



# VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University  
VCU Scholars Compass

---

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

---

2021

## Straight through my heart

Raul A. Aguilar Canela  
*Student*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Graphic Design Commons](#), [Painting Commons](#), and the [Sculpture Commons](#)

© Raul A Aguilar Canela

---

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6561>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).

© Raul Aguilar Canela 2021  
All Rights Reserved

# *Straight through my heart*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at  
Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Raúl Aguilar Canela

Bachelor of Studio Arts, Concordia University 2014  
Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2021

Director: Hope Ginsburg  
Associate Professor, Painting + Printmaking Department

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia,  
May 2021

## Table of content

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgment .....	iii
Chapter 1. Heartbreak .....	1
Chapter 2. Affective Techniques .....	8
Chapter 3. Collaboration and Dialogue .....	21
Conclusion .....	24
Bibliography .....	27

## Abstract

*Straight through my heart* is an exhibition that explores the concept of *heartbreak* as a socio-political phenomenon. Through the affect of sadness the thesis analyses the way in which subjects are formed under cognitive capitalism. Paying particular interest to the collateral effects of neoliberal culture —hyper-stimulation, self-exploitation, competition, and obsession with productivity—and the pathologies they create —depression, anxiety, body aches, fatigue— this work shifts the burden of sadness from the individual to the community. By doing so it proposes *heartbreak* as a public feeling.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Marcela Borquez, Hanaa Safwat, Damien Ding, Ellen Hanson, Connor Stankard, Kelley-Ann Lindo, John Chae, Bryan Castro, Luis Vasquez, GM Keaton, Kyræ Dawaun, Sydney Finch, Seren Moran, Juliana Bustillo, Eleanor Thorp, Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo, Ekaterina Muromtseva, Hope Ginsburg, Holly Morrison, Hilary Wilder, Cara Benedetto, Peter Baldes, Noah Simblast, Julia Dann.

Thanks to my parents, Alina Canela García and Juan Antonio Aguilar Vasquez.

## Chapter 1. Heartbreak

For two years, I have focused my art practice on developing a body of work that uses painting to explore the idea of subject formation. Paying attention to the particular affect of sadness, I want to explore how the emotional self is constituted in the context of capitalism. My intention is to build a language in which we can talk about the contingent space of depression, anxiety, loneliness, disappointment, and fatigue, outside of the predominant understandings of medicine. By doing so, I am following a theoretical path that shifts the burden of sadness away from the individual and inquires how the organizing principles of capitalism create the conditions for sadness as a public feeling.

The contemporary language in which we talk about sadness finds its roots in psychoanalysis and psychiatry. For psychoanalysis, the sadness associated with depression is an abnormal phenomenon. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud recognizes two modalities in which the ego reacts towards losing a loved object.<sup>1</sup> Mourning for Freud is the appropriate reaction towards the pain inflicted by a loss. It is also temporary and apt for completion when the ego finally detaches its libido from the memories and expectations brought up by the loved object.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, melancholia is seen as abnormal, and even though the object of love is lost, a part of it inhabits the individual's mind. The libido adheres to this mind projection as it adhered in the past to the object of love.<sup>3</sup> The melancholic individual becomes incapable of moving on or finding new interests. Its libido remains hijacked and its self-esteem impoverished. Through the eyes of the melancholic character, the world around seems empty. Even though both of these postures recognize the inside/outside dichotomy of the self that is at the center of my notion of *heartbreak* —going as far as finding the origins for sadness in the rupture between the inner self and an outside force— they focus primarily on the

---

1 For Freud the loss object can be a person or an abstract idea.

2 Sigmund Freud, *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement* (New York : W.W. Norton, 1989), 245.

3 Freud, *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, 245.

individual as a faulty person in need of correction. Modern American psychiatry followed a similar avenue by incorporating a biological approach that centered the nature of sadness on the brain's biochemistry. Turning from melancholia to depression had the advantage of treating sadness as an illness and brought various solutions oscillating from therapy to medication.<sup>4</sup> Antidepressants, party drugs, and therapy became a fundamental part of western culture and a significant way in which we, as a society, deal with our emotions.

The approach that I am interested in, on the other hand, dissociates from these perspectives by bringing attention not to the individual alone but to the relationship between the individual's psyche and the environment in which it is nurtured. With the use of the word heartbreak —instead of depression or melancholia— I attempt to separate the sad affect from the clinical sphere and insert it into a conversation with the social. By doing so, the affective quality of sadness does not become a burden of individual character or pharmacological treatments but on the historical conditions surrounding and molding the subject. Coupled with this, heartbreak as a concept sits on a privileged position because it is a word that is already in circulation: it populates an innumerable amount of songs, novels, films, letters, phone calls, and texts. This is relevant not only because it develops in an increasingly more public world but also because it is a point that we find in common. In other words, heartbreak is already a public feeling. One that takes into consideration the relationship between the personal and the public, with the *heart* pointing toward us and the *break* pointing towards the outside.

