma and more regularly given a PTSD diagnosis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then why would this group of “abused kids and rape victims” be considered “too small” to effect any type of change on public policy? The answer is illustrated in the history of PTSD’s status as an official diagnosis: it took a group of men, ex-soldiers at that, whose enormous suffering as a

result of war should not be understated, for public policy to take a problem that no doubt had already afflicted large (*she* embodied) swaths of the population since time immemorial. All segments of the population have suffered from traumatic events and PTSD, but children, girls, women, and other marginalized gender/sexual identities suffer at a much higher rate. If gender/sexuality/sexual identity are learned partially through phenomenological experience, is they are constituted and constituting through the body, then the experience of traumatic events and ensuing suffering from PTSD can be considered as violently constituted actions which help to shape our body's experience of itself and, by extension of the fact that it occurs more in *she* embodied populations, of understanding its identity traits. Trauma fundamentally alters the way victims experience their own bodies:

“...you can just shut down your emotional awareness of your body. And so a very large number of traumatized people...I'd say the majority of the people we treat at the trauma center and in my practice—have very cut off relationships to their bodies. They may not feel what's happening in their bodies. They may not register what goes on with them. And so what became very clear is that we needed to help people, for them to feel safe, feeling the sensations in their bodies, to start having a relationship with the life of their organism... (Tippett & van der Kolk 2017)”

PTSD is a disease that ultimately changes the way one interacts with the world, in body habits and in mind, manifesting as “flashbacks—reliving the trauma over and over, including physical symptoms like a racing heart; bad dreams; frightening thoughts; re-

experiencing symptoms” that cause a victim to “[stay] away from places events, or objects that are reminders of the traumatic experience; [and avoid] thoughts or feelings related to the traumatic event”. When making and installing my work, I often refer to PTSD-associated symptoms, seeking to recreate an effect that slightly unsettles the experience of the body by de-familiarizing a space. By eliminating expected elements that provide stability in an exhibition space, for example art works that are displayed legibly on pedestal or in a discernible pattern, I unbalance the viewer’s experience of a room and articulate a sensation of anxiety. Further, I push my work to inhabit the architecture of the space where it is installed in ways that are also unorthodox, either in their physical installation or in the way that they fill a space. For example, in my work *Fires*, the smell of a burning or just extinguished fire fills a room, but the source is not evident (a diffuser with scent is hidden somewhere out of sight of the viewer). By removing a sign of logical cause and effect (the smell of fire and the sight of a campfire, for example), I heighten the viewer’s sense of instability and discomfort. Additionally, by using a smell that is associated with both danger and, sometimes, with comfort, I play on the viewer’s sensory intake to further destabilize a viewer’s psychological state. I am not interested in, nor do I think it is possible, to mimic the effects of PTSD. Rather, I want to use our understanding of PTSD as a disorder that works within bodily memory to explore phenomenological perception, embodiment, and the embodied *she*.

Mental illness and ailments have been elaborated on before as a way to illustrate the body’s potential for heightened anxiety in navigating a space. In *Mimicry and Psychasthenia*, Roger Caillois describes the plight of schizophrenics:



“I will, however, briefly describe some personal experiences, but which are wholly in accord with observations published in the medical literature, for example with the invariable response of schizophrenics to the question: where are you? *I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself.* To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at *himself from* any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put.* He is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar.* And he invents spaces of which he is ‘the convulsive possession.’ (Caillois 30)”

Although describing a mental illness entirely differently from PTSD, Caillois still uses the physically phenomenological manifestations of schizophrenia to describe an altered embodiment, a state of being which is somehow unbound or paralyzed from the way we traditionally take in memory. Bodily memory and knowledge, as has been outlined, is assimilated through force of habit and repetition, until that knowledge is integrated into our understanding of the world. PTSD affects a breakdown of this process of integration:

“...we are a very resilient species. So if we are around people who love, trust us, take care of us, nurture us when we are down, most people do pretty well with even very horrendous events. But particularly traumas that occur at the hands of people who are supposed to take care of you, if you're not allowed to feel what

you feel, know what you know, your mind cannot integrate what goes on, and you can get stuck on the situation (Tippett & van der Kolk 2017).”

Pausing or obstructing integration of understanding is a key tool in my construction of my work. Slowing the viewer down, using familiar objects in unexpected ways, and including materials that behave unpredictably all alter down the process of integration. This instability mimics both van der Kolk’s summation of PTSD memory integration as well as the elongated sense of time described by Lippard in an earlier section of my report, wherein she classifies conceptual art as being able to distort our sense of time in part because of a subversion of viewer expectations.

