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Asunder

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ASUNDER

by

RACHEL BALLARD

Under the Direction of Christina A. West, MFA

ABSTRACT

Traumatic triggers come in many forms: the smell of a rose, the taste of a warm pie, the sound of music, the gaze of a loved one, and the touch of soft soil. What appears ordinary to one may repel another, but the tension between these two opposing reactions is what entices me as an artist. Every trigger is tied to a specific memory which causes me, as a survivor, to question my reality and what I believe to be true. Is this love or is this abuse? What happens when I succumb to the memory that haunts me? My work addresses themes of domesticity, trauma, and sentimentality through the creation of sculpture and video works. *Asunder* is a minefield of such works that are my response to personal trauma while offering a space for outside connection.

INDEX WORDS: Trauma, Domesticity, Sculpture, PTSD, Feminism, Contemporary Art

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RACHEL BALLARD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2017

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2017

ASUNDER

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August 2017

DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper and exhibition to Tyler Nicholson and Michelle Laxalt. You two remind me every day how lucky I am to be here and how wonderful life can be. I would not have been able to do this without your love and friendship. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
LIST OF FIGURES	VII
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 THE VIEW FROM THE WINDOW	4
2.1 Roots.....	4
2.2 Mountains	7
2.3 City	9
3 THESIS WORK: WELCOME HOME	12
3.1 Domesticity	13
3.2 Trauma.....	15
3.3 Sentimentality.....	18
4 THE PARADOX OF TRAGEDY.....	21
5 CONCLUSION: INTO THE GARDEN	24
FIGURES.....	25
REFERENCES.....	40

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Rachel Ballard, <i>How Does It Taste?</i> , 2017	25
Figure 2. Tracy Emin, <i>Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995</i> , 1995.....	26
Figure 3. Rachel Ballard, <i>A Day For You</i> , 2017.....	26
Figure 4. Mary Reid Kelley, <i>The Syphilis of Sisyphus</i> , 2011	27
Figure 5. Maya Deren, <i>At Land</i> , 1946	27
Figure 6. Sara Eliassen, <i>A Blank Slate</i> , 2014.....	28
Figure 7. Rachel Ballard, <i>Use Me: Bathroom Edition</i> , 2016.....	29
Figure 8. Alex Bag, <i>Untitled Fall '95</i> , 1995.....	29
Figure 9. Rachel Ballard, <i>Let's Think About This Realistically</i> , 2016	30
Figure 10. Rachel Ballard, <i>Mrs. B</i> , 2017	31
Figure 11. Rachel Ballard, <i>Listen</i> , 2017	32
Figure 12. Rachel Ballard, <i>I think it's your turn</i> , 2017.....	33
Figure 13. Alfred Hitchcock, <i>Shadow of a Doubt</i> , 1943	34
Figure 14. Rachel Ballard, <i>A Day For You</i> , 2017.....	34
Figure 15. Rachel Ballard, <i>Choke</i> , 2017	35
Figure 16. Rachel Ballard, <i>Dick</i> , 2017.....	36
Figure 17. Rachel Ballard, <i>La Vie en Rose</i> , 2017	37
Figure 18. Rachel Ballard, <i>Asunder Installation View 1</i> , 2017	38
Figure 19. Rachel Ballard, <i>Asunder Installation View 2</i> , 2017	38
Figure 20. Rachel Ballard, <i>Asunder Installation View 3</i> , 2017	39

1 INTRODUCTION

asunder

[uh-suhn-der] /e'sender/

adverb

1. apart or widely separated; divided.
Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.
2. into separate parts; in or into pieces:
Lightning split the old oak tree asunder.

When I started graduate school nearly three years ago, I had no way of knowing the profound changes that were about to occur in my life. Recently married and optimistic about the future, I moved from the small mountain town of Boone, North Carolina to the city of Atlanta, Georgia. The culture shock was immediate as traffic, racism, and an overwhelming homeless population occupied my daily periphery. This was a world that I did not know how to navigate. With anxieties running high, adjusting to this new life proved to be a long and slow process. My husband and I bought our first home together in East Point, where we made plans of furthering our artistic careers and starting a family. I sought solace in tending to the roses that lined the front of our house and by nourishing the daydreams that floated in and out of my windowless studio. My efforts were unsuccessful.

In January of 2016, I moved out of my home and left my husband. I immediately moved in with fellow graduates, where I slept on the floor of their guest room for the next five months. An attempt at marriage counseling was made in the beginning, but ended abruptly when the letters PTSD were uttered during one of our therapy sessions. “Do you know what that means?” the counselor said to me. I stared blankly at her, dumbfounded. “What you were

just describing...that's PTSD." As the severity of this diagnosis and realization of its origins started to seep in, I knew there was no turning back.