The contemporary environment that I refer to as the outside —and stands in opposition to the self— is as complex as the array of emotional responses it produces and manages. Because the outside is all-encompassing, abstract, and to a certain degree invisible, I will try to reduce it to a number of its characteristics to analyze it. It is essential to mention that the world I am describing is, in most part, the world that I have known, which means middle-class North America. It is also important to recognize that most of what I consider part of this outside can be flagged under the umbrella term of neoliberalism or, in Franco Bifo Berardi's terminology, cognitive capitalism. For Bifo, cognitive capitalism is the most

---

<sup>4</sup> Thomas A. Ban, *From Melancholia to Depression: A History of Diagnosis and Treatment* (Argentina: International Network for the History of Neuropsychopharmacology, 2014), 30.



recent development stage in capitalists societies. It is characterized by the immaterial nature of its interactions, by the state of hyper-stimulation it incites, and by a competitive or exploitative atmosphere. To this definition, I would like to add Olivia Laing's notion of loneliness and surveillance and the model of unfulfilled promise presented by Laurent Berlant in *Cruel Optimism*.

In Bifo's perspective, the world became immaterial through the rise of post-Fordism as a way of production. This means that in the 21st century, the production of value shifted from physical labor —the kind of work one does in a factory— to semiotic labor —the kind of work one does in the office, in an artist studio, or at home.<sup>5</sup> The weight of semiotic labor falls not into the worker's body but upon their mind. Before relegated to the private sphere, language and creativity became vital assets to an individual's employability. Bifo summarizes this exercise as "putting the soul at work,"<sup>6</sup> or in other words transforming the self into its own enterprise: "Our desiring energy is trapped in the trick of self-enterprise, our libidinal investments are regulated according to economic rules, our attention is captured in the precariousness of virtual networks: every fragment of mental activity must be transformed into capital."<sup>7</sup> The self under this model never stops working because its individuality is always tied to the production of value.

Under this model, the self is in a constant state of hyper-stimulation. The majority of cognitive labor now happens on the net, an ever-increasing pool of data updated in real-time. Being current in this world means being constantly bombarded with tons of information; the exercise of discerning which of this information is useful or not falls on the subject. At the same time, the responsibility of staying current cannot be reduced to a mere desire of staying in flux with what is contemporary —a trend follower, an early adopter— but should be understood as essential in a world craving efficiency and competitiveness.<sup>8</sup> In this context, one can assume that speed becomes an invaluable asset

---

5 Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 22.

6 Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 24.

7 Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 24.

8 Franco Berardi, "Schizo-Economy," *SubStance* 36, No. 1 (2007): 82.

and that the brain and body's physical capacities will prove insufficient for such an accelerating network.

Finally, it is undeniable that one of the pillars of neoliberalism is competition. The discourse of competition is usually framed in relationship with national economies or industries: how competitive one market is in relationship with another or how efficient a company is concerning its counterparts. In *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han warns us against the consequences of adopting such parameters on individuals. For Han, contemporary capitalism has created conditions in which, through internalization of competition values, individuals have mutated from subject to projects, always on the lookout for new ways of optimizing themselves.<sup>9</sup> This optimization process is hidden through the language of freedom: free to reinvent oneself, free to become one's own boss, free to work as much as it is needed to become the more desirable asset. Neoliberalism, seen through this optic, has become a highly effective coercion system via the exploitation of freedom.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of coercive freedom is also present in Olivia Laing's essay *The Future of Loneliness*. For Laing, the promise of the internet was connection: jumping the physical world's barriers to create contact between complete strangers with common interests.<sup>11</sup> To an extent, that is what the Internet does. However, as Laing recognizes, connection is not intimacy, and having access to a public forum where one is prone to see and be seen does not equate to a feeling of togetherness: "the cure of loneliness is not to be looked at, but being seen and accepted as a whole person."<sup>12</sup> The filter of the screen does not favor such encounters. For Laing, the Internet's openness is to a degree ambivalent. On one side, it provides an opportunity to experiment with identity and community building. However, on the other, it generates users hungry for approval and in a constant state of self-promotion. In the open field that the Internet provides, nothing is neutral. As Byung-

---

9 Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (New York: Verso, 2017), 1.

10 Han, *Psychopolitics*, 3.

11 Olivia Laing, "The Future of Loneliness," *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2020), 216.

12 Laing, "The Future of Loneliness," 217.

Chul Han would say, relationships under neoliberalism are not free from purpose, but a space where different entrepreneurs of the self meet and perform.<sup>13</sup>

Under these conditions, it is understandable that the self is a subject in tension and prone to psychopathologies like depression —or heartbreak. Going back to Freud, arising out of the specter of promises embedded in neoliberal capitalism —trickle-down economics, an abundance of employment, the flexibility of time and mobility, freedom to explore innumerable connections— comes a disappointment when the reality that the world is presenting is actually hostile: hyper-competitive, exploitative, alienating, and lonely. This break between promise and reality is similar to the phenomenon described by Freud as melancholia, where the object of love is lost. For theorist Lauren Berlant this produces a politically depressing subject that is never fully capable of detaching itself from the desire to make things work, to actually flourish under the system.<sup>14</sup> This condition's weariness will inevitably reflect on the body and mind: panic, depression, anxiety, nervous collapse, tiredness, different types of dermatitis, different stomach and intestinal problems, and loss of hair are just some of the ways in which tension is revealed.

