

In the Muck and the Mire

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Painting at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

by

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2021

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Dedicated to my grandmothers: Bonmama for entrusting me with your artistry, and Lola for being my best friend, my muse, and my confidant. I love you, forever and always.



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## Acknowledgments

Thank you to my parents for your unyielding support, without which I would not be doing what I love.

Thank you to my siblings, who support me in both big and small ways.

Thank you to all of my teachers from across the years who helped me grow into a better person and artist, especially those at RISD who I had the privilege to learn from.

Thank you to my classmates, who taught me more than I knew was even possible.

And thank you to my recently departed pet rats: Princess, Al, and Brutus, who gave me lots of love throughout graduate school.

## Abstract

At the core of my practice lies my fascination with my body; how I exist in relation to others and my surroundings, how much space I take up, how close I am to others, how much distance exists between us. I am interested in intimacy and bodily contact, which I explore through objects that bridge the gap between human embodiment and otherness. My works, made out of paper pulp, simultaneously stimulate a hyperawareness of one's own body and a dissolution of the self. Their human scale immediately places them in relation to the viewer and creates space for empathy. As amorphous growths and biomorphic bodies, they adapt to their environment while existing in a constant state of controlled chaos. In this thesis, I will provide autobiographical information that points to the origins of my interests, and a view into the processes, methods, symbols, and materials that comprise my project.

## Collision

My works stimulate a conflicting state of intimacy and alienation between themselves and the viewer. They express this condition metaphorically through the image/object binary. Using traditional painting devices, I create a sense of the painting as a view into fields and dimensions beyond our world. At the same time, I utilize sculptural techniques to manifest a sense of embodiment. *Time, Nature, and Another Dimension*, 2021 [fig. 1] exemplifies this approach. In this case, purple bony structures protrude from crusty drips at the bottom of the work, while fleshy expanses stretch out across its exterior. In conjunction, these elements create a sense of the bodily. Simultaneously, the diagonal seam between the purple and orange fields suggest that the piece may be part of a larger form or scene, while the organic shapes floating inside it create space within the piece itself. Finally, the gaping hole in the center of the work converts the painting into a symbolic window. Thus, it is an object that moves between painting and sculpture, the body and space.



Figure 1: *Time, Nature, and Another Dimension*, 2021, paper pulp on screen, 53"x43"



Family debates, childhood play, and my Modern Orthodox Jewish upbringing all fed my interest in the body. I grew up the youngest of three in an extremely opinionated family. Our weekly Shabbat dinners featured heated arguments alongside matzoh ball soup. Topics ranged from theology to politics to science and beyond. We covered everything from the weekly Torah portion to the trolley problem. Our philosophical, scientific, and sociological conversations fed my appetite for pondering questions of human existence. Judaism, a religion that seeks to guide our relationships with our bodies and our bodies' relationships to the world, further fueled this appetite. It was childhood play, however, that offered me a way to explore the true complexity of this experience.

For much of my childhood I was too young to participate in my family's Friday night discussions. Instead, I retreated into my own private fantasy world. This imaginary place had boundless potential—in it, I was the star. Over time, I became adept at divorcing myself from reality and slipping into my alternative realm. In my head, I would float above the dinner table and watch as scenes played out below.

I made odd noises while in my fantasy world. Things like “perrrrrapitidbobbidobabbidobabi” emanated from a deep subconscious place within me. This practice was so instinctual I often did not realize I was doing it. My noisy outbursts resembled a combination of scatting and Ewokese (the language the furry guys in *Star Wars* speak)<sup>1</sup>. I annoyed my parents so much, they would send me to my room for time-outs. I took advantage of this supposed punishment to immerse myself even deeper in my alternate reality. When my parents would return later to check on me, they would find me happily playing make-believe with my beanie babies. Until I had the know-how to participate in family debates, I relied on play to plumb the depths of my subconscious. Looking back, I now see that I used fantasy and play to build an alternate psychological space in which to investigate myself in relation to my environment. I now use the same tactics in my art to continue this investigation.