Starting a master's program married and ending it divorced is not exactly what I had in mind, but it would be disingenuous of and impossible for me to avoid making a body of work surrounding my thoughts and feelings regarding this experience. Even before I moved out the house in East Point, the toxicity and troubles of my marriage were blatantly clear in my work. Friends and colleagues started asking questions that I never knew how to answer. "Is everything okay? What's going on at home?" The contrast between the joy I felt in school and the fear I felt at home, started to become unbearable. "Perhaps this is just what happens after you get married," I told myself, "it hurts." The unhappiness of my marriage permeated into everything I touched and invaded every thought. Although the abuse was strictly emotional in nature, the psychological impact it had on my mental health was devastating. The decision to move out has single-handedly been one of the best decisions I have made in my entire life.

The year of 2016 proved to be a difficult one not only for me, but for the entire country as the anticipation and excitement of possibly electing our first female president was shattered by the election of Donald J. Trump. Words cannot not accurately express the confusion, heartache, and devastation of his victory. His presidency has made art making seem frivolous and laughable at best when thousands of people are marching in the streets, there is talk of walls being built along our southern border, immigrant families fear deportation, Muslims and Syrian refugees are being banned from entering our country, and funding to the National Endowment for the Arts is threatened to be eliminated entirely. Just yesterday, the U.S. launched missile strikes into Syria in response to deadly chemical attacks allegedly ordered

by the country's president, Bashar Assad, against his own people. Most times it feels as though the entire world is imploding. The political climate that the Trump administration is generating is a smog of fear and ignorance that is suffocating our people.

The division I see in our country greatly diminishes the division I feel within myself. Perhaps this is partly due to the gift of time, which has offered me the distance to look back instead of to be. Decisions and moments leading up to leaving and embracing the unknown no longer seem as scary as they once did.

I believe now, more than ever, that we need to feel things. We need to have empathy for others, we need to cry, we need to laugh, we need to scream, and we need to fight. There is no reason to over-intellectualize art, which tends to further isolate us from one another by generating unspoken hierarchies of class and knowledge. We need art that can bring us together and allow us to confront and communicate our fears and feelings. I have created this body of work based on my separation from my ex-husband, but it is my hope that this work can bring people together to share something to which we all can relate.

2 THE VIEW FROM THE WINDOW

“Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot.”

- Charlie Chaplin

2.1 Roots

Every Friday night was movie night. My father would go to the Mooresville Public Library and rent classic film reels to play on our 16 mm Bell Howell projector. My parents, grandmother, two sisters, and I would huddle together on the floor and roar with laughter as the silent films of Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy played on the walls of our living room; the sound of the film clicking through the projector forever burned onto my memory. Saturday nights were dedicated to re-runs of *The Lawrence Welk Show*, where I, being the oldest, would lead my sisters in an entire theatrical production that mirrored what we saw flickering on the television screen. Dressed in a hodgepodge of my mother’s jewelry, heels, and our old Halloween costumes, we gleefully sought to be just as captivating and talented as the performers on the show, who were clearly a display of good taste and high-quality entertainment. Whenever we were not role-playing, we would draw or paint alongside my father in his studio. Elvis Presley’s music fueled our imaginations while we painted watercolors facing the windows to our backyard. Art was something to be celebrated in our home and I loved every minute of it.

My father’s own ambitions to be a painter undoubtedly had a major influence on me growing up. He painted meticulously rendered watercolors of abandoned farmhouses and country landscapes from around my hometown. But once I hit puberty, our bond of doting daughter and father changed. My budding sexuality was difficult for him to process and resulted in an extremely restricted and supervised adolescence.

Full of anger and angst, I become an expert at picking the lock to my father's studio door and then cracking the password on his computer so I could access America Online (AOL) to communicate with my friends and love interest. Once everyone in the house was asleep, I invited him over where he visited me outside of my bedroom window. This nightly ritual of teenage rebellion quickly turned sour when I realized after about two months that I was pregnant. I was fifteen years old. After weeks of stubbornly trying resolve this issue on my own, I finally told my father. The news irreversibly altered our relationship. His little girl image of me had been shattered.

Therefore, the window has become a powerful symbol for me, both for what it keeps in and what it keeps out. *How Does It Taste?* (fig. 1) has just as much relevance to my adolescence as it does to my adulthood. The outline of the window in high-gloss paint exists as merely a suggestion to an outside world, a boundary that is flexible and easily broken. By simplifying the form of the window, I allow the viewer's gaze to rest upon the more potent object: the pie. Pies already carry a great deal of cultural symbolism in this country, especially the apple and cherry red ones. But instead of a delicious filling that one might expect, this particular porcelain pie is filled with dried roses. What do roses taste like? How can you describe the taste of sex? As a journalist from *The New Times* wrote in 1902, "Pie is the American synonym of prosperity, and its varying contents the calendar of changing seasons. Pie is the food of the heroic. No pie-eating people can be permanently vanquished."¹ Deflowering, temptation, seduction, death, and patriotism are all the ingredients included in this simple, clean little object.