In this context, the heartbroken subjects situate themselves in a particular and individualized condition. Psychoanalysis and psychiatry would second that idea, offering personal improvement alternatives through drugs and therapy. Nevertheless, as I have established, the heartbreak condition is a collective experience, a social phenomenon that we experience as contemporaries. In *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Francis Fukuyama argues that nationalism in the early 20th century was fueled by the anxiety developed during industrialization.<sup>15</sup> In Fukuyama's recount, the transition from peasant societies to industrialized cities mean that individuals moved from communities with closely-knit family structures, similar language, and traditional employment expectations —for example, learning the trade of the father or mother— to spaces with people with a wide variety of backgrounds and alienating jobs that had

---

13 Han, *Psychopolitics*, 1.

14 Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimist", *Differences : A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, No. 3 (2006): 23.

15 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 58.

nothing to do with their personal histories and traditions.<sup>16</sup> This transition demanded a high level of adaptation skill from individuals and created a subjective vacuum that political groups used to generate new forms of identity. In this case, even though people came from a multiplicity of geographies and cultures, they were experiencing very similar phenomena concurrently.

Using a more current example, Sara Ahmed points towards the way in which the British National Front<sup>17</sup> has used the language of *the other* to magnify the division between migrant and non-migrant populations in the UK. Ahmed's analysis is especially pertinent because she argues that by using the metaphor of the body to represent the nation, the National Front invokes the inherent fear of being physically hurt and adheres to the idea of being culturally invaded.<sup>18</sup> The migrant population becomes the knife by which the skin, the country's border, is being cut. If, for Fukuyama, the emotional response towards industrialization —the production of anxiety— was a natural reaction towards an uncontrollable phenomenon, for Ahmed, the emotional response against migrants —the production of fear— is artificially inflated and managed. This means that the language that we have built around emotions plays a significant role in how we relate to one another. It also means that emotions do not come from the subject, as an inside coming out, but are built in relation with the other, as an outsider coming in.<sup>19</sup> In other words, emotions are externally gestated by the systemic interaction that a community facilitates, and only after that, internalized as one's own. Following this logic, we can say that emotions are public phenomena managed and politicized to produce particular subjects. Neoliberalism as an economic and ideological system produces the conditions and language to create the heartbroken individual.

To conclude this first part of the thesis, I would like to offer a last theoretical intervention. While most of what I have written in this chapter points towards criticism of capitalism's affective productions, this does not mean that I am criticizing the affect in itself. I believe

---

16 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 58.

17 The National Front is a far-right, fascist political party in the United Kingdom.

18 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburg University Press, 2004), 1.

19 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 6.

*Straight Through my Heart*

that heartbreak is integral, inescapable, and productive. Naming it is an exercise of recognition and acceptance. At the beginning of this essay, I described the environment in which we live as invisible, which means that it is so much a part of ourselves that we cannot perceive it. Presenting heartbreak as a public feeling is an attempt to give ourselves a break. To share our emotional state's responsibility with a larger community composed of equally affected subjects, without the need to do anything more to it. In the words of Ann Cvetkovich, from whom I borrowed the term *public feeling*, "it might instead be important to let depression linger, to explore the feeling of remaining or resting in sadness without insisting that it be transformed or reconceived."<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression as a Public Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2012), 14.

## Chapter 2. Affective Techniques

We always tell the same story, over and over. When I was a kid, I started drawing to send cartoon reproductions to my cousins by mail. We lived in distant cities, and I didn't want them to forget me. I drew a bunch of characters from Top Cat on loose pieces of bond paper. Later in my life, when I was 15, I bought a notebook to draw in during class. I was heartbroken —the way a teenager feels lost and confused— and didn't know how to make myself feel better. I started drawing hands. In different positions and gradually more contorted, the hands were a good distraction. I kept hearing from teachers that they were the most challenging part of the body to draw; later in life, I read that Rubens had a person in his studio specializing in making the hands in every painting. I thought that could be a nice job; a way of giving yourself a straightforward task, keeping the mind occupied. During most of my life as a young adult, I realized that every task —as most jobs— does keep the mind and body busy, but that being occupied does not relieve any of the pain of feeling heartbroken. In terms of stories, this is the one that I tell over and over.

Through my work, I've identified painting as the discipline that I care about the most. The painting practice is a practice of endurance. In an interview, Alex Katz mentioned the *666 rule* for every aspiring craftsman: six hours a day, six days a week, for six years. It is wonderful to believe that one can paint 36 hours a week, maintain a 9 to 5 job, and remain sane. I guess the answer would be to cheer in favor of effort and sacrifice, but those ideas already disenchant me. Luckily, a painter's practice is also an invitation to play: to explore materials and methods, to go back in history and look for unused processes, to copy and alter existing work, to bring things together. Painting is fun. Painting is also cathartic: as every practice that demands daily exercise, painting accompanies you as a diary. It becomes a way of archiving thoughts and ideas. The work that happens in painting is not only physical or intellectual but also emotional. The labor that emotion urges echoes our psychological states. It twitches sometimes; it spills, it paralyzes, it flows, it obstructs, it is erratic and unfocused, it is optimistic, it is methodically cold, it is slow and tiring, it is beautiful.

In the following pages, I'll be going through some of the work I did in the last three years, and I'll point out how it connects to the narrative of heartbreak that I've described. Through a discussion about technical processes, I'll anchor the relationship between affect and work through the twitches and spills that heartbreak produces. I'll describe how things are done, how they stand, and how they move. Visiting three different projects, I'll point towards specific metaphors around heartbreak-adjacent elements like the inner self, the body, and the outer environment. First, I'll talk about a series of ink drawings fixated with the idea of repetition and spasms titled *anger*. Later, I'll move to the *t-shirt paintings*, where I'll delve into absorption and memory. Finally, I'll discuss the introduction of cheap image-making technologies and vibration through my latest project, *Vibes*.

