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Sexual Assault Victims and How They Cope:
A Creative Thesis From A Survivor's Perspective

By

Taylor Clara Campbell

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
University Honors Scholars Program
for the
Fine and Performing Arts Honors College
and a discipline in
Arts and Humanities: Art and Design: Painting
East Tennessee State University

David Dixon, Thesis Mentor

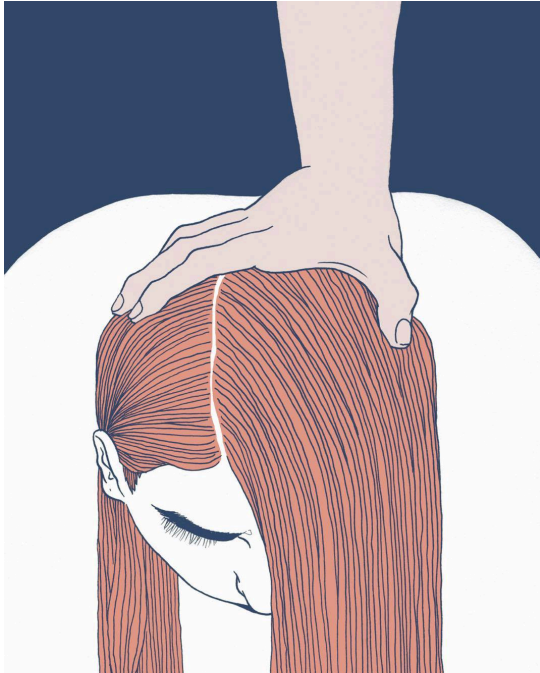
Andrew Scott Ross, Reader

Patrick Cronin, Reader

I am in my final year at college, and while I have attended classes here at East Tennessee State University I have been both sexually harassed and assaulted. I believe that these things happen all too frequently because of the lack of action college campuses (and officers of the law in general) take against sexual offenders and our current societal standards that believe in victim blaming and protecting the rights of the criminals more than holding the them accountable for their actions. I know that was the reason I never reported these several offenses. But unfortunately, my case is not an outlier or even the slightest bit surprising to those who are conscious about violence against women. There are millions of victims in the United States alone who have similar stories and that share the awful burden of being a survivor of sexual assault, even before and beyond their collegiate careers. However due to the rise of third wave and fourth wave feminism, these women have been more empowered to seek help in a safe space and to share their stories with others like and unlike themselves. With all of these cases riddling the airwaves about sexual offenders such as Brock Turner and even our current president, Donald Trump, and the legal system's lack of initiation to give them a well-deserved trial and/or a justifiable sentence, survivors are rightfully feeling overwhelmed and discouraged. Those of us who are able keep pushing for change while coping with the demons inside of us still stand and want our stories to be heard. For my research, I wanted to dive into a few sexual assault victims' stories as well as my own, examining how sexual assault survivors cope with their pain and completing a series of drawings that give rape cases visual evidence when words just don't seem to be enough.

I began my creative research by digging deeper into myself and my own coping mechanisms when thinking about and dealing with memories of my assault. I discovered that

facing them head on was both helpful and hurtful, much like the experiences one would feel after visiting a counselor after a traumatic event. The only difference was that I was alone with these incredibly powerful emotions. The paper and drawing utensils were there only to redirect these feelings into a visual space. I found myself with tears running down my face at the end of each piece, which I found both emotionally exhausting and artistically enlightening. The pieces I created during this period was almost entirely self-serving, and helped me better understand the emotional damage I was left with after not talking about those incidents for so long. I found myself connecting to the feelings that artists like Jean-Michael Basquiat felt when he learned Andy Warhol died, fueled by pure emotional energy and hardly any thought or planning. Some of the best artwork I or any other artist can do is from this sort of experience; it feels like you aren't in your own body anymore. Time ceases to exist, then you blink and you have such an interesting and intuitive image in front of you. Most artists would stop there once they returned to themselves, but I kept going. I tweaked and edited the composition until I felt it looked finished to my sobered eyes. In the beginning this sort of extra step felt right, but the more I worked into my piece after that unbridled subconscious mark making had ceased, the more I realized I had covered up the real artwork with something less interesting. I had built a wall in front of my purest form of expression like I had when I was assaulted and refused to address the emotional turmoil I had experienced. I repressed it then and I had done it again, and that's when I knew I was going to have to do some serious digging to let these emotions bleed out, and to not clean it up when it does.



The few drawings I had made were exactly that: few. Nevertheless, the toll it had taken on my mental and physical states was drastic. I felt tired no matter how much or how little sleep I had gotten, I got sick more often, and I began eating a lot more without the energy one usually gets after a meal. My parents even talked to me on several different occasions and asked me about my “new” behavior; they told me they were concerned and didn’t want me to overwhelm myself with tackling such a large and difficult subject. That led me to research into creatives and mental illness, which was something I was interested in learning about from a young age. Everyone has heard the phrase at some point in their lives “the tortured artist”. I had thought it sounded melodramatic and borderline ridiculous when I had first heard it, but the more often it returned into conversation the more I reflected on it. In fact, there have been findings that have leaned in favor of that very phrase. “A large number of studies in the past few decades support a link between creativity and mental illnesses, particularly manic depressive disorder and schizophrenia,” says Adrienne Sussman of the Stanford Journal of

Neuroscience. This of course has caused some sort of conflict within the scientific (and artistic) communities concerning mental illness. Sussman goes on to say “If mental illness can produce powerful and important art, then perhaps, instead of trying to eliminate them by medication, we should embrace these mental states as valuable in their own right.” I let this idea sink in, even though it admittedly struck a very wrong chord with me when I first read it. I thought about my own art, and how it was never received well until I had experienced a traumatic event and dealt with it visually. Once I had done this, my peers and professors alike responded wonderfully saying it was a marked improvement on my earlier work. I realized that this idea of cultivating and embracing mental disorder in the art community wasn’t coincidental, but subliminally encouraged. One could see this Julian Schnabel’s incredible piece “Portrait of Andy Warhol” (1982) in response to his dear friend’s tragically early death (artmatters.)