¹ "PIE," *The New York Times*, May 03, 1902, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9805E5D6103DEE32A25750C0A9639C946397D6CF&legacy=true> [accessed April 18, 2017].

The relatability of shared female experience is what draws me to the work of Tracey Emin. Notorious for unabashedly sharing the most intimate of her experiences to the public, Emin's courage and charisma are what simultaneously attracts me to and repels me from her work. Is it too personal? Is there any room for the audience or outside interpretation? Claire MacDonald helps to clarify:

Women artists had long struggled to negotiate the relationship between woman as the object of artistic representation and woman as agent and author of her work. The live presence of the artist in her work is one way in which she can assert her agency as a woman and as an artist, thereby confronting directly the relationship between the two. In a work where the self is the subject, the relationship of the artist to herself as subject of the work can be a complex one, but it is a complexity that is often overlooked.²

In this way, Emin's insistence on herself as the text of her work can be misread as a direct expression of identity, but the complex and often indirect ways in which she represents her experiences imply a more complex set of mediations between her life and her art.³

Emin's seminal piece, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (fig. 2), has been understood by most critics as an assertion of "in-her-face" female sexuality.⁴ Upon further investigation, the piece reveals an intimacy of sleep that not only includes the applied names of lovers, but also friends, family members, and even Emin's two aborted fetuses. Rosemary Betterton goes on to say that the labor involved in embroidering each name on the sides of the tent, further reflect the labor involved in the making of relationships, traditionally a feminine task.⁵ Emin's use of a domestic aesthetic, a personal life story and craft techniques in *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* clearly connect her to earlier practices of feminist art and are

² Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend, *The Art of Tracey Emin*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 33.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 34.

all elements I find compelling about this piece. By making herself vulnerable and revealing her truths, she causes all who encounter the work to recount the names of all those with whom they have shared the intimacy of sleep.

2.2 Mountains

When I graduated from high school, I received a scholarship to study music performance in The Hayes School of Music at Appalachian State University. Although the bassoon was my principal instrument, I pursued multiple vocal opportunities as well. I first joined the women's choir and auditioned to become a member of small female quartet. Singing with these groups of women gave me the opportunity to perform and to be creative in a more communal way.

Looking back, I suppose I felt I had something to prove. To whom, I could not say. Maybe it was my way of trying to get back to the girl dancing to *The Lawrence Welk Show*, instead of the girl who had an abortion at fifteen. Regardless, the ability to sing well felt like an essential quality of femininity that I needed. This thought was repeatedly reinforced by the enchantment of female Disney film characters and other forms of popular media marketed to young girls. Therefore, in my mind, Julie Andrews was the quintessential woman. She had everything: beauty, grace, kindness, warmth, moxie, and an astonishing voice that could move mountains. I distinctly remember especially admiring her for her ability to, with elegant ferocity, stand up to the male characters in her films. Men seemed to listen to her and she was not overly sexualized. From Mary Poppins to Maria Von Trapp, Andrews portrayed a woman with confidence I pinned to possess.

The female character, played by myself, in *A Day For You* (fig. 3 & 14), allowed to me access this sweet and unassuming cinematic woman of song. She exudes sentimentality as her tearful, unfocused gaze, and sad song drift across the screen. Initially, the female character's

singing is much like a lullaby, soft and low in tone. But as the piece progresses, her voice becomes increasingly strained as we realize that she is not alone. She prepares a pie, the filling is red, a man steps into the kitchen, she is choking. The cuts in the final edit are sharp and violent, mirroring the escalating scene that unfolds. Informed by my own experience with traumatic flashbacks, something I will further address in the next chapter, the character shifts between moments of solitude to moments of violence between the male figure. Flashes of her cutting the pie and defiantly licking the contents cause us to question her role and perceived innocence. In the end, it is her song that prevails.

The singing elements, poetry and dark humor of Mary Reid Kelley's video work strongly appeal to my feminine sensibilities (fig. 4). Kelley creates video works that give voice to the forgotten women of history. From the French Revolution to WWI, Kelley heavily researches the lives of these lost women and reconstitutes them through imagination and art. In an interview with ART21, Kelley speaks of female trauma:

Trauma, as experienced by women, is often cut off quite deliberately from artistic expression or artistic experience. Many men who did all kinds of work during the first world war would have written poetry.... they would have written a memoir. Women just didn't have those kinds of opportunities to process what had happened to them, so they couldn't put the trauma anywhere other than into the deep dark recess of history.⁶

This statement validates my own desire to investigate personal trauma, as I am fortunate enough to live during a time where I can process my experiences through the creation of works of art. With humor, wit, and impeccable skill, Mary Reid Kelley transforms unfavorable topics of

⁶ ART21 org, "Mary Reid Kelley: "You Make Me Illiad" ART21 "Exclusive," (YouTube. November 16, 2012) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaHDT_nOzaE [accessed April 18, 2017].

death, disease, and prostitution into thought provoking cinematic experiences which we all can appreciate.