I started *anger* in 2019 while I was living in México City. I didn't have a studio at the time. I decided to refrain from oil paint fumes and find other ways of working. I bought paper and black ink and made my first drawing, depicting an angel ascending with a text that read *energy is eternal delight*. The crosshatched picture took me seven days to produce. I gave it away as a present, and I felt as if I'd provided a week of my life to someone else: labor becoming care. The subsequent six drawings came up quite differently. Instead of crosshatching, I started making points. I bought the smallest nibs commercially available and decided to put as many hours into each drawing as I could.<sup>21</sup> The first drawing's figurative elements disappeared and were replaced by more abstract scenarios. The writing changed as well: no more delight, pure venting. At the time, I was feeling frustrated and paralyzed. I was going through one of my deepest depressions, and I felt useless. Art was useless. I didn't sleep well.

Every drawing felt like giving myself a task. The task of rendering the highest quality of image with the most saturated colors. The task of not dropping any unintentional ink, keeping the paper free of any mistake. No pressure, heat, or sweat. No smudges. If I were to make a mistake, I had to start over. After two weeks, I began wearing a wrist splint. The cadence of making point after point hurt the joints. The prosthetic support increased the hours I could spend on them. One day after the other, the image slowly appeared, from less to more saturation. Every session had a moment of warm-up, rhythm,

---

<sup>21</sup> Give or take, each drawing took around 4 weeks.

and a moment of failure. Warming up is pretty straightforward. You start slow and careful. The rhythm came after the first half-hour. The hand beats perfectly, like a tattoo gun —muscle and mind connection at its best. Point after point, you find some purpose. But hands are no machines. Muscles start contracting sometimes late, sometimes early. You cannot hold the rhythm for more than some seconds at a time. You get more and more nervous. Other parts of the body start overcompensating. Your back carries all that weight; your shoulders fall to the front.



ODIO. Ink on paper. 2018.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud mentions how the melancholic subject gravitates towards the compulsion to repeat. For Freud, repetition is a way of resistance against acknowledgment and change to avoid reality.<sup>22</sup> In the same way, in *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud explains how the melancholic subject attached its libido —its energy or willingness to act— onto objects that serve as surrogates for their desire.<sup>23</sup> And desire can be ill-advising. The language that is part of the drawings is self-deprecating, masochistic, and mean. The repetition was a way of attaching myself to it. Every hour spent applying ink onto the paper was an hour of the same phrases in my head: *odio liberal* (liberal hate); *ya ponte a*

*trabajar* (get to work); *you think you're an artist but you're mostly a bully*; *human achievement reprised*; *no guilt*; *ciao bb*. The desire was to purge the body; the technique was spasmodic and performative —in the sense that working on them meant getting into

---

22 Claudia Lapping, *Psychoanalysis in Social Research : Shifting Theories and Reframing Concepts* (London: Taylor & Francis Group), 81.

23 Freud, *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, 250.



a specific mood, a depressive position. The result was a series of 11 x 8.5 pieces of paper held to the wall with tape. From a distance, they looked like they were printed. The paper was so stripped down that it almost hid from view. No energy was used to make it more appealing or attractive —nothing to catch the eye. If you got close enough —if you offered a double glance—you could see the work and maybe imagine every point extending through time.

Revisiting this project makes me think of the work of artist Nao Bustamante, *Neopolitan* (2003), that I discovered through the writing of José Esteban Muñoz. In Bustamante's 11-minute video loop, we see the artist watching over and over the ending of the Cuban film *Fresa y chocolate* (1993). The artist cries while watching the movie, and as soon as it finishes, she rewinds it, and the sobbing recommences. For Muñoz, the "[r]epetition is the piece's most obvious depressive quality. It describes the ways in which subjects occupy and dwell within the depressive position [...] The film being screened in the video, the source of the sadness and somatic excess, is a Cuban film about homosexuality and revolution. Its tragedy has to do with the way in which queerness can finally not be held by the nation-state. This is the rip, the moment of breakdown in a revolutionary imaginary."<sup>24</sup> Bustamante's hold towards *Fresa y chocolate* is similar to how I was holding to the language in my drawings. For me, the condition of labor —which comes hand in hand with the conditions of capital— is the source of anger and sadness so intense that it cracks into the body and generates the somatic responses of the twitching, the tick, the scratching, and the spasm. A dot after the dot, forever.

I started the *t-shirt paintings* at the end of 2019, and I worked on them during the Spring and Fall of 2020. After the *anger* drawings, I needed some refuge. The t-shirts gave me that moment. They were the first pieces I did with the idea of heartbreak. If the drawings were crafted through a desire to expose and merge with the anger of precarity, the t-shirts were made with a desire for love and solace. At the time I was making them, I wrote one of the many attempts at describing this affect:

---

24 José Estéban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, No. 3 (2006): 684.

*Straight Through my Heart*

*Heartbreak is a contingent space where anxiety, disappointment, fear, sadness, mourning, and fatigue —characteristic of neoliberal working conditions— coexist with an overall uncertainty of what the future will bring. Heartbreak, in this case, has all to do with loving and losing someone, but also with a transition from innocence towards awareness, not of one singular localized event but a continuous cascade of unstoppable preoccupations. At the core of this approach is a desire to allow sadness to exist and be shared.*

I think these words still describe the intention embedded in the paintings. When I wrote them I was afraid of sounding like a cliché. Now I think that the cliché is another reflection of our inability to look somewhere else, to think about futures that do not involve our mutual exploitation. In Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, the author quotes on more than one occasion the phrase "it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism."<sup>25</sup> Fisher's words resonate through my practice and serve as the frame from which I wish to escape. The t-shirt paintings attempt to create a space where the rules of exposure, vulnerability, and sadness could overcome those of competition and isolation.