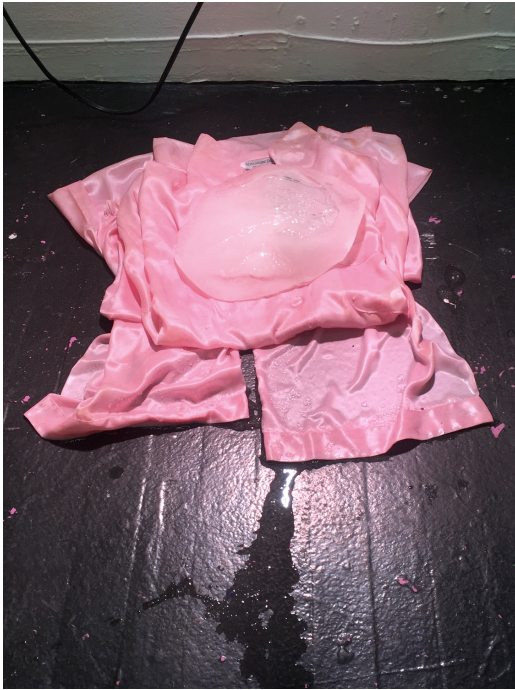


Figure 10: Detail of *Body Heat*, silk pajamas, ice, 2017



Figure 11: Detail of *Body Heat*, Union Jack suit, dyed strawberries, butcher paper, 2017



Figure 12: Detail of *Speculum*, medical examination table, ceramic, citrus fruit, scented paraffin wax, medical paper

## **5: METHODOLOGIES OF HEALING**

Beyond referencing feelings of anxiety, disassociation, and disorientation, I want to locate healing and elements of repair within my work. Although much of what I have explored so far in my attempt to understand and tie together different states of embodied being has focused on the negative capabilities of phenomenological understanding, I do seek to also explore what can be positively transformative about these states. Many people in trauma therapy participate in exercises that train traumatic memories to be remembered as integrated parts of their lives, rather than as isolated events that they relive in perpetuity. This process of integration is often aided by physical means, as with eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR) or weighted blankets. EMDR, a technique invented by Francine Shapiro, where “you move your eyes from side to side as you think about distressing memories, [so] that the memories lose their power” has proven to be immensely successful in the integration of traumatic memories (Tippett & van der Kolk 2017). Both EMDR and use of weighted blankets involve centering on a physical aspect of a trauma victim’s embodied state, using the body’s capacity for processing sensory stimuli to assist in the reintegration of traumatic experiences. This notion of re-centering the body through a focus on being present, on embodiment, and on the process of integration, is key in own practice. Heightening and attenuating the viewer to minute changes in their senses, in the significance of objects, and in their sense of time, can have a grounding effect that I see as mimicking some of the embodied healing techniques used in treatment of PTSD. By viewing the work through a lens influenced both by the illness of and healing of PTSD, I allow for the possibility of a viewer

experience that celebrates the resilience and fullness of embodied experience.

Experiencing both that anxiety and repair also allows for further forging of empathetic connections and continued vulnerability.



Figure 13: *Taste of Red*, hummingbird feeders, coke bottles, rope, ceramic beads, red flowers, wire, pomegranates, nectar, 2017

In *Taste of Red*, similarly to *I change with your atmosphere*, I alter the way the space of the gallery functions. In *I change with your atmosphere*, that shift in meaning happens in the viewer's ability to mark and wear away at the floor. In *Taste of Red*, the sculpture also functions as a hummingbird feeder. All of the objects have a double meaning; they are all items that human bodies have a 1:1 ratio with (a bottle of coke, a pomegranate), but are also all items that appeal to hummingbirds. Hummingbirds prefer the color red to

any other color and, like all birds and pollinators, seek out flowers and fruit. *Taste of Red* enacts this reparative sense of the body by giving viewers a chance to interact with a work not specifically designed with their own embodiment in mind, allowing their sense of scale to shift both within their own bodies and in the gallery space. Bodily awareness, as experienced through scale and material, gives way to the possibility of bodily understanding, even bodily transference. By destabilizing the purpose of the gallery, by making it a space that accommodates hummingbirds, the experience offered to the viewer becomes one that contains a multitude of possibilities. The pomegranates rot, the nectar drips from the necks of the coke bottle, the flower petals blow in the breeze from windows left open and eventually drift to the floor. It is within this kind of positive chaos that I find the ground for an embodiment that integrates the present through a reveling in unbound, physically rich experience. Repair occurs when the viewer is allowed to acknowledge the signals towards violence, disassociation, estrangement, and forced visibility; eventually integrating them with a sense of the materials that aims at being sensuous, weird, and even whimsical. By expanding my sense of phenomenological perception, I have begun to develop a way of working in my studio that mines embodied perception for experiences of both violence and healing.

It is hard to have a body every day. It is important to have a body every day. A body is danger. A body is emergency. A body is romance. A body is evidence. A body is sensitive. A body is fragile. A body learns differently. A body only goes on for so long. A body and a spirit are in constant negotiation. A body has its own reasons. What does the body know? What can the body tell us?

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