2.3 City

Watching the films of Maya Deren (fig. 5) changed the way I approached my studio practice and expanded the label of artist. Even with the power of my family's collective and obsessive interest in classic films, I had no idea that this avant-garde female filmmaker of the 1940s ever existed. I felt as though I was being introduced to a former self. The dark mood and Deren's intuition with the camera were absolutely hypnotizing. The films felt like they had been made just for me. I understood them immediately on a completely psychological level, without a single spoken word. Deren writes of *At Land*:

Through dislocations of space and time it creates a relativistic universe in which the individual alone is a continuous identity. If one may speak of a theme, it is the effort of the individual to relate oneself, as an identity, to a fluid, apparently incoherent universe.⁷

The timing of my introduction to her work couldn't have been better as I started to feel the 'incoherent universe' shifting around me. She continues to be a constant source of intrigue and one of my biggest influences.

My earliest video works were dark as my mental health started to decline. I sought to disturb because I was disturbed. I wanted to hack my hair off with a sword, so I did. I wanted to teach you how to lie just as loved ones had lied to me. I wanted to dance in porcelain shoes until my feet bleed. I felt betrayed and like the life I had hoped for was never going to arrive. Video let me be someone else while being myself.

⁷ Maya Deren, *Essential Deren*, (Kingston: McPherson & Company, 2005), 247.

Once I made the move out of the house and filed for divorce, I traveled alone for a summer along the east coast. I stopped in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Portland and Montréal where I was exposed to the work of Sara Eliassen. Gallery hopping along Rue Sainte Catherine, I paused when I saw the face of a woman who looked strikingly like my mother playing on the walls of a gallery. The character was alone, just like me, traveling by herself in some abandoned coastal town. “Are you by yourself?” the man on the screen invasively asked her. “Married? You been here before? You know what it’s like when we come back to a place...it’s like the past and present merge.”⁸ I was speechless.

Similar to when I saw Deren’s films for the first time, Eliassen’s *A Blank Slate* (Fig. 6), seemed to be speaking directly to me. Here was a contemporary female artist and film maker doing precisely what I wanted to do: challenge the traditional male gaze of cinema. In an interview with Laetitia Sonami, Eliassen discusses her ideas behind the film,

The project started with me needing to question my own references a lot and if it was possible for me to remove myself from the film history I have seen and the cinema language I grew up with... Because this film is about a woman traveling alone, and the woman getting stuck on a Ferris wheel, seeing herself having sex in some sort of a fantasy, but it is written by a man and it’s narrated by a man in this book by Murakami.⁹

Having just finished a research paper on the female gaze in contemporary art not two months before, I could see the evidence of influential writers like Laura Mulvey and Lucy Lippard in the film, which greatly enhanced my viewing experience. *A Blank Slate* would serve an artistic beacon in the months leading up to my thesis exhibition.

⁸ “Sara Eliassen and Laetitia Sonami in conversation about Eliassen’s film *A Blank Slate*, 2014,” (Vimeo, 2016) <https://vimeo.com/171618410> [accessed April 8, 2017].

⁹ Ibid.

When I returned, I was determined to keep working in video and sculpting in ceramics, but I was not sure how to bring these two worlds together. The creation of the character, Amber Fine Sparkle was my solution (fig. 7). Named after an aventurine glaze by acclaimed ceramist, Lisa Orr, Amber Fine Sparkle highlights the tendency to fetishize technique within the craft community. With her white bobbed hair, porcelain cream dress, and ceramic glasses, Amber allows me to embody and simultaneously tease that fetish through satire. Her character represents a duality and struggle within myself to embrace my southern craft-centric roots while also working to push beyond them into a broader art context.

I was finally starting to play again. The studio had become a much more pleasant place and I could feel a younger self starting to emerge as I developed the costume, wig, and voice. Writing the script was like writing comedy. It was cathartic and allowed me to purge my frustrations toward female objectification, the craft community, and Donald Trump all at once under this pristine, Warholian-like mask of Amber Fine Sparkle. My engagement in social and institutional critique, is not unlike that of Alex Bag in *Untitled Fall '95*, one of the most interesting protagonists of video performance. Wearing costumes, masks and make-up, the artist plays most roles herself, aiming not at a naturalistic performance based on the attempt to feel the part, but instead seeking out a moment of difference or excess and unfinishedness.¹⁰ Bag writes all the scripts herself and deploys an aesthetic defined by immediacy. This immediate and unfinished quality is evident in my own video work as I learn to navigate a new medium and try to embrace my amateur approach.