Play is one of the most important tools we have as humans. In his thesis *Play as Self-Realization*, sociologist Thomas S. Henricks describes the importance of play in human development:

...identifying play as one of the fundamental forms of human relating keeps alive the prospect of understanding the importance of transformative, consuming activities in the human quest for self-realization. Play is not a trivial endeavor. It is necessary for comprehending what we can be and what we can do.<sup>2</sup>

Through this lens, I view my dinner table exercises as a way for me to learn about myself. I built a fictional reality where I could indulge my deepest fears and desires without judgement. Today, I utilize

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Marquand, director. *Return of the Jedi*. 20th Century Fox Release, 1983

<sup>2</sup> Thomas S. Henricks, “Play as Self-Realization: Toward a General Theory of Play.” *American Journal of Play*, vol. 6, no. 2, (2014): 210-211.

my ability to enter this alternate reality through play in my art. For me, art-making and play are both “transformative, consuming activities in the human quest for self-realization” and are therefore intrinsically linked. When I am making art, I am at play.



Figure 2: *Untitled*, 2021, crayon and watercolor on paper, 54”x60”

The appearance and layout of my studio reflect its function as a kind of playroom; its chaotic environment helps me enter a subconscious state of mind. Material and debris litter a floor replete with projects. I work sitting cross-legged on the ground, or crouching hunched over my pieces, and lose myself in the process of meticulously applying material to substrate like a kid building worlds out of Lego. I leave tools lying around instead of taking the time to put them away so as to not interrupt the flow of things. When I was younger my mom would tell me she always knew I was home when the scissors would disappear. Today, I feel a similar urgency when I am making that requires me to maintain expediency.

In my studio-playroom, drawing is my gateway into my fantasy realm. When drawing, I tap into my subconscious as I create a visual alphabet with which to manifest the fantastical world of my art. I am constantly developing a set of coded symbols stemming from religious and everyday rituals centering on the body. By repeating these forms over and over again, I meld the bodily and the intangible, creating a sense of vacillation between these two states of being.

## Repetition

Growing up in a Modern Orthodox Jewish home, I came to appreciate the transformative nature of ritualistic action, which I now use to make my artworks. Much of traditional Judaism is based on returning to systematic acts over and over again in the pursuit of understanding. For example, the prayers of absolution on Yom Kippur (the Jewish day of atonement) include a prayer during which one pounds on one's heart over and over again while repeatedly apologizing for a list of sins. In this case, recapitulation brings about a state of self-reflection and humility. It prevents you from thinking of yourself as an individual separate from the rest of society, and instead creates a feeling of collective responsibility. The fact that the prayers are written in the plural, i.e. "On the sins we have committed..." further emphasizes the communal over the individual. This prayer is repeated over and over again over the course of the day, during which many Jews fast. This, in tandem with the gesture of pounding one's heart, reminds us of our physical fragility. We both affirm our bodily existence and are reminded of its ephemerality. In my art, I repeat symbols, forms, textures, patterns, and colors in individual works, and between works, to explore communal definitions of the self.

The repetitious aspect of my practice exists on a subcutaneous level in my work—it is embedded into the final product and not always immediately evident. Although I use the same visual alphabet as a basis for all of my works, each one takes on its own character traits. For example, I often repeat a breast/butt-like form in my art. At times this motif becomes absorbed into its surroundings, while at others it maintains a clear separation. Each time I repeat it, its meaning and appearance morphs and evolves. This symbol is embedded into both of the works shown below [fig. 3 & 4]; however, it functions differently in each one. In *Humor, Nature, Family*, the purple-pink breast/butt form is clearly identifiable at the top left corner of the piece. It interacts and overlaps with tentacular forms while existing as a separate entity. In contrast, in *Humor, Humor*, the same symbol is repeated twice, but both are absorbed and camouflaged into the body of the piece. The forms dematerialize in the process of becoming part of something larger. In relation to one another, these works vacillate between the corporeal and the immaterial, and singular and the communal.