(artmatters)

Another more recent example of this would be when I discovered Andrew Salgado: a young, gay Canadian artist who really broke into the world of fine art after he and his partner had been a victim of a hate crime in 2008. In a 2013 interview with Emaho Magazine, the interviewer asks Salgado about the subjects of his paintings, mostly which are male figures with “faces full of pain and anguish” (Emaho.) He was asked about that element having any correlation to the assault on him five years previous. Salgado said, “I think that it’s quite easy to say that these are related, and certainly the 2008 incident was a catalyst for what I view as the political perspective inherent in my work” (Emaho.) He goes on to say that he has been trying to let that “catalyst” fade away from the contents of his work, however it was that traumatic experience and his artistic response that made him the famed painter he is today. Someone who would subscribe to the idea that Sussman introduced would argue that the emotional turmoil he must have dealt with after the attack was his right to experience. After all, if someone was introduced to help him deal with his emotions in a different (and maybe even healthier) way that we wouldn’t have his inspirational artwork to consume now. I had learned that there was a rather sizeable demographic of people, artists and not, that take advantage of the creative process and the artist’s inherent need to deal with their emotions visually. This I believe had unintentionally led to the death of many artists at their own hand, and circles its way back to why I use art to deal with my emotions and the responses I received when I presented a finished piece. I admit I felt betrayed by the community that I had always thought of as a safe and open space, but at the same time I wasn’t surprised. After all, it wasn’t going to prevent me from making art inspired by the things that happen to me because I still view some

of is as cathartic and freeing. Yet being aware of this sort of underlying structure in the art world made me want to take a break from making work about myself.

I started to look up other victims' stories. It's honestly quite heartbreaking what a quick Google search will bring up, because there were so many that appeared right before my eyes. As sad as it may be, it happens all too often and unfortunately a majority of these cases don't get reported to the police. Going back to the reasons that victims don't come forward more often, I found some statistics that will paint a better picture for those unaware of sexual violence on college campuses and in the general populous. First and foremost, "1 in 5 women are targets of attempted or completed sexual assault while they are college students, compared to about 1 in 16 college men" according to the American Association of University Women. In a Fall 2016 consensus among the National Center for Educational Statistics, "some 20.5 million students are expected to attend American colleges and universities... about 11.7 million females will attend, compared with 8.8 million males." Using the statistics that AAUW provided compared to these numbers, 2.34 million women were (or will be) victim to sexual assault in the 2016-2017 academic year as well as 550,000 potential male assault victims. Which leads to the likelihood that these students will come forward, which AAUW states that "less than 5 percent of rapes and attempted rapes of college students are reported to campus authorities or law enforcement." The same investigation, led by the Center for Public Integrity, goes on to say that one of the reasons for barely any of these incidents being exposed is that there are "many barriers to reporting sexual assault, including inadequate university sexual assault policies." Sadly, it is also known that "in 90 percent of the reported cases, the victim

knew her or his attacker” which dispels the myth that “most sexual assaults are committed by strangers” and that “it's not rape if the people involved knew each other” (Georgetown Law.)

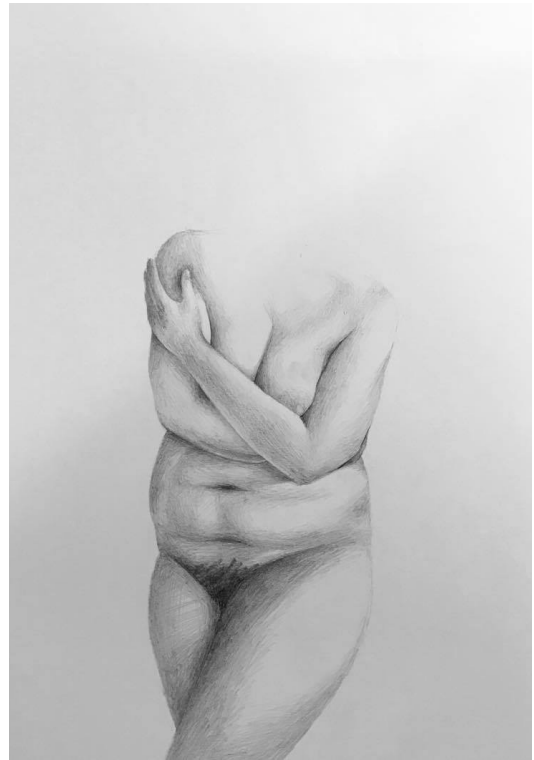
Through this discovery, I have the fortune of also uncovering several programs and organizations designed to help victims learn to live beyond their assault and improve their overall mental health. One of these organizations is the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network, or RAINN. Among endorsing bills that protect people from sexual assault and providing us with the National Sexual Assault Hotline, a free and confidential service that is available 24/7, they also publish videos of sexual assault victims and their stories. This process is obviously completely voluntary, but they let other victims know that they're not alone while also giving them outlets to express their emotion, their pain, and their personal enlightenment. I watched several of these videos, and as they sat there divulging these demons from their pasts I became overwhelmed with emotion. They spoke of what happened the day of their assault, what they smelled or heard or felt, all in vivid detail as if it had only happened yesterday. They cried and wished well to those who were watching, and talked about how much freer they felt after they were able to tell their stories. For some it took months while others took decades, but coupled with RAINN's support and support from loved ones around them they were able to not only survive, but thrive.

After seeing these videos and really absorbing their information, I started doing some serious self-exploration. I searched my feelings and tried to figure out why I remained so emotionally vacant on the subject of my assault until something would remind me and I would have to run somewhere private to deal with myself. I realized that it might be time that I also come forward with my story; after all my friends and family could probably figure it out once

they saw my work. I told my mom and my closest friends about what happened, and the amount of support I received was really quite comforting. I had also gotten some backlash for not coming forward to the police when it happened, but after I explained why I hadn't done so I felt like they understood. I learned that day that I have people around me who care and who I can put my trust in, and it was one of the most freeing experiences I had felt in a long time. One day I'd like to come forward like the brave people in those RAINN videos, and some day I know I will, but for now those select few people around me were enough.

I thought about making art about these wonderfully brave people, how I could do their stories justice visually, but the more I mulled it over the more afraid I became. These survivors had already relayed their stories in an auditory manner, describing in storybook detail of the events and feelings and struggles that they had went through. What good would bringing visual accompaniment to those accounts do other than hurting them? I needed to speak for those who hadn't come forward, who haven't quite built up the courage to share their stories. But how could I do that if they hadn't shared anything? Who would I talk to? I couldn't just go up to any person on the street and ask if they've been sexually assaulted, so the solution seemed clear. I would make artwork about my own experiences and describe how much it helped me deal with these emotions I had repressed for so long in the hopes that survivors that visit or read about my show will be inspired to share their burdens. If I could make at least one person feel like they're not alone in this daily battle, then I will have done what I set out to do. As hard as it was, I started making artwork about myself again. I set aside a few hours after classes were over to go to my studio and put something down on paper. I experimented with countless different mediums, some comfortable and some not. Every piece was so vastly different than

the one before it. I can't exactly explain why this process unfolded the way it had, but I knew if I just kept pushing myself I would find the right way to share my feelings without speaking. I knew that eventually my art would speak on my behalf and my viewers would understand. I just had to dig for it.