¹⁰ Fame Driver. "Alex Bag." Alex Bag: Alex Bag. http://teamgal.com/artists/alex_bag/exhibitions/233/alex_bag [accessed April 18, 2017].

3 THESIS WORK: WELCOME HOME

“When you’re in the shit up to your neck, there’s nothing left to do but sing.”

- Samuel Beckett

For months, my idea of home was constantly shifting. What is home? Is it a place? A feeling? A person? Unaware of its profound importance during the time, my piece *Let’s Think About This Realistically* (fig. 9) for the exhibition *Home: Reflections on Place* at The Xchange Gallery in Atlanta would set the course for all of the future work included in my thesis exhibition. Using a small table, tap shoes, sod, chia seeds and ceramic sculpture, *Let’s Think About This Realistically* was my first attempt to process my experiences of emotional and verbal abuse directly through art. My statement for the exhibition is as follows:

I became a first-time homeowner approximately two years ago. Tucked into a quaint neighborhood and lined with bright red rose bushes, this little brick house effortlessly held the hopes of a bright future. It provided me with a sense of place, contributed to my identity and seemed to offer the promise of shelter, security, and family. It was more than I ever could have asked for. Unfortunately, these hopes soon faded to reveal a tormented reality that thrived on anger and fear. The voice of reason smothered the dream. *Let’s Think About This Realistically* is my attempt to rebel against that voice, heal from the trauma, and mourn the loss of a home that is no longer mine.

Therefore, it made perfect sense that I would feel compelled to reference the home in my thesis exhibition. The final result was clearly not a home, but referenced domestic life by pulling in simplified versions and images of things we associate with the home. The majority of the work used a restricted color palette of black, white and red, with the exception of green from the living grass and moss. These restrictions quiet the work and generate a serious undertone that I find particularly appealing and conducive for contemplation. My use of color relates to the varying degrees of realism in the work. At times things are presented in the round and are colored naturalistically, and at other times they are reduced to flat images or black and white

simplified representations. All of the decisions regarding color and reduction, rely on the potency of the original memory or trigger and my desire to either delude or enhance it.

3.1 Domesticity

Once I had spent several months away from the house in East Point, I was surprised by how much I missed it. It wasn't the relationship with my husband, as much as it was the house itself and my role within it. It was a part of my identity and something in which I took great pride. I didn't mind playing the part of the domestic housewife, in fact, I often feel in constant conflict with her. She is the aspect of my identity that wants to tend to the home, raise the children, and be the little homemaker. But this traditional and somewhat submissive woman constantly conflicts with my ambitions to be an artist. How on earth could she be remotely appealing? This is where the charm of fictional characters like the ones within Julie Andrews' wheelhouse, continues to ensnare me. Through cultural reinforcement and a conservative upbringing, I can hear her voice pleasantly telling me that this is what I want and what I should desire as a young woman.

The photograph of *Mrs. B* (fig. 10) illustrates this internal conflict. This is the last image taken of me inside of the house in East Point. I had officially moved everything out and spent my final hours cleaning every inch of the home. Somehow this maintenance labor was my way of coping and saying goodbye. The repetitive and mundane actions generated an intimacy between myself and the space. As Mierle Laderman Ukeles writes:

Some saw her as being trapped. Those who would ask her [...] not knowing she was working harder than she had ever worked in her life, trying to keep everything going, the mother part, that artist part, whirling-they would ask her, 'Do you do anything?' [...] Many women, the ancient maintenance class who were told that's who they were meant to be without bothering to ask them [...] most people in the world were spending most of their time trying to keep someone going. Someone alive, sustained, doing service work, maintenance work of one kind or another. They were, however, trapped in a high culture frame that froze them into being

seen as “Do you do anything?” (of importance, not this stuff), or not present with power. And without voice.¹¹

The black pentagon frame surrounding the photograph, further anchors me to the domestic space. I am trapped, not unlike a fairytale princess in a tower, and unfortunately like so many women trapped in their homes unable to escape the domestic terrors that they continue to privately endure. The idea of the glass house and peering in at what goes on behind closed doors is also provided. You can see me, but I am completely drained of color and the question of whether or not I am alone lies in the question of who is taking the photograph. I sit in the light facing the windows to the outside and turn my back against the rest of the home. My gaze confronts the viewer. How could you possibly know everything that has happened in this room from just looking at me?