Figure 3: *Humor, Nature, Family*, 2021, crayon and watercolor on paper, 92"x86"



Figure 4: *Humor, Humor*, 2021, crayon and watercolor on paper, 60"x48"

My visual alphabet helps me enter a psychological state of play by providing me with liberatory boundaries. The idea that boundaries can further exploration is substantiated by a landscape architecture study in which preschool children were observed playing more freely in fenced in playgrounds than in non-fenced in ones. Within designated boundaries, the children felt more comfortable to play how they wanted.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, I feel freer when I provide myself with specific frameworks to work within. My visual lexicon therefore comprises my ‘field of play’—a set of aesthetic rules I use to guide my work. Counterintuitively, the more rules I provide myself with, the broader the emotional and physical range I am able access. Working with a specific set of symbols derived from autobiographical experience allows me to in fact expand the possibilities of each piece.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Summerlin. “ASLA 2006 Student Awards.” *American Society of Landscape Architects*, 2006, [www.asla.org/awards/2006/studentawards/282.html](http://www.asla.org/awards/2006/studentawards/282.html).

By exploring the same symbols in different forms over and over again, I empty them of their meanings and refill them over and over again. Through this cycle of reiteration, I break down the semiotics of my imagery, helping me divorce from namable reality and enter my subconscious. I was taught to draw from observation this way: to disassociate what I was observing from its namable properties in order to fully capture its likeness. For example, when drawing a nose, I had to forget I was drawing a nose and instead break down the form into a series of lines and planes. This process induced a disembodied meditative state, one that I attempt to replicate for my viewers.

A scene in Francois Truffaut's *Stolen Kisses* exemplifies a similar breakdown of semiotics. In the film, the main character Antoine Doinel repeats his name, and the names of his lover and her husband, over and over while staring at himself in the mirror. As he does so, his words begin to disassociate from their original meaning. The more Antoine tries to will them into being, the more disconnected from reality they become. By the scene's end, Antoine induces a trance-like state for himself and the viewer.<sup>4</sup>

My imagery is reliant on transmutation and I compel viewers to make connections between works through repeated forms while maintaining fluid meaning and interpretation. In biblical Hebrew, words often have secondary meanings that are more important than their surface-level definitions. A full understanding of the text is only achieved by making connections between the same words used in other contexts. Having grown up constantly surrounded by biblical interpretation, I view my practice through this lens. My works speak to one another and exist in the same aesthetic realm, while containing a multitude of impressions.

In *Humor, Rationality* [fig. 5] I used the letter "Q" and a silhouette of my butt reflected in the water of a toilet bowl to create the overall composition. Through the process of repetition and reinterpretation, I severed these symbols from their original sources. This, combined with an ethereal color palette and repetitive touch, creates an object that through its insistent physical presence denotes a sense of dislocation. It appears both bodily and familiar, and out of place at the same time.

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<sup>4</sup> François Truffaut, director. *Stolen Kisses*. 1968.



Figure 5: *Humor, Rationality*, 2021, paper pulp on metal, 48"x39"



## Digestion

Color functions as a bridge between the bodily and the supernatural in my work, and I use it to create the illusion that my works come from a parallel reality. I find similarities in the palettes of the sets of the original *Star Trek*. These sets, like the one depicted below, are made using a series of non-local colors with close tonalities. The result is a believable world that both approximates but diverges from our own. I use palettes with a similar logic to produce an uncanny experience for the viewer. I am also invested in faded nostalgic colors that harken back to childhood play like the ones used to create the set of “The Man Trap” [fig. 6].<sup>5</sup> Palettes associated with the feminine, innards, flesh, and bodily functions additionally tether my work to the corporeal. Together, these elements create strange hybrid color schemes that teeter between the celestial and earthly spheres, and the bodily and the preternatural.



Figure 6: *Star Trek*, Season 1 Episode 1, “The Man Trap”

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<sup>5</sup> George Clayton Johnson. “The Map Trap.” *Star Trek*, season 1, episode 1, 1966.