While creating this new collection of work, I began to think more creatively about my assault. I had read and listened to countless stories of victims and their rape cases, but now that I found were exactly like my own. I began to, yet again, wonder if my assault would even be considered an assault in the eyes of the law. This is unfortunately another daily battle I find myself a part of, and also another reason I never came forward to the police when the incidents had occurred. I forced myself to reflect on what happened to me, and to not give in to those thoughts, but constantly trying to validate a traumatic event in your mind and forcing yourself to relive it every single day isn't healthy in the slightest. This is where my art started to hurt

more than help, and unfortunately I had started to spiral once again. I dredged up self-doubt and self-hate all over again, and found myself unwilling and borderline unable to make artwork concerning this idea for a while. I would pick up extra work or extra assignments in other classes to distract myself, and after the day was done and I found myself alone in bed in my dorm, I would cry for what seemed like forever. After some time, I went back to the internet to research more sexual assault survivor tips, because I really didn't want to admit my vulnerability to my friends and family yet again over the same old story (another example of my emotional stubbornness getting the best of me).

On the bright side, there are a number of support pages at the touch of a button. Among the resources I saw, there were a number of guides to understanding and dealing with the emotions you faced (and still face) due to assault. One of the most helpful pages I found was the "Sexual Assault Survivor's Guide" on the Saint John's University website. It thoroughly defined sexual assault, rape, and consent, gave suggestions on what to do and who to contact in the event of an assault, and things to remember if you have been assaulted. One of the most helpful things I found on their page (for my case at least) was "the principles from the Central Minnesota Sexual Assault Center that are the foundation for how [CSB/SJU] addresses sexual health and sexual assault" and the list of reasons a sexual assault victim should not place the blame on themselves (Saint John's.) I often have to be reminded that "each survivor of sexual assault is a separate individual having distinct and separate needs and should be treated accordingly. There is no uniformly accepted "normal" reaction to sexual assault" and that the victim is not to blame even if they "froze and did not or could not say 'no' or were unable to

fight back physically” (Saint John’s.) My specific assault case and emotional conflict afterwards followed those statements to a tee, and once again felt that my feelings were authenticated.

I also researched artists like me, who wanted to start a conversation about sexual assault and make it less taboo to address it. The first I came across was Native American artist Caroline Luzene Hill, who is most known for her installation piece entitled “Retracing the Trace” which was exhibited at Eiteljorg Museum (indystar.) Hill started out doing drawings like I had, after a long bout of silence on the matter and then slowly slipping information concerning her rape into her drawings and installations, albeit in a very “abstract and personally detached way” (Hill.) Her work really began to shine, however, when she created her immersive and challenging installation riddled with red satin cords. As simple as the medium might have seemed, the show spoke volumes. The cording symbolized the cording on her hoodie that her attacker used to strangle her before beating and raping her on “January 4, 1994 in Piedmont Park in Atlanta” (Hill.) It also abstractly represented the silence she had undergone concerning the assault, and how she felt as if her attacker had taken her voice. Her courage and strength became an inspiration to me, as well as how she communicates through her work.



(luzenehill)

Another artist I rediscovered was Emma Sulkowicz, who was a college student when she was raped by a fellow student by the name of Paul Nungesser (Emily Taylor.) Unfortunately, like many institutions, the university “failed to place the attacker at fault for the incident, despite having presented video evidence of the alleged event” (Emily Taylor.) Sulkowicz responded in the only way she could see fit; performance art. She began carrying a fifty-pound mattress everywhere with her each day, sparking national controversy. “The artist turned activist faced a tidal wave of dissent as she became ridiculed for her blunt message. She was often characterized as clinging to victimhood in her refusal to simply move forward” (Emily Taylor.) She was called a liar, a slanderer, and was spit at by passersby, but she remained steady until the end of her piece on her graduation day, May 27, 2015 (emmasulkowicz.)



(huffingtonpost)

The one that spoke to me the most was Yan Yinhong’s performance in Hong Kong on 2013. She called it “One Person’s Battlefield”, and it was said to be her own personal “furious comment on sexual violence against women” (nytimes.) However, as she performed her dance, a few men rushed the stage and began sexually assaulting her in front of the entire audience. “The assault continued through her entire performance as she dodged the men who kissed and

groped her, grappled her to the floor and thrust their hands up her skirt, the audience making only halfhearted efforts to help as they stood by and recorded the incident with phones and cameras” (nytimes.) The incident was not reported to the authorities by any member of audience or even Yinhong herself. “How could you report that here?” Yinhong asked with such astonishment and sincerity. Several other female Chinese fine artists experienced similar unsolicited interferences around that same time, which Li Xinmo (another artist who experiences harassment) said was nothing other than “anti-woman sentiment” (nytimes.) What was the most impressive thing though, was their willingness and bravery to finish out the duration of their performances, because they knew their message was important and needed to be heard.

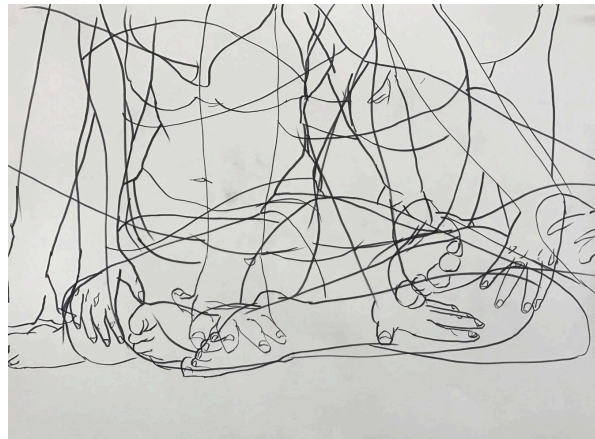
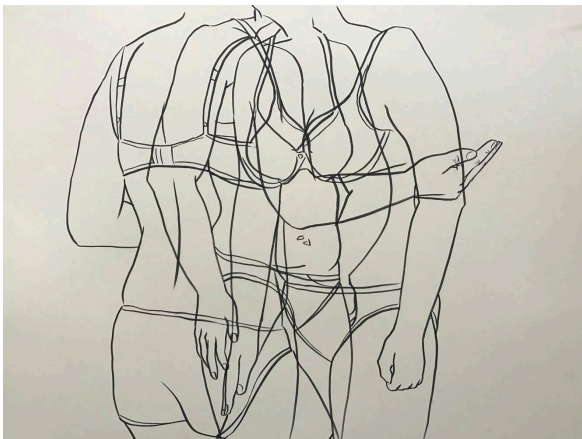