The ghost of a telephone is strategically placed directly underneath the frame in clear high-gloss paint. *Listen* (fig. 11) alludes to an opportunity to call for help or to communicate, but is one that can never be fulfilled. This impossibility of communication is due, not to a lack of interest, but to an incomprehension of what was going on at home, which only further isolated and silenced me from the outside world.

In, *I think it's your turn* (fig. 12) places the responsibility of washing my dirty dishes onto the viewer. This is just one of the many domestic activities that is traditionally placed upon the woman of the home to perform and complete. Washing the dishes and, more specifically, plastic bags was a constant source of unnecessary neurosis and strain on my marriage. When it was done and how it was done were of the utmost importance and if I did not complete the task correctly, I was sure to hear about it. Therefore, in this domestic tableau, I bring in the kitchen

¹¹ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “25 Years Later,” 1998.

sink and especially dirty dishes in the form of unfired porcelain. The water is there to wash and remove all traces of filth, but any attempt made at washing these bone-dry dishes will only result in furthering their disintegration. By the end of the exhibition, they were nothing more than mud.

The use of sod returns as a way for me to misbehave and essentially refuse to wipe my feet before entering the home. I directly bring the outside indoors and transform the sod into my kitchen countertop, bugs and all. Subliminally drawing from works like Walter De Maria's *Earth Room* and Doris Salecdeo's *Plegaria Muda*, my use of living plants has only just begun. I will continue to incorporate living plants into the work as an act of domestic rebellion and symbol of resilience.

3.2 Trauma

Post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, is found among women at approximately twice the rate as in men.¹² Marian Allsopp explains,

The term embraces all people who are said to have exceeded the boundaries of the word 'distressed'; people in a constant state of hyper-arousal, as in intense fear; who relive horrific past events in the present in the form of intrusive thoughts and flashbacks with all their original emotive power, at the same time avoiding, or sometimes, conversely, deliberately seeking similar or associated situations; occasionally amnesiac or dissociated and generally numb and uninterested in social and physical surroundings.¹³

Feminist relational theory posits that relationships have a special status for women, and that women's sense of self is organized around their ability to create and maintain relationships.¹⁴ Therefore, women may be more vulnerable to developing PTSD following assaultive events because of these events' impact on the relationships that are closely tied to women's sense of

¹² Rachel Kimerling, Paige Ouimette, and Jessica Wolfe, *Gender and PTSD*, (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), xii.

¹³ Marion Allsopp, *Emotional Abuse and Other Psychic Harms: Invisible Wounds and Their Histories*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 70.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

self.¹⁵ This is particularly true in a woman's relationship with someone she trusted. In this situation, she may, in an attempt to preserve the relationship, blame herself for the violence that occurred.¹⁶ All of the symptoms of PTSD are predicated on one necessary condition: an aetiological event.¹⁷

A Day for You (fig. 3 & 14) is a fictional reinterpretation of such an event and stands as the centerpiece of my exhibition. Largely inspired by a single photo from the Hitchcock film, *Shadow of a Doubt* (fig. 13), my first viewing of this image caused an entire scene to unfold in my mind. "He's choking me," I thought, "I want him to choke me." I knew I wasn't alone in being able to relate to the severity of this image and, as I mentioned previously, I knew that I wanted the character's song to be what defeats him. Therefore, I sang:

*If I had words to make a day for you
I'd sing you a morning, golden and true
I would make this day last for all time
And fill the night deep in moonshine*¹⁸

The song, originally written by Scott Fitzgerald in 1978, comes from Chris Noonan's film, *Babe: The Gallant Pig*, 1995, one of my childhood favorites. In the film, Farmer Hoggett sings this song to the little pig in order to make him well again. It's an incredibly touching scene and one that has always stood out in my mind over the years. If I had any final words to give my ex-husband to conclude this experience, I would sing him this song. Twice and that is all.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rachel Kimerling, Paige Ouimette, and Jessica Wolfe, *Gender and PTSD*, (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), 121.

¹⁷ Marion Allsopp, *Emotional Abuse and Other Psychic Harms: Invisible Wounds and Their Histories*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 71.

¹⁸ Scott Fitzgerald, "If I Had Words" lyrics, <https://genius.com/Scott-fitzgerald-and-yvonne-keeley-if-i-had-words-lyrics> [accessed on April 18, 2017].

Acclaimed artist and director, David Lynch, writes that the filmmaker doesn't have to be suffering to show suffering. "You can show it, show the human condition, show conflicts and contrasts, but you don't have to go through that yourself. You are the orchestrator of it, but you're not in it. Let your characters do the suffering."¹⁹ Unfortunately, I have been through it and, at least for now, I happen to be the one playing my characters. In this sense, I believe I can use these difficult personal experiences as a powerful tool in the work. However, I agree with Lynch and prefer to create art from a far healthier perspective than the one I have been in for the past three years.

