

Loners:

Working from a Pattern

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By

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Loners: Working from a Pattern

Back in the 1980's, in the early days of Much Music, I used to spend many days in front of the television watching my idol, Madonna. In fact, the first tape I received was Madonna's first album, *Madonna Madonna*. I would spend long afternoons singing along with Much Music and doing re-enactments. I would mimic Madonna's dance moves and try to dress like her. For my tenth birthday my mother let me have a punk rock birthday party. I dressed like Madonna/Cindy Lauper and my mother sprayed my hair neon pink, crimped it and put it up into a sideways ponytail. I wanted to be like Madonna, but I had trouble understanding her *like a virgin* music video. It didn't make any sense to me, but I danced anyway, singing *like a virgin* at the top of my lungs. Things changed when I saw my first Weird Al Music video, *like a surgeon*, which was a parody of Madonna's *like a virgin* video.



Figure 1 - Punk Rock Birthday Party (Shanell B. Papp figure on the left), 1988.



Figure 2 - Madonna, *Like a virgin* (music video), 1985.



Figure 3 - Weird Al Yankovic, *Like a Surgeon* (music video), 1985.

At first, I was shocked and I thought Weird Al just didn't get it. But the more I thought about how *like a virgin* didn't make sense, the more I thought that *like a surgeon* made more sense. Eventually Weird Al became my new idol and a beacon of sanity. At ten years old I remember thinking that Weird Al really wasn't that weird, but if he was weird, I wanted to be weird too. Weird Al's work subverted expectations. Through Weird Al, I recognized the usefulness of becoming an independent thinker. My early fascination with Weird Al began a lifelong interest in groups and activities that diverged from the mainstream.

During the time prior to entering art school I continued to be interested in weirdos, outsiders, eccentrics and dissenters. I was involved in knitting and crocheting, self publication, underground comic books and the punk/metal/electronic music scenes. I was attracted to these things because they encouraged me to think for myself and make things, even if I didn't have the money or background education. My interests encouraged me to think unconventionally, and reinforced the idea that it was important to think and question everything, even if it meant being a social pariah. I was a pariah, so I created my own world to live in and did not care about the things that did not typically fit together; I was creating my own order. In putting together my M.F.A. thesis exhibition, *Loners*, I drew on my background interests in outsiders and people who don't quite fit in.

I grew up in Southern Alberta, in a large family pieced together through divorces, deaths and marriages. Currently, I have one brother, two sisters, one half-sister, one step-sister, three step-brothers, four fathers and three mothers. When my mother divorced my father in 1982, she was left with four children under the age of six to care for. My estranged father, who is a Mormon, had a new family within a few years and filed for bankruptcy several times over, thus, he never paid much child support and, even worse, he never came to visit despite living in the same small city. My mother would frequently rely on my grandmother for support. My grandmother ran a flea market, in which I would spend my days digging through old magazines, watching old films, playing old records or eight-tracks, building forts, and wearing vintage clothing. Throughout the course of the day, people would come and drop off useful things they no longer needed and other times they would purchase items.



Figure 4 – My grandmother’s flea market, Fort Macleod, Alberta, 2008.



Figure 5 - My grandmother’s flea market, Fort Macleod, Alberta, 2008.

During my days in the flea market, I met many people through their discarded objects. I was very interested in what people would cast off -- items that were no longer fashionable, but functional, and I became interested in the history and design of household items. Because I was in my grandmother’s store in southern Alberta, I didn’t develop much experience with fine art, but I was very familiar with the art in flea markets, second-hand stores and auctions. I became an aficionado of kitschy velvet paintings, pressed flowers, tooled leather, collector dolls and pottery projects. I was educated in junk, repurposing and making do. My grandmother’s flea market was a combination of a supply house for materials and a museum of outdated and used items. Her store was a cabinet of curiosities of the discarded objects of the prairies. Her store had its own taxonomical system of ordering, and she had her own acquisitions policy: clear ideas of what she would include or exclude and how she would organize and display these items.

Later on when I studied art in university, I learned of the work of Marcel Duchamp, a brave, innovative and risk-taking artist of the early twentieth century and his most infamous piece, *Fountain*, which is a simple repositioning of an everyday object to enhance and change its meaning. In this case, a urinal is changed into a drinking bowl, by simply changing the orientation of the object and adding text. Like Duchamp, I am always considering the function and the narrative of the objects and materials I use. I often use materials because they have qualities that add to the specific meaning of the work. I have used crochet because of its structural cell-by-cell, stitch-by-stitch

construction; felt, because of it being made under heat and pressure; and I have used pantyhose because of its strong references to the body.