Starting with the obvious, the t-shirt paintings were primarily made with my old t-shirts. I use these garments as substrates for two reasons. First: through them, the relationship between painting and body comes to the forefront. Second: t-shirts are absorbing agents, and this capacity helps to create a metaphoric illustration of the



*Waiting.* Oil on cotton. 2020.

---

<sup>25</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2009), 2.

sociability of emotions. In terms of the body-painting relationship, their size and format echo our human torsos. The way they're cut and displayed is a reminder of the moment of uncovering present in the different iterations of *Veronica's Veils*. But while that story focuses on the religious miracle of faith —the connection between the individual and god — my paintings are much more earthly. The uncovering in the t-shirt paintings makes public what is private. The insides of the t-shirts, the parts usually in touch with the skin, are now pointing outside. By doing this, it becomes apparent that the bodies the work is evoking have no structure holding them. The traditional stretcher is missing and is substituted by two plain screws on the wall. The fabric keeps the memory of the gravitational force pulling down, the same way our backs get curved with time, and our chests close with our collapsing shoulders.

In *Provisional Painting*, Raphael Rubinstein argues that by producing paintings that "look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-canceling," and turning away from "strong painting," artists exercise a strategy of refusal inherent in modernism.<sup>26</sup> The artists that Rubinstein mentions —Raoul De Keyser and Mary Heilmann, to name a couple— share a common inclination towards an aesthetic of failure. De Keyser's paintings are so simple in their execution that they could easily be called lazy and unambitious. In a similar line, Heilmann's work is uninterested in painting history. It proposes a way of working that is more similar to ceramics, "free of weighty cultural expectations," and empty of transcendental ideas.<sup>27</sup> This embrace of failure in painting makes me think of forms of radical acceptance. By stripping any form of technical prowess, monumentally, or overt smartness, these artists encourage personal and compassionate practices. Following this example, I want the t-shirt paintings —and the bodies they evoke— to be addressed with similar compassion.

The second idea the substrate of the t-shirts brings comes via the absorbing qualities of the fabric. In the theory of emotions that I'm considering as part of the heartbreak condition, there is a transference process that happens from the outside environment to the individual. On the t-shirts, I'm illustrating this process through the metaphor of

---

26 Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," *Art in America*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/provisional-painting-raphael-rubinstein-62792/>

27 Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting."

absorption. Every one of the paintings was treated with dye and/or glue before being hung to dry. This liquid penetrates the fabric and alters how it looks and feels to the touch. The process is messy and hard to control. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler offers a vision of vulnerability through the concept of mourning that echoes this dyeing process: mourning "is a way to "undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance."<sup>28</sup> This approach to vulnerability is adjacent to heartbreak because heartbreak implies a collective



*Heart.* Oil on cotton. 2021.

mourning, a constant feeling of loss from a potential bright future that seems inaccessible. The final shape of the paintings after the dyeing and gluing treatment results from the different tensions pushing and pulling the fabric. One can provide the conditions for a specific form but never execute full authority over it.

As a complement to the absorbing material, the surface of the fabric is worked with oil paint. This last part of the process is the one that takes the most time. The images I'm creating function as allegories or fragments of stories with no ending. The leading force in these narratives are the characters depicted there: cartoon-like figures frozen in time, captured when something is happening or

about to happen. A frog that just died and whose spirit has the form of a rhinoceros, a man with no arms panicking and trying to decelerate the inertia with his feet, and a terrifying eye observing a nightmarish landscape with too many calamities happening all at once are examples of the types of stories I'm telling. The paintings are minor in their association with caricatures and teenage doodles. They are precarious because of how

---

<sup>28</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 21.

## *Straight Through my Heart*

old and used the fabric is. Still, they are made with a lot of care. The paintings' surfaces are exceptionally delicate because of the lack of a rigid structure. A big part of the work that I do on them is to mend them constantly —fix them when they crack, reform them when they fall, and clean their folds with water and soap because they get full of dust. These heartbreak paintings are done with a lot of love. In its own conundrum, each character is an invitation to accept failure with compassion. The sadness embedded into them is a way of revealing the inner self towards the outside, surrendering publicly to a transformation that we cannot anticipate.

The last project completed during the MFA is titled *Vibes*. This installation, one of two pieces presented at my thesis exhibition *Straight Through my Heart*, is composed of a series of 10 digital prints on acetate with a tiny vibrator attached on the back. A metal structure holds the prints 2 1/2 inches away from the wall. The metal structures were designed to hold an *Arduino Uno* microcontroller board that feeds the vibrator an oscillating electric current that goes from 2.5 to 5 volts. The inflow of energy travels from a socket in the wall to the Arduino board, to the vibrator, and finally to the acetate. The individual pulsing plastic sheets produce a quiet buzzing sound; when vibrating simultaneously, the hum of the ten prints becomes increasingly prominent.