Choke (fig. 15) is my interpretation of the emotional suppression and masculine stoicism I viewed in my ex-husband during our marriage. Men are taught from an early age to resist showing any signs of emotion. Our patriarchal and capitalist culture places extreme pressure on them to succeed and to be the bread-winners of their families. This typically involves dressing the part, complete with suit and tie. When these pressures build up, they can manifest themselves into unhealthy habits, such as excessive drinking. Therefore, an empty whiskey glass rests on the shelf underneath a plethora of red ties. Arranged in an inverted pentagon that mirrors the frame confining *Mrs. B*, the neatly displayed ties almost point to the glass in collective temptation. The variety of idioms surrounding the word "choke" only add to the piece's effectiveness and are further reinforced in the multiple scenes involving ties in *A Day For You*.

As Judith Trowell argues, with emotional abuse, "victims are unable or do not speak of the abuse; 'symptoms' are non-specific [...]. If emotional abuse leaves a wound, it is invisible, inscribed on some site that we might call the inner life. Any non-specific behavioral symptoms

¹⁹ David Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 93.

could be read as an outward expression of this wounded inner state.”²⁰ This is why I find art so important to this process. It has allowed me to speak when I could not find the words.

3.3 Sentimentality

Not until recently have I been able to identify and acknowledge the sentimental nature of my work. Sentimentality seemed too nostalgic, emotional, popular, embarrassing, mushy, immature, and unsophisticated. It was the last thing, I wanted people to think of when they viewed my work. However, Lauren Berlant’s book *The Female Complaint* has begun to alter my perspective. She writes:

The works of “women’s culture” enact a fantasy that my life is not just mine, but an experience understood by other women, even when it is not shared by many or any. Commodified genres of intimacy, such as Oprahesque chat shows and “chick lit,” circulate among stranger, enabling insider self-help talk such as “girl talk” to flourish in an intimate public. These genres claim to reflect a kernel of common experience and provide frames for encountering the impacts of living as a woman in the world. Sentimentality and complaint are two ends of the commercial convention, with feminism as a kind of nosy neighbor.²¹

Berlant continues to explain how sentimentality and fantasy of a better world, allow people to affectively experience a better life without being able to live it objectively.²² Sentimentality and fantasy combined produces art that transports people somewhere into a *situation*, if only for a minute. It also teaches that endings can be made into openings.²³

Having turned the end of my marriage into the opening of my thesis exhibition, I suppose I can no longer deny the presence of sentimentality in my work. And with that, I would like to discuss two of the most sentimental works in my exhibition: *Dick* and *La Vie en Rose*.

²⁰ Marion Allsopp, *Emotional Abuse and Other Psychic Harms: Invisible Wounds and Their Histories*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 151.

²¹ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), x.

²² *Ibid*, 31.

²³ *Ibid*.

If I were born a boy, my name would be Richard Ballard. Named after my father's father, I would likely be referred to as "Dick" just as my grandfather once was. He died of a heart attack while playing racket ball during a vacation in Florida with my grandmother. My father was the one who identified his body. *Richard (Dick) Ballard* (fig. 16) is the only sculptural figure present in the exhibition. Standing six feet tall on printed foam core with ball and racket in hand, he appears young, healthy, and dapper, like a movie star cutout. He is my life-sized paper-doll, easy to romanticize and idealize because he is dead and we never met. In proximity to the other work, his presence is patriarchal and questionable. Who is this Dick? Is he the man choking the woman on the screen? Or is he another character? I welcome all interpretations.

On the opposite wall, is a large white upright piano with an even larger foam core cutout of hundreds of bright red roses hanging above (fig. 17). Sod grows out of the piano bench and a handful of white picture frames filled with black soil stand on top of the piano. The sheet music to Edith Piaf's *La Vie en Rose* and a dozen red roses wilt quietly on the stand. As the granddaughter of Rosemarie, daughter of Rosemary, and sister to Katie Rose, I find this flower has particular resonance with my family history and was one of the main allures to buying the house in East Point. Roses, like the pie, carry their own array of cultural symbolism regarding love and death, among other things. The song, *La Vie en Rose*, literally translates to 'life through rose-tinted glasses,' which is often the fate of many young fools in love. It also happens to be the first song my ex-husband and I danced to as husband and wife.

Many home picture frames contain sentimental images of friends and family members. The ones sitting atop my parent's home piano are no different. They all contain wedding portraits of from both sides of the family. Therefore, whether divorced, dead, or not, I decided to bury them.

La Vie en Rose is gone and all I can do now is prepare the soil and plant the seeds for new growth.

4 THE PARADOX OF TRAGEDY

“I want to make people cry even when they don’t understand my words.”