Figure 6 - Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917.

Figure 7 - Marcel Duchamp, *Box in a Suitcase*, 1938-1942.

Duchamp's piece, *box in a suitcase*, is a mini-museum made by Duchamp to show a miniature version of his collected works. I find the work interesting in that it questions the authority and systems of collecting institutions and allowed the artist to create his own taxonomical order, which is very similar to how my grandmother controlled the taxonomical structure of her flea market. In my ongoing work, *Lab*, I am also interested in creating my own taxonomical structures to organize my understanding of the human body. I carefully constructed each organ stitch by stitch to resemble human organs clearly in a medium I know well, to get an idea of how a stomach or a heart is built. Crochet is not the typical medium for anatomical replicas, but I felt I could potentially come to some sort of understanding about my own organs and anatomy by making the organs and fitting them into my understanding of the world. I understood crochet and how to build things, but I didn't know the human body, so I built this work out of a strong desire to understand the body. I was interested in creating my own taxonomical structure for understanding the body.



Figure 8 - Shanell B. Papp, *Lab #3*, 2007.

My grandmother was a collection agent for cultural artifacts, but she wasn't the only one in my immediate family who was a collector, curator or artist. My mother sewed Hallowe'en costumes, made dolls out of her used pantyhose and sold her wares at the local farmers' market. My uncle is a mechanic and airbrush artist who is covered in tattoos. Many people with independent creative urges surrounded me, and I was exposed to media that were not the typical fine art media and techniques. This exposure gave me the belief that collection, curatorial and artistic urges are not solely the domain of those with the ability to financially support their interests. Collection, curatorial and artistic practices can be the domain of anyone.

American artist Edward Keinholz specialized in repurposing everyday materials to create narratives; he is particularly attracted to making work that used common materials to construct

environments, situations and people who are outside of the mainstream. His explorations take us to parallel places that are not completely accepted as part of dominant culture: mental asylums, boudoirs of prostitutes, and the apartments of shut-ins.



Figure 9 - Edward Keinholz, *State Hospital*, 1966.



Figure 10 - Edward Keinholz, *Roxy*, 1961-1962.

In my work, I am also attracted to people who do not fit in within the mainstream. Like Keinholz, I use life-size figures and materials that are foreign, fragile and forgettable. In my piece, *The Dream is Dead*, I made a horse out of repurposed garbage bags. In this work, I wanted to make a statement about how horses are no longer useful animals. Not so long ago, horses were important for the survival of people living on the Great Plains; now they are used for leisure and pleasure. I constructed my horse out of garbage bags which are used for refuse, but I have also used garbage bags as travel cases for my belongings for moving. I think of garbage bags as a material used for forgetting, transportation and supporting a transient life style.



Figure 11 Shanell B. Papp, *The Dream is Dead*, 2010.

Michel Foucault speaks of outlying spaces or places where transients exist as heterotopic spaces. Foucault defines heterotopias as real places which are counter-sites, which are effectively utopias that are reflections, contentions and inverted spaces of mainstream and public spaces. They are offshoots of lived public experience, because heterotopias are absolutely different and created as a reaction to the limited options and acceptance in the public sphere. (Foucault 1967)

Like Keinholz and me, Foucault is interested in divergent spaces and experiences, and particularly how these spaces are becoming more isolated and viewed as deviant or odd:

But these heterotopias of crisis are disappearing today and are being replaced, I believe, by what we might call heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behaviour is

deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons. (Foucault 1967)

When I was a child my mother struggled to make ends meet and we moved frequently. I was often attending new schools in different cities, towns and farm communities. I went to two or three new schools per year from grade five to ten. At first, I was interested in meeting new people, but I soon became adept at adapting to the patterns of the new school and purposely avoiding being part of the pattern of cliques and groups. I thought of myself as an amateur sociologist, observing at each school which kids were popular, unpopular, nerds or outcasts. It was never really important for me to feel that I belonged because I knew we would be moving soon, so I started to be an observer.