The physicality of my work is further underscored by the fact that the body is an essential tool for play and for making. My experience clowning exemplifies the importance of physicality in play, and influences my work as an artist. I began formally using physical comedy to connect with others while attending circus camp as a child, and solidified this practice on a clowning trip run by famous clown and activist, Patch Adams, in Mexico City. On the trip, I clowned for people in hospitals, prisons, low-income communities, and for passersby on the street. I used spontaneous improvisational play to make people laugh and communicate across cultural and linguistic divides. The collective energy of the group intensified the impact of my clowning, not unlike how relational aesthetics function between my works.

As a clown, I often enacted a skit with my friend Neena that went like this: the two of us played a game of catch until one of us “accidentally” dropped the ball. Upon bending down to pick it up the other person made a farting noise with their mouth, making it appear as if the person picking up the ball let one rip. This always, without fail, made onlookers laugh. Clowning showed me that the body contains universal humor, and I take advantage of it in my art as a site for connection. Intestinal ropes, mounds, and bony outgrowths fill my works as I draw upon our shared, often uncomfortable, physical realities. As in clowning, I take advantage of this commonality in my art to relate to others.



Figure 7: Clowning with The Gesundheit Institute! in Mexico City, 2018

Paper pulp is an important source of physicality in my work; its sensuality recalls the body, while its aggregate nature acts as a metaphor for dematerialization. I “digest” the pulp by plopping down wet piles of mushy, stinky sludge onto a table and kneading it like giant piles of playdough. Digestion is the meeting place in the body of the self and the other. This point of intertwine reminds us that we are merely short-lived masses of accumulated particles.

The pulp additionally acts as a recording device that captures duration and labor: when I press down on it, it instantly encodes the gesture of my hand. Over time, I build up the surfaces of my works with ritualistic touch. The repetitive quality of the surfaces produces the sensation of fields of time, space, and color, while its all-over insistent texture emits a soft yet crispy fleshiness.



Figure 8: *Humor, Friendship*, 2021, paper pulp and acrylic on metal, 62”x57”

Judaism particularly emphasizes the importance of the body in ritual. It is a tradition that imbues every part of daily living; there is even a blessing for using the bathroom. These values challenge those of greater secular American society by consecrating activities typically deemed profane through religious ritual. It is with this perspective that I employ imagery like the toilet-butt silhouette in my art, as I establish a sense of spirituality that permeates even the most unattractive and taboo of bodily realities.

In a similar vein, I use material transformation to further draw connections between the abject/bodily and the spiritual. I elevate unwanted materials, like paper pulp, by turning them into art objects. My pulp starts out as discarded waste; with time and labor I convert it into contemplative objects. I commute disgusting materials into art, thus infusing my works with both the abject and the sacred.

Paper pulp is a kind of collaborator for me and a force to play off of. As it dries, its color and form shifts, so I never have complete control over it. Its drying time is heavily dependent on the weather, which subordinates me to my surroundings. The pulp's autonomous and unruly nature introduces an element of chance to my work—yet another vital aspect of play. In his thesis, Henricks lists “a fascination with the fall of the dice, and the chance to assert power over someone who resists you, or the perplexities of self-experience” as components of chance and power in play.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, material mastery and finesse are characteristics of the way I play in the studio. Getting the pulp to do what I want is part of testing my power of manipulation. The possibility of failure contributes to the playful nature of my practice, while the threat of non-cooperation reflects the impossibility of ever fully understanding myself in relation to my surroundings. Working with the pulp is a constant negotiation with the other, and is another way for me to place myself within a larger context.

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<sup>6</sup> Henricks, p. 197.

## Conclusion

As we physically navigate the world, we are confronted with states of contemporaneous fear and desire. I am fascinated by this ambiguous relationship to the body. I want to know how simultaneously beautiful and grotesque my pieces can be; how alive I can make them feel. I make my works with ritual and play—seemingly oppositional tools I use to parse through my conflicting relationship with my body. I want my works to contain a need for connection so great, that they reverberate in new spaces with other beings. And I want to know how much my works can teach me about myself so that I may learn to better fuse with others and my surroundings.

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