*Vibe 1*. Digital Print on Acetate, Arduino, Metal. 2021.

The idea of bringing vibration and sound into the heartbreak work came from a desire to describe the outside environment that I mentioned in the first chapter of this document: an all-encompassing, abstract, and invisible space. Cognitive capitalism is a machine that never stops; it only has moments of slower and faster flows. These flows can be identified as moments of intense labor and

moments of non-intense labor. An example of intense labor is when you're seated in front of the computer, writing, coding, or modeling a project; non-intense labor, on the other hand, is when you're not *actually* working —you are at a party or commuting—but still keep answering email, networking, or posting casual promotional material online. These two flows are the flows in which we vibrate, in unison, with capital.



*Vibe 7. Digital Print on Acetate, Arduino, Metal. 2021.*

As with every vibrating object, visual confirmation is hard to identify. At a certain speed, vibration becomes imperceptible to the eye. The brain, incapable of keeping up with the pace, projects the image of an inert object. In *Vibes*, this phenomenon is at play: even though every print is vibrating at high speed, we cannot see movement. Hidden in the static image, the vibration is revealed only through the collateral effect of sound. The rhythm produced is reminiscent of the ocean —which also travels through waves— without its calming effects. On the contrary, while testing the resistance of the materials, I spent hours in the studio with the vibrating prints, and can describe the experience as

tiring and annoying. The repetitive rhythm gets lost after a while and gives way to the white noise. At this point, it is easy to get used to the sound and almost forget about it. Still, the sound continues to have an affect. The stress that goes through the materials — the acetate, the metal in the vibrator— gets transferred into the body. Listening to it for a long time has physical and psychological affect. The twitching and shaking in the acetate is a reminder of the spasms, flinches, and ticks that the body produces under high levels of stress and anxiety.

*Straight Through my Heart*

The composite prints were all made in Photoshop with found online imagery. Each print has a background, the torso of a character from the Japanese anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion (NGE)*; screenshot images from my social networks, e-mail subscriptions, and health-tracking apps; images adjacent to working environments, and finally a text in the middle of the page. When editing the collages, I thought about the mix between optimism and depression that 90's rave culture embodied. Generated at the dawn of neoliberalism (in the Reagan and Thatcher era), rave culture experimented with spaces that fostered collectivism in place of free capital and atomism, and promoted ways of being together that escaped the parameters of productivity.<sup>29</sup> The abuse of drugs and the lack of any economic plan made rave spaces hubs for the unfit, the lazy, the hedonistic, and the ones in need of an escape from their daily routines. The rave was a hiccup for a production machine that searched for efficiency. The hiccup attracted a young crowd disenchanted with the possibilities that their local economies were offering them.



---

29 Nav Haq, *Rave: Rave and its Influences in Art and Culture* (London, UK : Black Dog Publishing 2016), 13.

The culture around raves was also affected by the technologies that made raves possible in the first place: the incorporation of digital tools into the quotidian. The technology that was key for the transition from physical to cognitive labor enabled new ways of creation based on the exchange and transformation of digital material.<sup>30</sup> The rave flier is an excellent example of this. The flier served as an invitation but also as a way to encompass the values of communal transcendence that raves supported. With idyllic landscapes and 3D-wired images, rave fliers were optimistic about human and digital synergy. The rave utopia was a place that accepted radical forms of identity and where property dissolved into the commons. Rave fliers used, stole, copied, pasted, and reproduced visual material they didn't own; they often came without sign of authorship, and they were distributed for free. Photoshop and similar software made it easier for people to render images without an education in art. Because of this, the type of imagery produced was utterly different than anything coming from the arts at the time. As radical as this mode of production was, it didn't take long before it was co-opted by capitalism and incorporated into publicity campaigns to target younger audiences.<sup>31</sup>

As I mentioned before deviating towards the historical conditions of rave aesthetics, the printed images in *Vibes* have a background, a figure, various types of smaller images collaged on top, and a text. The different backgrounds are default landscape wallpapers for computers, photos of open-plan offices, satellite images of city parks, a 3-D model of the highest temperatures recorded in modern Earth's history, and a picture of one of my favorite after-hours clubs in Montreal called *Stereo*. The figures —or torsos— from *NGE* are three teenage anime characters whose job is to operate giant robots to protect a post-apocalyptic city called Tokio-3 from cosmic angels wanting to destroy it. The series explores the relationship between labor, care, and exploitation, and the characters are the embodiment of the heartbroken, emotionally manipulated subjects in the formation process. The images layered over the characters are an assorted collection of labor-adjacent images —from depictions of how the human body is changing according to work performed in offices to the infographics tracking my own deprived sleep in the last

---

30 Nav Haq, *Rave: Rave and its Influences in Art and Culture*, 14.

31 Joel T. Jordan, *Searching for the Perfect Beat: American Rave Fliers From the 90s* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000), 21.



*Straight Through my Heart*

couple of months. I took text from different power enclaves in the neoliberal ecosystem: archives from American and British political leaders, mega-company slogans, and spam. The borrowed speech plays the role of mechanical caregiver and productivity inducer. All good intention, all love, and all wishful thinking, in the service of a better and more productive subject. Finally, as I mentioned earlier, I printed these images on transparent acetate, which lets us see—in a glance—all of the elements at the same time: the picture, the acetate, the vibrator, the *Arduino*, the metal structure, and the cables connecting it to the wall. The result feels very close to the experience of multitasking on multiple windows while watching multiple videos on a busy computer.