I lived in a heterotopia of deviation, and the results can be seen in my work in that I was interested in talking about a shell that I have built to keep people at a distance, through glibness and enough superficial charm to allow me to conduct myself on a daily basis, but to not over-extend myself or become emotionally involved. I think I have been working on an invisible and distant me for years. I wanted to become a ghost; I wanted to participate in life like someone who is watching a movie, like a spectre watching the world from a safe distance.



Figure 12 - Shanell B. Papp, *Ghost*, 2010.

French surrealist artist, Rene Magritte, expresses a similar lack of connection with other people in his works. It is unclear whether his draped figures are hiding their identity for their individual sense of security or if they are protecting others from the horror of their true selves. They clearly lack a connection that I think they are longing for and perhaps are incapable of reciprocating. My work, *Ghost*, is similar in feeling to Magritte's work in that I designed it to combine my need to protect myself from others and to protect them from my flaws and my desire to be invisible or unnoticed.



Figure 13 - Rene Magritte, *The Invention of Life*, 1928.



Figure 14 - Rene Magritte, *The Lovers*, 1928.

This need to protect and separate oneself for healing is also present in the work of German artist Joseph Beuys, who often uses everyday materials imbued with a mythology meant to heal his country after the Second World War. Beuys was a pilot stationed in the Crimea during WWII and was shot down; he was found barely alive by Tartars who, according to legend or myth, wrapped Beuys in fat and felt in order to bandage and heal him. Joseph Beuys's work was about survival, healing, protection and vulnerability. In my work, *Pressure Suit*, I have the similar concerns as Joseph Beuys in that I wanted to create a buffer, filter, an exoskeleton to shield and protect the wearer from external pressures. The white knit pieces of *Pressure Suit* for the hands and face are handknit and carefully constructed to cover the face and hands for protection. They should be thought of as elements created by time and human effort for protection, or even as elements that

could possibly be growing from the body and as a visual representation of fortifying one's defences. The felt material and knit elements are like a psychic blister or callous built up over years of annoyance and agitation.



Figure 15 - Joseph Beuys, *The Pack*, 1969.



Figure 16 - Joseph Beuys, *Felt Suit*, 1970.



Figure 17 - Shanell B. Papp, *Pressure Suit*, 2009.

When I was twelve, I received my first camera for Christmas. I was hoping it would be a movie camera, but I received a 35mm film still camera instead. I was interested in creating a narrative of surveillance and mystery like in my favourite childhood show, *Unsolved Mysteries*, and so with my first few rolls of film I took pictures of the views from the windows of our house. I saw no point in going outside unless I needed to take a photo of something out of place, like an unfamiliar car or a dog with a missing limb. When my mother found out I was “wasting” the film, she wouldn’t take my pictures to be developed as she saw my “photos of evidence” as pointless and wasteful. I think she was hoping I would do some conventional pictures of my family and friends.

The photographs of French photographer, Eugene Atget, are also distant and removed like “evidence” photos. He documented the streets of Paris at the turn of the last century. He chose to document abandoned streets with only the occasional person present: the homeless, the destitute and the derelict. He took pictures of prostitutes, street peddlers and performers: people who are always visible on the streets, but also invisible, like the architecture.



Figure 18 - Eugene Atget, *Rue des Ursins*, 1923.

Figure 19 - Eugene Atget, *Prostitute*, 1920's.

The American documentary photographer, Arthur Felling (better known by his nickname Weegee), also photographed life in the street and the violence that happens when people become

desperate in close confines. In contrast to Atget, Weegee documented the tensions that exist between individuals, crime scenes and other negative aspects of urban life. Weegee provides some insight into what may drive someone into removing him- or herself from society. In Weegee's world, human beings are unpredictable and dangerous. Both Atget and Weegee provided me with inspiration for my interest in protecting and separating myself from the chaos of living with other people.



Figure 20 - Weegee, *The Critic*, 1943.



Figure 21 - Weegee, *Untitled*, 1940's.



Figure 22 Shanell B. Papp, *Blood Pools*, 2009.

I addressed this anxiety about potential violence through my artwork in the piece, *Blood Pools*. I wanted to make a work that could help me deny the tension, desperation and aggression I see in people. I wanted to make pillows for the victims of head wounds, so that I could continue to deny that it is possible for anyone to resort to such desperate violence.