(nytimes)

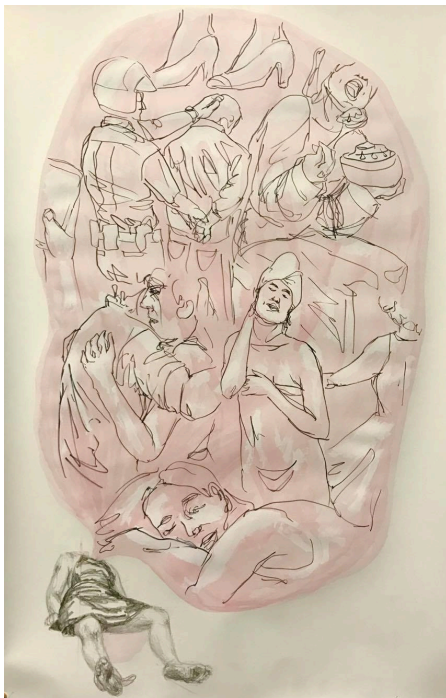
Of course, there were many more artists who do this sort of work. Those such as Marina Abramovic and Yoko Ono also popped up, along with up-and-coming artists like performance artist Caroline Rothstein and spoken word poet Kevin Kantor. What I noticed was that most of the creatives making work about sexual violence were performance based or installation pieces, hardly ever any drawings. Yes, some would start out drawing, much like Luzene Hill. However hardly any of them ever use drawing as their end-all-be-all outlet to create artwork

about rape. While this was surprising and a tad bit disheartening, this newfound opportunity was also exciting. I had tapped into almost completely foreign territory in the art world, and I planned to use that to my advantage.

I started experimenting some more with how I wanted to go about illustrate these same feelings one would getting just after seeing a performance by Abramovic or walking past Sulkowicz on the street carrying her mattress. I desperately wanted that same gut feeling one would feel when seeing these powerful women perform, but I couldn't quite figure out how. I started with a technique that I considered comfortable, because I knew I could push it however much I needed to further my concept. With a partially nude female model, I started with a contour drawing in ink. After one drawing was finished, I would move to a different spot in the studio and draw her again from a new angle on top of the older drawing. I kept this process going until I had filled the picture plane with a conglomeration of shapes and lines that began to assume a whole new meaning; not just some figure drawing practice. I enjoyed this new method of working a lot, and it allowed me to think on my feet and work quickly. After a timer would sound, I wouldn't touch it. Finally, I was able to get out some raw emotive drawings on paper without overworking it and covering up what made it interesting in the first place.



With those samples in the back of my mind and being overwhelmed with incomprehensible amounts of possibilities, I started brainstorming just how I could use what I had learned to illustrate my message in an aesthetically interesting and thought-provoking way. I would mull over these concepts so much that I began to have dreams about them, coming up with something different and exciting each time. Finally, I thought I had struck gold. With my background in design, I was inspired by the idea of a more minimalist approach, so I decided that the simple line work with interesting weight variation would pair well with a limited color palette. That would be my means of narrating a sort of abstract story to the viewer. Each element was extremely structured and balanced, and each figure was very gestural and emotive. I finally felt confident in my work moving forward. One could see inspiration from feminist artist Sue Williams and her crude and direct paintings in the way I rendered these pieces, and purposefully so. Beautifully rough was the aesthetic I tried to achieve and I believed I had done just that.



These drawings were the first instances that I hadn't used my own assault story as the inspiration for the content, but those that I read about or listened to. I never made the figures faces too rendered or recognizable, because I never contacted the survivors for their permission to do art about these traumatic events they've undergone. The idea behind the color, the scratchy crude manner of rendering, and the placement all contributed to my concept. These images were supposed to represent a moment, a split second in time, during a sexual assault. The images in pink above the more clearly rendered figures at the bottom of the piece represent thoughts that flash through a victim's mind in that instance. That's where a bit of influence from my own scenario began to bleed in. Seconds seemed to last hours, and among the humiliation and pain all I could think about was taking a shower, or hugging my mom, or what I could have done differently to prevent this. The entire image begins to symbolize the victim's self-doubt and self-hate that often comes after an event such as this. I named this series "If Only", and I honestly felt as if this was what I was supposed to be doing. This was what needed to be said and how I visualized it was exactly as it needed to be. Then everything changed.

On November 8th, 2016, nearly the end of the fall semester, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. I and a few close friends stayed up to watch the entire thing unfold right before our eyes. I remember feeling powerless, helpless, drunk and numb. I stayed home that very next day because, like many of my other friends, I was scared. When everything on the news is just the next sexist and insulting things he's said about women only to deny it the next day, even prior to his election, I thought my fear was founded. Women were only a small part of the bigger picture: Muslim people, Jewish people, people of color, disabled

people, you name it and they've been verbally attacked by our commander in chief. The following day, three of my female friends were harassed. One of them was even groped in a public supermarket. This felt like only the beginning and the fight for progress in this nation seemed to have come to a screeching halt. And suddenly, looking at my pieces with new eyes, they weren't enough. This wasn't provoking enough or frightening enough. What I wanted my viewers to feel now was the same fear I had felt in that dark moment that I realized that we all had a huge fight ahead of us.

The first pieces I made in this sort of frantic rage and hurt were pure response. I needed an outlet to express my anger without necessarily focusing on anything too specific, but that's when I came across a news article about a gay man named Chris Ball who was brutally beaten only hours after the announcement of Trump's presidency. There were allegations that people started shouting homophobic slurs at him while at a bar that evening, saying things like "We got a new President you fucking faggots" (independent.) After Ball had left the bar, a group of men allegedly ambushed him and smashed a glass bottle over his head, causing him to have to get five staples in his head at a nearby hospital (independent.) He posted a response to the new presidential election on Facebook after his attack, writing "I try hard to understand different points of views, perspectives, and avenues when it comes to politics, but when the realities of the time we live in are so stark it really breaks my heart... This is real, and the mentalities and mindsets behind it are very real as well. This hatred, bigotry, and senseless violence all comes from the same part of America that voted in a demagogue who spits hatred as his rhetoric." The story inspired in me a guttural need to make art about his attack, and that's exactly what I did. I was heavily influenced by the work of Georg Baselitz not only in color, but in expressive

quality. In that single class period, I was able to tap into this unfounded energy inside of me. That's how I knew this is where I needed to go with my work. I knew nothing else I could do would inspire the same feeling in people that this piece did. This was it.