### Chapter 3. Collaboration and Dialogue

From January 2021 to the end of April 2021, I met with my mother, Alina Canela, every week for an hour via Zoom. These meetings were different from the more casual conversations we had during other moments in the week —when catching up and gossiping— because these meetings had an agenda. In the first meeting, we talked about our moments of depression and I officially invited her to collaborate with my heartbreak project. Next week we answered some questions that I wrote in preparation: "Do you remember how you felt when you were a teenager?", "Do you consider yourself a sad person?" and "Do you think we're inherently sad, or do we channel sadness from our environment?." These first couple of conversations felt intense because although we have a good relationship and we speak often, we've never talked about feelings in such a way. For my part, I can say that I've always hidden my sad feelings from my family. My role there has always been light-spirited. For her part, she's always been more introspective, offering emotional support to others and keeping her stories to herself. The dialogue we prompted during those first weeks was awkward and vulnerable.

We wrote a page-long document for our subsequent encounter when we tried to put into words the feelings we were describing earlier. The writing was not particularly poetic. We both decided that aesthetics were the least of our concerns; the point was to try to be as natural and precise as we could be. We read those words aloud, and we started chopping off anything unnecessary until just a couple of phrases were left. The next time we met, we dyed our pieces of fabric. Then we started embroidering the writing on the dyed fabric. When she was young, my mother went to a Catholic school where the nuns taught the students how to stitch; she taught me how to sew on the Zoom call, and from that day on, I sent her images of the progress I was making. Both of our fabrics ended up looking very different. My mother's looks clean and effortless. Mine looks full of mistakes and holes. In our conversations, she told me that she always cried in her room when she was a teen and felt like she lacked affection. I imagined a younger version of her in bed with red drippy eyes. I was not there at the time, but *I've been there*. This was the first time I heard anything like this from her. I told her how I care about people because I want people to care about me without me having to ask for it. I need that love coming back my

*Straight Through my Heart*

way because every institution I've been part of operates under the premise of competition, and that competition alienated me from my peers. The embroidery space that we were opening, in its awkwardness, prompted us to dig inside in ways we haven't done before. Sharing those moments felt good.



*Embroidery with my mom (detail). Dye and tread on cotton. 2021*

This exercise culminated in *Embroider with my mom*, which is the other main piece in my thesis exhibition. After receiving my mother's work in the mail, I stitched together both pieces of fabric—hers and mine. With the help of my friend Ellen Hanson, I started joining some of the old dyed fabric that I didn't use for the *t-shirt paintings*. I decided that *Embroider with my mom* would stand in relation to *Vibes* and that if *Vibes* was the outside-coming-in, I wanted this collaboration work to be an inside-coming out. My partner, Marcela Borquez, and I dyed 30 feet of soft silky rayon fabric standing 9 feet

high. This fabric was sewn together with the embroidery piece and hangs from the ceiling to create a u-shaped room in the middle of the exhibition space. The painting choice — semi-saturated squarish blocks— was directed by my mom's desire to make this a joyous and colorful space. In a similar fashion as the *t-shirt paintings*, the use of dye responded to the absorbing qualities of the fabric and the material can be metaphorically read as a porous body: the stain lives inside and outside of this thin skin, making inside and out indistinguishable.

The embroidery is placed in the middle of the makeshift space. Written in Spanish, the text shows as much as it conceals. I couldn't bear the thought of having it translated into English. I don't mind translating it myself when someone asks, but the translation will always be different in this case, and it will always be tied to however I feel at the moment of conversation. On the inside of the big fabric piece, I stitched 100 bells with the help of my friend Hanaa Safwat. In opposition to the constant buzz of the vibrating prints, the bells ring just once in a while when people walk close to the fabric or when a breeze travels through the gallery space. These bells are there to denote a presence and welcome whomever comes inside with a treat: a sound that disrupts —even for a tiny second— the continual hum coming from outside.

The way this massive piece of fabric is installed makes me think of Sam Gilliam's work. Gilliam's *drape* paintings in the 70s abandoned the stretcher for a more unstructured disposition. The paintings' hanging quality brings multiple meanings: from hanging clothing to hanging bodies. Gilliam's work thrives in the openness that abstraction offers.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, I think *Embroidery with my mom* presents a tension between the celebratory and the mournful that is hard to overlook. The quality of the stitching and the precariousness of how everything is tied together suggests a provisional space that can fall at any time. Still, the lightness in the material and the lack of frame holding it invites a read of a body that embraces as you go in. You cannot have one without the other.

---

32 Deborah Solomon, "Sam Gilliam Unfurls an Exuberant Rainbow at Dia:Beacon," *New York Times* September 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/12/arts/design/sam-gilliam-dia-beacon-color-.html>

## *Straight Through my Heart*

When describing *Vibes*, I spoke a lot about rave aesthetics and how rave flyers connected with people's desire to build a utopia. I spent a lot of time in raves in my early and mid-twenties. I did many drugs and danced for hours. I enjoyed and romanticized the party as a space where you can forget about the world outside. I did this until I couldn't do it anymore. I think *Embroidery with my mom* attempts to build spaces for exhalation akin to raves through healthier means. I believe we are all a little bit heartbroken. We're all growing as people in a context where the rules of survival are self-exploitative and menacing. I think compassion for ourselves is not something that comes easy; it needs practice and support. I'm not sure if I like how *Embroidery with my mom* looks, but I love how it feels. I enjoyed the moments of conversation, the moments of teaching and the moments when I needed help, and there were people there, ready to give it.