An interest in the lives of outsiders is also prominent in the work of Lethbridge artist, David Hoffos. He uses scale to unsettle a viewer's relationship to his figures. His work is either the size of a small television recessed into the gallery wall or life-sized, hologram-like projections of mysterious figures. When encountering his work, one is drawn to the intimate television-sized works showing a scene of someone alone or a small group of people, but one eventually realizes that one is being watched by a figure in the corner, while one is watching the screen. This unsettled feeling turns to horror only when you realize that the person you were convinced was real turns out to be a ghostly apparition. Hoffos's work has strong references to storytelling techniques of television and film, due

to the choice of media of television and projections. His works show individuals alone and creates a narrative around this solitude: were they abandoned or are they escaping or choosing to be alone?



Figure 23 - David Hoffos, *Scene from the Dream House*, 2009.

Figure 24 - David Hoffos, *Absinthe Bar*, 2007.

In my work, I want to create the same feeling of loneliness as Hoffos, Atget and Weegee. I also want to create a feeling of empathy with the characters. I want the viewers to identify their own desires for escape and control and to consider that the thought of truly separating oneself from society is a dark wish, since people need to be in groups for survival and for sanity. In my video works, *Disappearance part 1 and 2*, I indulge in my desires to disappear as a way to be in complete control. In *Disappearance part 1*, the figure walking explores a winter landscape while wearing the *Pressure Suit*; this figure is stalked by an unknown entity that erases the footsteps and the existence of the figure. In *Disappearance part 2*, the viewer sees the world from the point of view of the figure wandering around alone in a winter landscape; this was shot in super-eight film stock to evoke a feeling of nostalgia, the past and memories.



Figure 25 - Shanell B. Papp, *Disappearance part 1*, 2009-2010.

Figure 26 - Shanell B. Papp, *Disappearance part 2*, 2009-2010.

Two more artists who address the sense of isolation and potential violence, but through the medium of textiles, are British artists Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin. I first encountered their work in 2005 on a trip to Vancouver. Lucas's work, *Bunny*, was on exhibit in the show called "Body: New Art from the UK", at the Vancouver Art Gallery. *Bunny* is pantyhose stuffed with polyfil and attached to an ordinary office chair. Emin's piece, *Some things Wrong*, portrayed an embroidered figure of a woman on a blanket with coins entering or escaping from her vagina like some kind of bizarre biological slot machine. I had never seen anything like Lucas's or Emin's work. Their work was shocking and confrontational and seemed to be about the vulnerability of sexuality, biological relationships to money and the female body in the workplace. Materially they were also concerned with repurposing and "low-brow art" techniques. According to Sue Lavitt, "The principal focus for all the artists is the human body, both as a powerful site of social rupture and dissent and as a subject of complex social interactions. Emerging in the 1990s, the aggressive, in-your-face attitude of these artists united the forces of British youth culture, mass marketing and high art." (Lavitt 2005)



Figure 27 - Sarah Lucas, *Bunny get Snookered*, 1997.



Figure 28 - Tracey Emin, *Somethings Wrong*, 2002.

Lucas and Emin's work reminded me of the crafts my mother made from her used panty hose of pickled bums and kitchen witches (see images below). My mother's friends would come over for coffee and laugh about the pickled bums, but I just thought they were dirty and they made no sense to me. Why would anyone want to eat a pickled bum made of panty hose? It took me until I was well into my twenties to realize that pickled bums meant drunk bums. As in Lucas's and Emin's work, there was a dark and possibly dangerous subtext to this humour.



Figure 29 - Unknown artist from the internet, *Pickled Bums*.



Figure 30 - Unknown artist from the internet, *Kitchen Witches*.

In my work, I am also interested in having these multiple layers of meaning. I think my work is successful when it can reach many different people. Sometimes this happens through a layer of strange humour. The purpose of the work is not humour first, but somehow the humour finds its way in when one talks about the body. In the case of my undergraduate work, *Body*, I originally started with the idea of dissecting identities. I then decided to replicate myself to look at my identity. I made a body that looked like me, and many saw it as a humorous piece, which was the opposite of how I felt about it. I think it was dark, because I just ended up making myself as a corpse or life-sized doll.



Figure 31 - Shanell B. Papp, *Body*, 2005.