The piece was a breakthrough for me; I was happy to finally make something that I felt extremely proud of while also cementing my voice in a historic event. I wasn't nearly done, though. Chris Ball's story was not the only one of its kind, unfortunately. So I continued this series further, finding stories of men and women being attacked for something they can't control by those who refuse to open their mind and bridge that divide. I found a story about a young lesbian woman names Mallory Owens who went to her girlfriend Alex Hawkins' family's Thanksgiving dinner. During dinner, she was brutally beaten by Alex's brother Travis, who didn't approve of the relationship his sister was in (dailymail.) They were unable to charge him for a hate crime, however, because Alabama is a "state with hate crime laws that do not include crimes based on sexual orientation or gender identity" among 14 other states as well.



For the final piece rounding out this series, I found a story concerning a Muslim woman who was assaulted for her religion. It was yet another attack just hours after President Trump's election. The woman's name was not released, but we know she was a student at San Jose University and was attacked from behind by a man in a parking garage on campus (nbcnews.) In the same day, there was another Muslim who "reported being followed by two men who made comments about Trump and the Muslims before robbing her" (nbcnews.) "It was the first full day of America under a President-elect Trump. And it reinforced fears that the Republican's upset victory would inspire a new wave of Islamophobia nationwide" (nbcnews.) The fact that these attacks occurred the day after the election was frightening to say the least, but kept my artistic responsibility fueled, and I continued to make work commenting on these assaults and condemning this mindless violence. While the circumstances are horrible, I believe that this sort of work helps voice the concern for a group of people often remaining unheard, and I truly felt like these pieces provided silent solidarity even if it could not necessarily guarantee justice.



With my activism concerning this immediate issue was sated for the time being, I finally had the opportunity to step back and look at this collection of work objectively. My aesthetic inspiration was still noticeable, albeit subtle. The colors were much less “radioactive” in its color choice as some of his pieces looked. My work was also unsaturated and dim. Sometimes the skin took on a color of decay, which is honestly something I had considered and constructed in furthering my message. The red was there as a symbol for blood and rage, but didn’t make you want to turn away at the thought of excessive gore. Overall, when I walked away from these drawings for a few days and then came back to view them with fresh eyes, I just became overwhelmed with sadness. You feel the color of your own skin drain like the figures pictured. That said, there was room for obvious improvement. Who’s to say I don’t want to turn people’s stomachs when they see the blood? Why can’t I make art that’s hard to look at, especially if it’s commenting on such a violent subject anyways? I learned from this not to coddle the viewers, but to surprise and inspire them. I needed something stronger; maybe try some wider strokes

with a fatter brush, or maybe use more paint and less ink. Ultimately, I ended up wanting to go more towards the style that Baselitz had developed for himself, I just had to convince myself that being inspired by someone doesn't mean that you are copying them. I believe that was one of the reasons the commentary pieces I had made then were so flat and dim. So here I was, continuing onto painting instead of drawing, completely on accident but also understandably so. With the hundreds and hundreds of years of history to influence me and to put my work into perspective, painting would challenge and motivate me. I ended up doing this work for a reason, I just had to accept it and get to work.

Still inspired by the recent election, I started researching women's reactions to Trump's candidacy with the sexist comments he's made and the lack of action made against him concerning those statements. There were rallies and protests everywhere, which I had heard about on the news. Nothing could have prepared me to see what extent these women went and how many countries across the world they reached. Two women in New York protested on the morning of Election Day, rushing into a polling station and taking off their shirts with messages written across their bodies (newsweek.) One woman had the words "Trump Grab Your Balls" written on her chest and stomach while chanting "Out of our polls!" (newsweek.) Unfortunately, their protest was short lived, a mere 30 seconds, before they were arrested with charges pending (newsweek.) There were plenty of instances where brave protesters risked being attacked (and sometimes even risked their very lives) by going to Trump rallies to have their voices heard. One instance I found was of a black woman by the name of Kashiya Nwanguma, who attended a Trump rally in Louisville Kentucky with two signs depicting the candidate's head on a pig's body (nytimes.) "The moment that Ms. Nwanguma, 21, held up her

signs, Trump supporters ripped them away and began shoving her, screaming racial slurs and calling her 'leftist scum,' she said in an interview" (nytimes.) Fortunately she was not harmed, but that can't be said for countless others, such as Rakeem Jones who was punched in the face by a Trump supporter while being escorted from the rally (nytimes.) And then of course, there was a Women's March on Washington that was organized that turned into a worldwide call to action. The international protest took place the day after Trump's inauguration day and reached all 50 states as well as 32 different countries (usatoday.) The numbers in the march in the States alone ended up somewhere between 3 and 4 million according to Fortune. "The report, first picked up in Yahoo News, puts the low-end estimate of total marchers at 3,336,865 and the high-end at 4,633,725. The total population of the U.S. was 324,421,240 according to the U.S. Census Population Clock as of noon on Monday January 23, 2017" (fortune.) According to The Atlantic, this was the largest protest ever in the history of the country.

With all this wonderful activism taking place by people from all walks of life, it gave me plenty of ideas and references to use for my artwork. Since sexual violence against women is one of the highest priorities in women rights movements, I felt that making art concerning the protests was valid for my thesis and show. I got to work right away on a large piece of paper roughly 4'x8', surrounded with images of Baselitz's work for inspiration and images of the brave women who protested as my muses and subjects. My colors became much more vivid and my figures were now a ghostly white instead of a putrid yellow. The figures faces were obscured and the illusion of space within the picture plane relied almost entirely on the hierarchy of the figures. The women looked grotesque and monstrous, commanding attention in any room. Initially I had written some phrases on their chests and signs like those that were in the images,

but eventually I worked over top of them deciding it was too literal. I wanted my pieces to be able to speak on their own, but sometimes text isn't necessary. I want the viewers to have a chance to imagine the scenario themselves and what the subjects are saying, and not put words in their heads that immediately categorize my work.