*Embroidery with my mom* (back). Dye and tread on cotton. 2021

## Chapter 4. Conclusion

As I mentioned at the beginning of this text, the heartbreak research took center stage in my practice for two years. Still, while writing this thesis, I recognized hints of this interest in earlier work —like in the ink drawings— and in personality traits that I manifested in preparation for *Embroider with my mom*. Through the literature I've engaged with, I realized that the field of public feelings is fertile and that a sociological perspective is necessary to understand the phenomenon of depression outside of medical and psychoanalytical traditions. This is particularly important if we want to shift the responsibility of depression from the individual to the collective and offer a compassionate vision of the sad subject. Similarly, through a revision of literature about cognitive capitalism, I understood how heartbreak and the culture emanating from neoliberalism are tightly knitted. Hyper-stimulation, self-exploitation, competition, and an obsession with productivity are the forces under which the heartbroken subject is molded. Because of this, feelings tied to fatigue, loneliness, anxiousness, and depression should stop being addressed as abnormalities and recognized as collateral effects of our working conditions.

In my t-shirt paintings, I explored these collateral feelings through the use of cartoon characters, dyes, and —as the name implies— cotton coming from old t-shirts. With what I called affective strategies, like using absorbing fabric instead of canvas and screws instead of stretchers, I presented painting as a surrogate for the body and self—a porous self, a body whose posture reflects the taxing effects of gravity. The images, hand-painted on top of the fabric, came from drawings in which I attempted to describe feelings of heartbreak in different modalities. They were used as a way of making feelings public by literally opening t-shirts to bring what is usually inside to the outside.

In my thesis exhibition, I explored the inside-outside dichotomy again. This time through two separate pieces: *Vibes* and *Embroidery with my mom*. In the former, I use found online images, spam, screenshots from health-tracking apps, and promotional emails to compose images that respond to an overwhelming stimulation coming from our digital lives. The language used in these images was borrowed from different power enclaves in today's economy: state leaders, multinational corporations, and entertainment companies.

## *Straight Through my Heart*

These images generate a hum with the help of a vibrator that controls the electrical current. All the materials in this work were rigid, cold, and impermeable. In the latter piece, located in the center of the exhibition space, I worked collectively with my mother, partner, and friends to create a giant piece of dyed fabric hanging from the ceiling and forming a u-shaped room. We embroidered my mother's words and mine inside of this fabric. We stitched bells as well. The materials here were permeable, soft, and warm.



*Theory and Practice*. Print on aluminium. 2021

Finally, there is a last piece in the exhibition I haven't spoken about called *Theory and practice*. It is a mid-size aluminum print that rests on two pillows on the floor. The printed image is a concept map where I point, through concentric circles, to all of my heartbreak research. I attached an audio exciter that plays a snoring sound through the back of the aluminum plate. Inhale and exhale. The words *resting in sadness/resting as compassion* written at the bottom of the print are a way to remind myself that sadness can be

*Straight Through my Heart*

something that holds us together, that by accepting it we can offer support to each other. The sound in the piece is a wishful thinking for myself and whomever visits this exhibition: I wish them and myself rest and sleep in our coming days. A lot of rest, and a lot of sleep.



Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburg University Press, 2004).

Ban, Thomas A. *From Melancholia to Depression: A History of Diagnosis and Treatment*. Argentina: International Network for the History of Neuropsychopharmacology, 2014.

Berardi, Franco. "Schizo-Economy." *SubStance* 36, No. 1 (2007).

Berardi, Franco. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009.

Berlant, Lauren. "Cruel Optimist." *Differences : A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, No. 3 (2006).

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2004.

Cvetkovich, Ann. *Depression as a Public Feeling*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*. United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2009.

Freud, Sigmund. *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*. New York : W.W. Norton, 1989.

Fukuyama, Francis. *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

Han, Byung-Chul. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. New York: Verso, 2017.

Haq, Nav. *Rave: Rave and its Influences in Art and Culture*. London, UK : Black Dog Publishing 2016.

Jordan, Joel T. *Searching for the Perfect Beat: American Rave Fliers From the 90s*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000.

Laing, Olivia. "The Future of Loneliness." *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2020.

Lapping, Claudia. *Psychoanalysis in Social Research: Shifting Theories and Reframing Concepts*. London: Taylor & Francis Group.

Muñoz, José Estéban. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, No. 3 (2006).

Rubinstein, Raphael. "Provisional Painting." *Art in America*, May 1, 2019. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/provisional-painting-raphael-rubinstein-62792/>.

Solomon, Deborah. "Sam Gilliam Unfurls an Exuberant Rainbow at Dia:Beacon." *New York Times* September 19, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/12/arts/design/sam-gilliam-dia-beacon-color.html>

### Vita

Raul Aguilar Canela was born on March 16, 1988, In Tijuana, Baja California, and its a Mexican citizen. He received a Bachelor in Studio Arts from Concordia University in 2014. His work has been exhibited in México, Canada, and the United States. He received a Masters of Fine Arts in Painting and Printmaking from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2021.