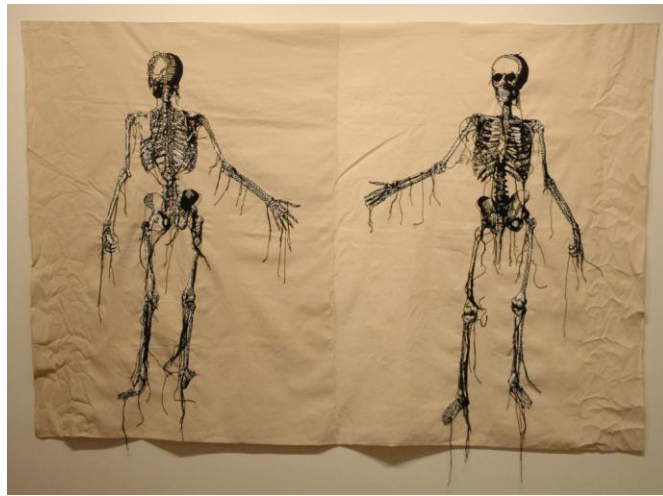


Figure 32 - Shanell B. Papp, *Bonebook*, 2007.

I make my bodies from remnant materials and textiles, but I tend to focus on obsessively working with the materials. In *Bonebook*, I was very interested in making a life-sized book. I could have easily drawn the skeletons onto the canvas, but I wanted to embroider them, as the labour seemed important to the outcome of the work. I was also interested in thinking about the origin of the word “surgery”, which means “hand work” in latin. With this work, I was interested in vulnerability, healing, medical taxonomies and death.

In the two previous works, *Body* and *Bonebook*, I was thinking about vulnerability, while in my recent work, *Anxiety*, I was more interested in protection. This work is also about the obsessive repetition of the pins as thoughts or moments of building up a line of defence. I wanted to build

something like a crystal or a mountain, something that grows on its own without human involvement. I wanted to make a visual representation of how people slowly fortify and protect themselves over years, whether they want to distance themselves from others or not. The work is about becoming jaded, defensive and distant.



Figure 33 - Shanell B. Papp, *Anxiety*, 2010.