I received a lot of wonderful feedback on my newfound direction and motivation to keep going, so I decided to do another protest piece. The image I used for this piece was from another topless protest concerning sexual violence. One woman is embraced by a few of her fellow protestors; perhaps she knew them, perhaps not. It was such an emotional and powerful image on its own, but I decided to recreate it making the underlying message more visible with how it was painted. I mimicked the previous piece's aura with both color and brushstroke width. This piece however, ended up looking too planned when compared to the previous ones. While some elements of the figures are nicely visualized and the overall content was good, there was something that made this one seem less interesting.



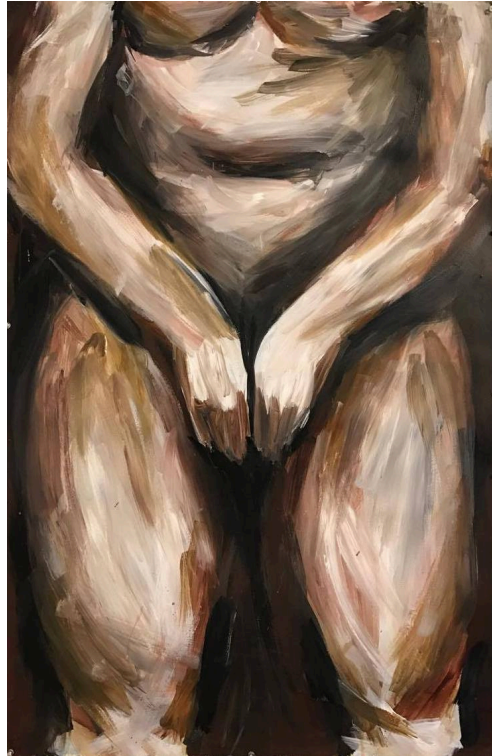
However, I knew there was something I could do to make this one better. All I needed was a break from this one to rethink how to approach it. This “break” ended up lasting about two months, but when I came back to it I knew exactly what I had to do. Keeping in mind the criticisms I received on it previously, I reworked the piece with a brand new color palette, two different sized brushes, and a whole new energy level. I figured out what I disliked about it was how the image was more reminiscent of the holocaust and WWII painting I was inspired by, and I decided that the bodies needed to be less ghostly. I also realized I exercised a lot of control over the piece and almost smothered it like I had with previous pieces. So I cut loose, letting a lot of my brushstrokes become subconscious and fully exerting myself until I couldn’t any longer. That’s how I knew it was done.



With my newly discovered palette, method of working, and excitement about making important artwork again after my break, I found new life in my work. I could appreciate moments within the paintings as well as the work as a whole. Reworking the last piece was what I really needed to assess how to continue this series I had begun, and soon all the things I needed to say would manifest itself as a composition in my mind before I even knew what was happening. I became a machine, but for now it wasn't a dreary scenario. For now, it was good for me, and it started to improve my mental state for the first time in almost an entire academic year. All I needed to do was incorporate the scenarios I had personally experienced along with the scenarios that other survivors had experienced. That way, I could remain detached enough from the subject matter so that making the work didn't put as much of a strain on my mental capabilities. Fortunately, some of my closest friends were there for me as well. They would oftentimes offer to accompany me to the studio to work, so that I wouldn't be by myself. If I started to become too overwhelmed by the work, they were there to calm me. They remained a steadfast support system for me, and they really helped me accomplish all that I was able to.

The next piece I worked on dealt with yet another aspect of life after a sexual assault: self-image. I touch on this earlier in the paper, because I know I personally felt a dramatic nosedive concerning how I felt about myself. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror the same way. Before the attack, I was much more religious and valued the concept of virginity to a fairly high degree. So once my attacker took that away from me, I felt utterly disgusting and irredeemable. I remember still feeling that same pain inside myself each time I relived my

assault in my mind. I would clutch what hurt to alleviate the discomfort and to reassure myself that the pain was only my mind playing tricks on me, thus bringing me to create this painting.



This piece was pretty controlled as far as the shading and the composition goes, but I felt as if it were necessary for this concept. My self-image at this point in my life was extremely delicate and soft, thus why I stylistically chose to paint the figure in this way. I also added more moments of warmth, using the stark white only as highlights on the skin. The dramatic shadows also appear to disconnect the figures appendages from one another, leaving this body held together not by its physical qualities but something else entirely. At any moment, it could simply fall apart.

My next piece was more difficult. I noticed that all of pieces up to this point had been about the after math of sexual violence, but none actually depicting scenes of assault and harassment taking place. For my show to accomplish what I wanted it to, I knew this was

something I would have to address. For my inspiration for this painting, I watched several videos directed by David Schwimmer and Sigal Avin about sexual harassment in several different scenarios mostly involving the workplace. He and Avin created this campaign called “#ThatsHarrassment” for April, which is National Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month. In an interview on The View, Schwimmer explained why he thought making these films right now was a good idea. “Sigal Avin wrote and directed six short films [concerning sexual violence]. Originally, she had made five of these in Israel and sent me the link to them. She asked ‘what do you think about making them here in the States?’ I was so disturbed by them and also really admired the quality of the acting, the writing, and the direction that I thought this is the moment to make these. I thought with the current climate right now in this country, it feels like women and their advocates are fighting for basic human and civil rights, and Sigal and I thought we needed to explicitly state that sexual harassment and sexual assault is not permissible and to also to give a face to it. Because everyone’s seen the guy jumping out of the bushes, we’ve seen a lot of sexual violence in the media, but we haven’t seen this particular kind of gray area.” When asked about whether Schwimmer believed if men always knew what sexual harassment is, he stated “I would say about half of them are [aware] and half of them aren’t. I really believe those who have been convicted or those who have paid people off are aware. That’s why I hope men see these films as well so that they can learn [what is and isn’t] appropriate behavior. I think that most women are at least aware of this issue, but I think the films will also be a revelation for [them].” While I personally believe his estimation is a bit skewed, I really do think that there are men and women alike out there that don’t really know

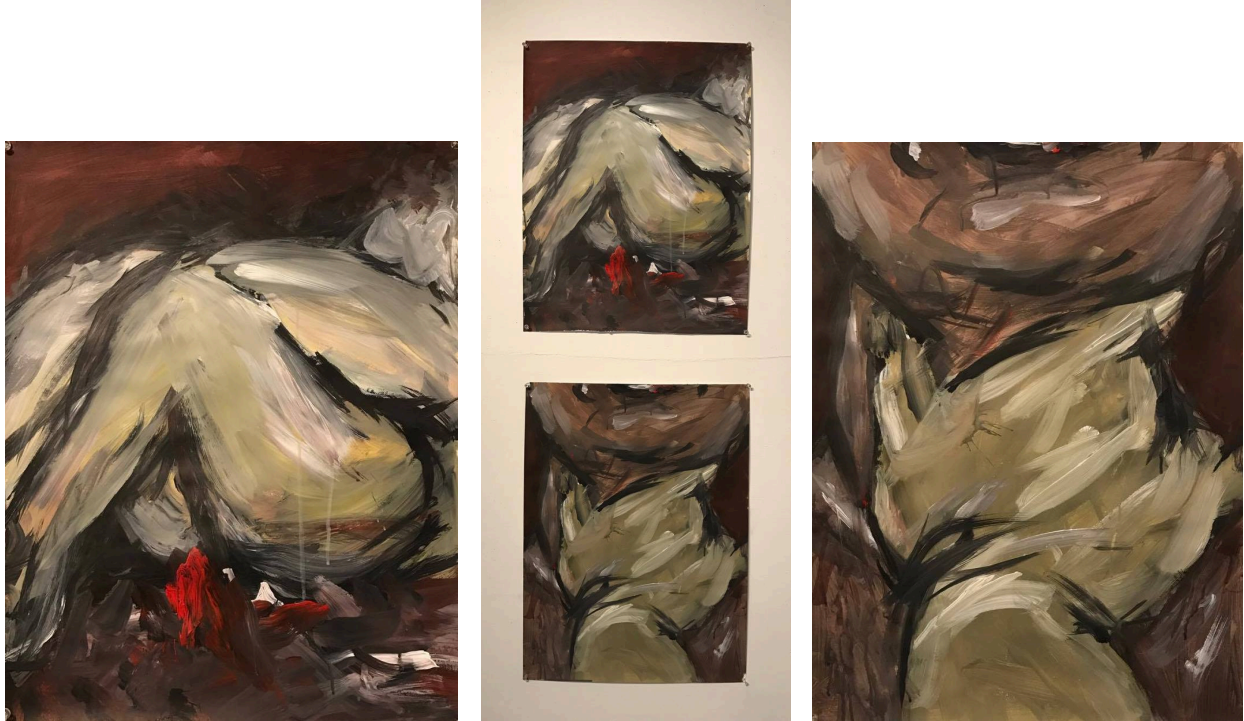
where to draw the line. So with that interview and those awesomely directed videos in mind, I painted this piece.



The specific video I had in mind while painting this was the one entitled “The Boss”. To summarize, a male boss in a business setting calls his assistant to meet with him alone in a office and precedes to forcibly kiss her to show his gratification with how well she’s been performing in her workplace. I decided to push that idea further and make it more visceral to look at, but to also bring to light some things that are happening inside the piece. One can see that neither figures are clothed, which is intended to mean that their actions before this were becoming rather intimate. However, the figure on the right changed their mind after they were both already undressed. It has been stated before, but I’ll state it again, “Once you have said yes, you can change your mind. No matter how no is communicated, it must be respected” (Humboldt.) That is what I wanted to give to viewers to think about with this piece.

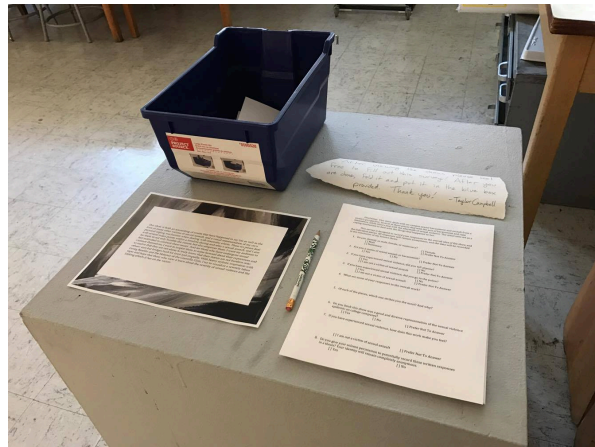
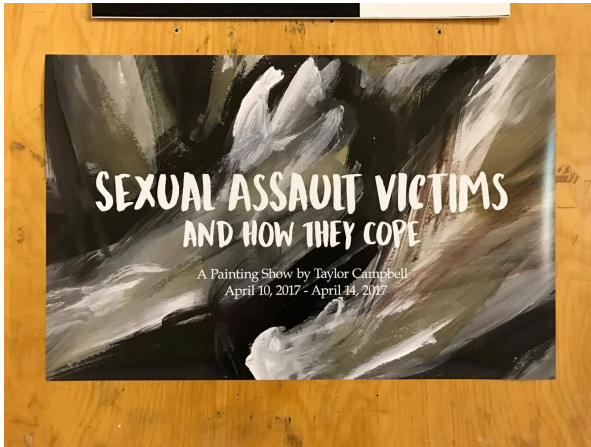
For my next and final pieces, I decided to create a diptych. These were the two that I knew would be hardest for me, because it was time that I created pieces about the rape itself. Displayed one on top of the other, I attempted to illustrate a two-step narrative. The piece on top depicts a rape with the attacker on top of the victim in a slightly abstracted viewpoint. It's main focus is the blood that's pooling at the bottom of the victim, portrayed with a vivid, striking red stroke. Neither of the faces are visible and therefore remain anonymous to the viewer, and I as the artist and the victim can remain detached enough from the piece as to not spiral myself downward again. I will admit though, that I found talking about this piece just now was extremely difficult. Making myself explain and relive this moment is much harder when I'm forced to put words to it.

The second piece shows an attacker's hand on the throat of a victim. I intended this piece to remain open-ended, so that the viewer could take this as the attacker literally choking and silencing the victim. Or it could be taken as a figurative silence, symbolizing how most victims feel too afraid to talk about what they've gone through. I painted the attacker's hand a gross, decayed color compared to the victim to imply that the victim shouldn't be the one to feel awful and lifeless, but the attacker should. Just to be absolutely clear here, I say "shouldn't" here to comment on the state of our society and how it views rape victims as those who are at fault; not because I don't believe the victim should be allowed to grieve. Because of the way I chose to display these two pieces, I believe it will be fairly easy to read as two parts to a story, and I feel as if it does more justice to the commentary rather than try to put those two ideas into one painting.