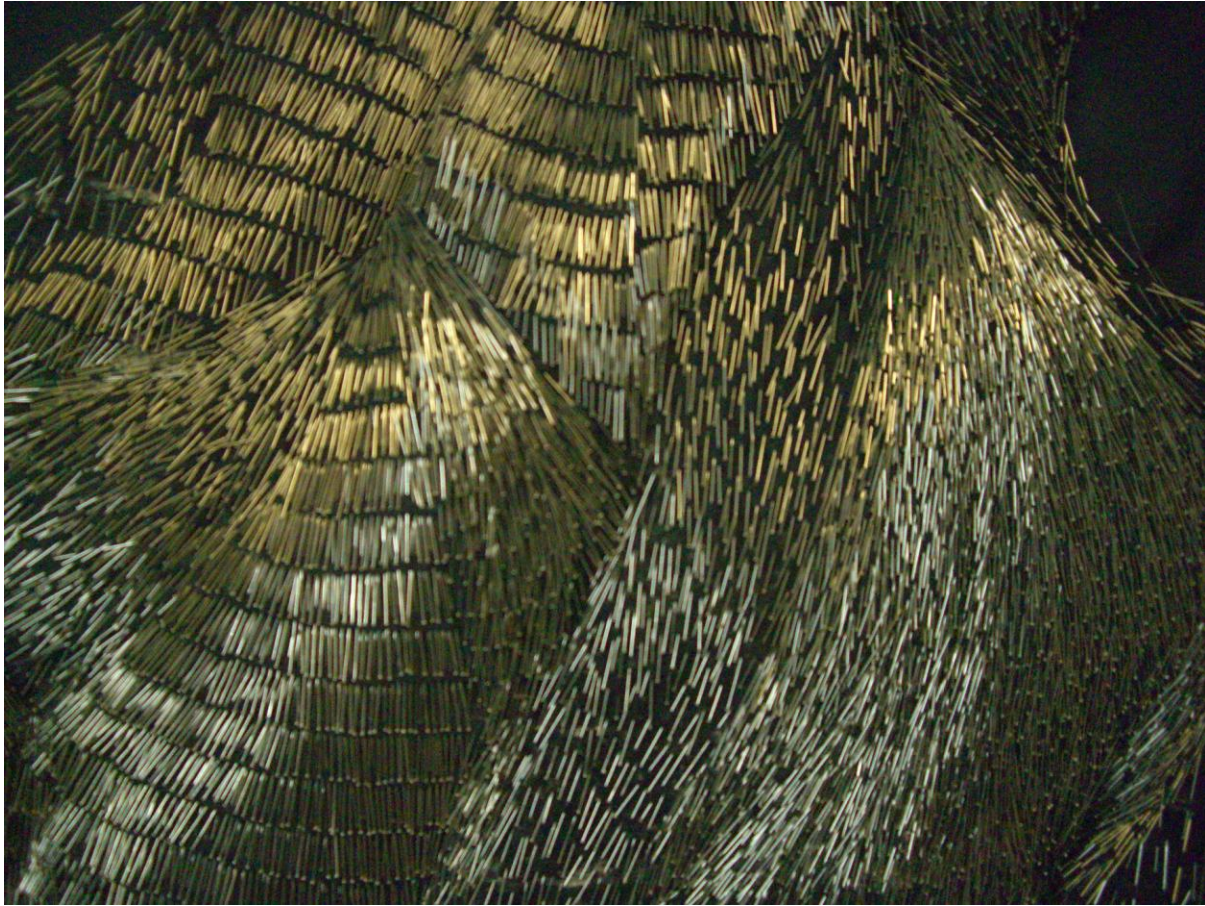


Figure 34 - Shanell B. Papp, *Anxiety (Detail)*, 2010.

Two other artists who use textiles in a similar way by repurposing materials and addressing taxonomical structures are American artist, Mike Kelley, and Canadian artist, Alyson Mitchell. Kelly works with found, discarded objects and the body. He uses the history of the particular objects to add meaning to his work. Like me, he is interested in ideas of difference and the homogenization of individuals.



Figure 35 Mike Kelley, *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, 1991.

Figure 36 - Mike Kelley, *Frankenstein*, 1989.



Figure 37 - Shanell B. Papp, *Lab #2*, 2007.

Allyson Mitchell constructs sasquatch women from discarded and used craft materials. In her work she is questioning the role and social acceptability of women's bodies by constructing female sasquatches who have never been represented. Mitchell's *Ladies Sasquatch*, like my figures, *Lab #2* and *Loners*, are new and unexpected bodies created from repurposed remnant materials.



Figure 38 - Allyson Mitchell, *Ladies Sasquatch*, 2005-2009.



Figure 39 Shanell B. Papp, *Loner #1*, 2010.



Figure 40 - Shanell B. Papp, *Loner #2*, 2010.



Figure 41 - Shanell B. Papp, *Loner #3*, 2010.

I never intended to go to university and it was not something I was expected to do. I began university with no expectations of what the experience was meant to be. It was a completely foreign

place and I felt like an outsider. I still have moments where I am shocked: how did an outsider like me manage to negotiate this foreign system? Nevertheless, university was surprisingly the perfect place for me. In an art department I realized I could design my own system, taxonomical structure and rules, as long as I was willing to explain my ideas.

My art work tends to float among several media, but mainly I am interested in textiles and video. When working with video, I tend to work within the rules of the medium, using cross fades to denote the passage of time, straight cuts to represent events that are happening simultaneously, black frames to rupture the visuals, and sound to give time to the viewer to think and not get caught up in the storytelling direction of conventional video. Video is known as a medium for telling stories and I find it interesting to interrupt this expectation, to break this pattern. Though I still want a story to exist, I don't want viewers to comfortably accept the story line; I want them to be aware that it is a constructed environment.

When working with textiles, I am in very familiar territory. Much of my work starts from my background in fabric, yarn and patterns. When constructing with textiles, one traditionally follows a pattern and structure to master the skills, which I did, learning from instructional books. I use my knowledge of the medium to disrupt expectations and play with the rules of construction. In my work, I purposely break with the rules of pattern-making and I only follow the structure in a limited fashion. I make my own structure within these rules. My work disrupts the expected outcomes of the materials as I adapt patterns and materials to question the rules. This extends into understanding the work itself as I question taxonomical structures and order. The breaking of patterns – literally, the patterns of textiles or conventions of video and film or, metaphorically, the mold of social structures and expectations – informs much of my work and has been the determining and driving force behind my urge to be an artist and achieve this MFA degree.

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