On Monday, April 10th I installed my show in room 315 in Ball Hall. It was up for display during classroom hours every day of the week until Friday, April 14th. Since I knew I wouldn't be able to stay up in the room to record people's responses myself, I provided an anonymous survey for those who felt like sharing their feeling about the show. I included information about my thesis and what it was for, what I would be taking from these surveys, and of course letting those who fill them out know how much I appreciate their responses. I set the surveys on a podium in from of the door so they knew that the audience couldn't miss them, along with my artist statement for them to read over to get a general idea of what the show was all about and what I aimed to accomplish with my work. I also made a poster that I put on the door to the gallery so people could find the space easily and know when it would be up and who the artist was. I also wanted to make sure the audience knew exactly what they were about to see when they walked in the gallery. I realize that not everyone is comfortable seeing images like these; I

know at times right after my assault I couldn't handle it. So, the poster acted as a warning to those not capable of being exposed to this sort of work as well.



There were several people who went through and viewed the show, and of those dozens of people there were seventeen who filled out the surveys provided. The questions listed included gender identity, whether the survey taker had been assaulted and if they told

the police or close friends and family, and how the work spoke to them. I was sure to include a place where they could specifically identify if I could use their answers in my thesis, and all seventeen responses were compliant.

Of the sample of people, five out of seventeen people openly admitted to being sexually assaulted and two preferred not to answer. Two of the five survivors identified as female, two as nonbinary, and one as male. Their written responses were somber to say the least. When asked about their responses to the overall work, one individual described it as a “good portrayal of anxiety”, which was an angle I hadn’t considered. Another said the work made them “cringe because it brings up sensitive topics, but [they] feel it’s needed because [sexual violence] shouldn’t be ignored.” One person even went so far as to say that the work was “beautifully envisioned” and that they were “very moved by the rawness/violence juxtapositioned with tenderness/compassion. It is a visual voice to what is mostly unspeakable.” On the other end of the spectrum, there was a male participant who said that the work “feels expressive and violent which portrays sexual assault well” but he “personally can’t identify with the work because [his] own experience was drastically different.” Reading some of these responses made me realize that my work definitely could have been more inclusive to different situations of sexual assault and harassment. I definitely know something I could have done differently would be addressing sexual violence towards men and female assaulters (Campbell.)

I found that some of the viewers who said they hadn’t experienced sexual violence had a harder time understanding the pieces, which I found to be completely plausible. One response concerning this was “while I understand what most of the pieces show, I feel that the

style in which the medium is applied [...] does not help convey meaning. For instance, I don't know what the third [painting] (pictured on page 25) shows. I know what the others are, but I don't fully understand what is being said." What I got from this answer was that the viewer desired something more representational and less stylistic. The person goes on to say "because of the way the paint is applied, the pieces lost clarity and for me, lose meaning." All in all, this could just be a personal preference to the participant, but I definitely agree that some images could have been more clearly defined with application of different brush sizes and a better execution of dimensionality (Campbell.)

Another non-victimized participant expressed a sigh of relief and said that they were "glad the subject [had] been brought up and finally addressed in artwork," but "some of the pieces could use a little more compositional thought to maximize an emotional response from the viewer." They went on to answer question number six on the survey "Do you think this show was a good and diverse representation of the sexual violence epidemic on college campuses?" with "No". Going back to the fact that I had realized that I hadn't included male victim and female assaulters, I completely agreed with the statement. The limited color palette painted me into a corner as well, especially when it came to clearly representing peoples of difference races. I had given that idea some serious consideration, and I had made some intentional decisions in a few of my pieces to make the skins tones darker. However, it might not have been as present to my viewers as I had thought. It was definitely another great criticism that I enjoyed reading (Campbell.)

Overall, I was just so excited and honored by the amount of people who were touched by the work. Some other participants described the works as "powerful", "dark", "moving", and

“the product of strong emotion”. Some of my favorite and most inspiring responses to the show was that it made one person “think how much worse it could have been [for them] without a supportive person [there for them.]” I was happy to make at least one viewer realize how important it is to have and surround yourself with supportive individuals in your life. Dealing with my own experience of sexual violence and coming to terms with the fact that I didn’t have to carry this weight by myself was a huge step for me in overcoming a lot of emotional turmoil, and I’m so grateful to have helped someone else in that same way (Campbell.)

Another wonderful response I got was that the participant “[experienced] a range of thoughts and emotions. [They felt] shock, outrage, and despair that sexual assault [even] occurs, and [the] exhibit brings it ‘close to home’ meaning that it is very real. [They were] also impressed by the courage of the artist and inspired by her capacity to transform her feelings into creative expression.” Words could not express how proud I was to have moved this viewer. Having such a profound effect on someone with your creative outlet concerning such intimate subject matter is something I always strive for in my work, and actually hearing that it has achieved that puts such a powerful feeling inside my heart; it’s almost indescribable (Campbell.)

Finally, the last response that really stuck out with me was that a viewer was “thankful that the artist was so brave to share her heart and gift to produce this [work]. It is reassuring and inspiring!” To know that my art has reassured, inspired, and validated someone’s experiences in life is all that I could ever ask for. It’s something I set out to accomplish with this exhibition, and to know that someone walked away feeling better about knowing they aren’t alone in their struggle is such an incredible feeling. All of the responses I recorded are some that I will take with me for the rest of my artistic career, and I am so thankful to have been able

to have this opportunity to communicate my story and my mission to my peers in a way that made the most sense for me (Campbell.)

What I learned from this experience couldn't possibly compare to any library book or online search engine result. Among all the wonderful and heartbreaking things I learned about those around me, I also had the fortune to learn a lot about myself while researching and making this work. Through this process, I learned that as much as I hate to have to be a part of a sad statistic of sexual assault victims across our country, my place within this community of survivors is validated. I am reminded that I am surrounded by equally struggling and strong individuals that are dealing with similar internal battles every day just like I am. I am also reassured that there are some powerful and empathetic allies around me that might not have experienced what I've been through, but are able to share the burden with me regardless. Through this entire process, I have come to recognize the web of incredible people around me and that I and all the sexual assault survivors around me are loved and supported beyond comprehension. One day, I hope to revisit this work and expand it to include something that every survivor can relate to and identify with. I want to let people know that they have someone to count on to give their experiences validation and visual representation when they are feeling isolated and unheard, and I plan on moving forward with that mission statement always in the back of my mind.

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