- Edith Piaf

During one of my committee meetings, the question of viewership arose. “How do you want your audience to respond to this work?” When making art that is so deeply personal, it can be difficult to decide what to include and what to remove. In the final execution of a work, I have decided, formally, that less is more. With less visual information, it causes the viewer to ask more questions and to linger with the work longer. I have shared many stories in this paper thus far, but that is only because I have the unique opportunity to write about the work in a professional and academic setting. During an artist talk or even in simple conversation, I constantly battle with how much of myself to reveal and how much of it to conceal within the work. My catharsis comes from the making, and it is much more important to me that the audience can purge and connect to their own emotions in their viewing of it. Just as Tracey Emin’s *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 65-95*, I would much rather the viewer think of their own sleeping partners than mine.

How can we explain the satisfaction taken in experiencing art that is unpleasant? To begin to understand why people choose to experience works of art that are wrenching, depressing, exhausting, and horrifying when there are so many others of equal worth that are, by contrast, amusing and uplifting, we must first understand the paradox of tragedy. In Aristotle’s *Poetic’s*, the doctrine of catharsis is proposed to deal with it. Catharsis, in the case of tragedy must be the very process by which the pain of emotions like pity and fear is transformed into pleasure.²⁴

²⁴ Jerrold Levinson, *Suffering Art Gladly: The Paradox of Negative Emotion in Art*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 6.

Aristotle claims, “Tragedy is a mimesis...that effect, through pity and fear, the catharsis of such emotions.”²⁵ That is, tragedies that elicit high degrees of pity and fear in their viewers help ‘purge’ the viewer of excess negative emotions through catharsis so that the viewer’s emotional balance may be restored.²⁶

We may be saddened by a work of art and pained by it, but on a meta-level, we may recognize our first-order responses as appropriate, and be pleased by their appropriateness. If, on the contrary, the viewer notices that they are unmoved by human tragedy, this may be a depressing self-discovery, which suggests that they lack normal human emotions.²⁷ Pierre Destrée questions whether the emotions we experience in front of a work of art are the same emotions we experience in the real world. When we imagine a dreadful event, or are contemplating one in a painting, we are not emotionally involved in it and therefore no reaction follows from it.²⁸ I believe our emotional involvement changes when the viewing audience knows the artist personally. Both of my aunts and two of my students cried when they watched, *A Day For You*.

“Why do you want to traumatize your audience?” was another question asked of me some years ago, before I was even diagnosed with PTSD. Why would an artist want to cause a viewer pain? To answer it simply, to try to ‘wake them up’ and disturb them a little. Iskra Fileva writes that when you disturb viewers, you engage their emotions and you make them pay attention to the art and care about its content.²⁹ We all have terrible thoughts and impulses, whether we care to admit them or not. Fileva continues,

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.,173.

²⁷ Ibid.,176.

²⁸ Ibid., 13.

²⁹ Ibid., 176.

The messages of powerful art are not things we can directly and comfortably say to each other. Certainly not to strangers, but, likely, not to those we are closest with, or even to ourselves. Only art is allowed to give voice to them, thanks to its fictional or symbolic nature.³⁰

This is precisely why I have chosen not to write or speak about certain works in my thesis. I would much rather them remain at a critical distance.

From a critical distance the disturbance in question is primarily moral. When the works hits ‘too close to home’ and such distance is reduced, the disturbance is psychological. In the former case, we feel that the challenge is addressed to everyone, not primarily us. This is the power behind sentimentality in women’s culture that Berlant refers to in her book. Tragedy reminds of us of how fortunate we are. We can give voice to concerns we are not quite sure how to address. The viewer of painful art feels respected: like they are capable of taking it. However, they must be in a robust state of mind in order to derive any pleasure from the experience. We need the mental strength in order to confront our fears. Fileva’s final suggestion as to why we might enjoy the experience of pain: pain assures us that we are human.³¹

³⁰ Ibid., 177.

³¹ Ibid., 182.

5 CONCLUSION: INTO THE GARDEN

“I’ve been absolutely terrified every moment of my life – and I’ve never let it keep from doing a single thing that I wanted to do.”

- Georgia O’Keffe

Throughout this paper, I have discussed my early artistic and personal influences, the presence of domesticity, trauma, and sentimentality in the work, and the paradox of tragedy, which allows us to derive pleasure from viewing painful art. Despite having to experience the immense sadness of divorce and the death of a relationship during my graduate studies, I see this moment as a bright beginning. I doubt that I would be an artist without these experiences, both traumatic and otherwise. When I succumb to the memories that haunt me, I am compelled to make art. Through this process I am able to arrive at a more resolved understanding of troubling circumstances. As Berlant says, perhaps endings truly can be openings.

6 FIGURES

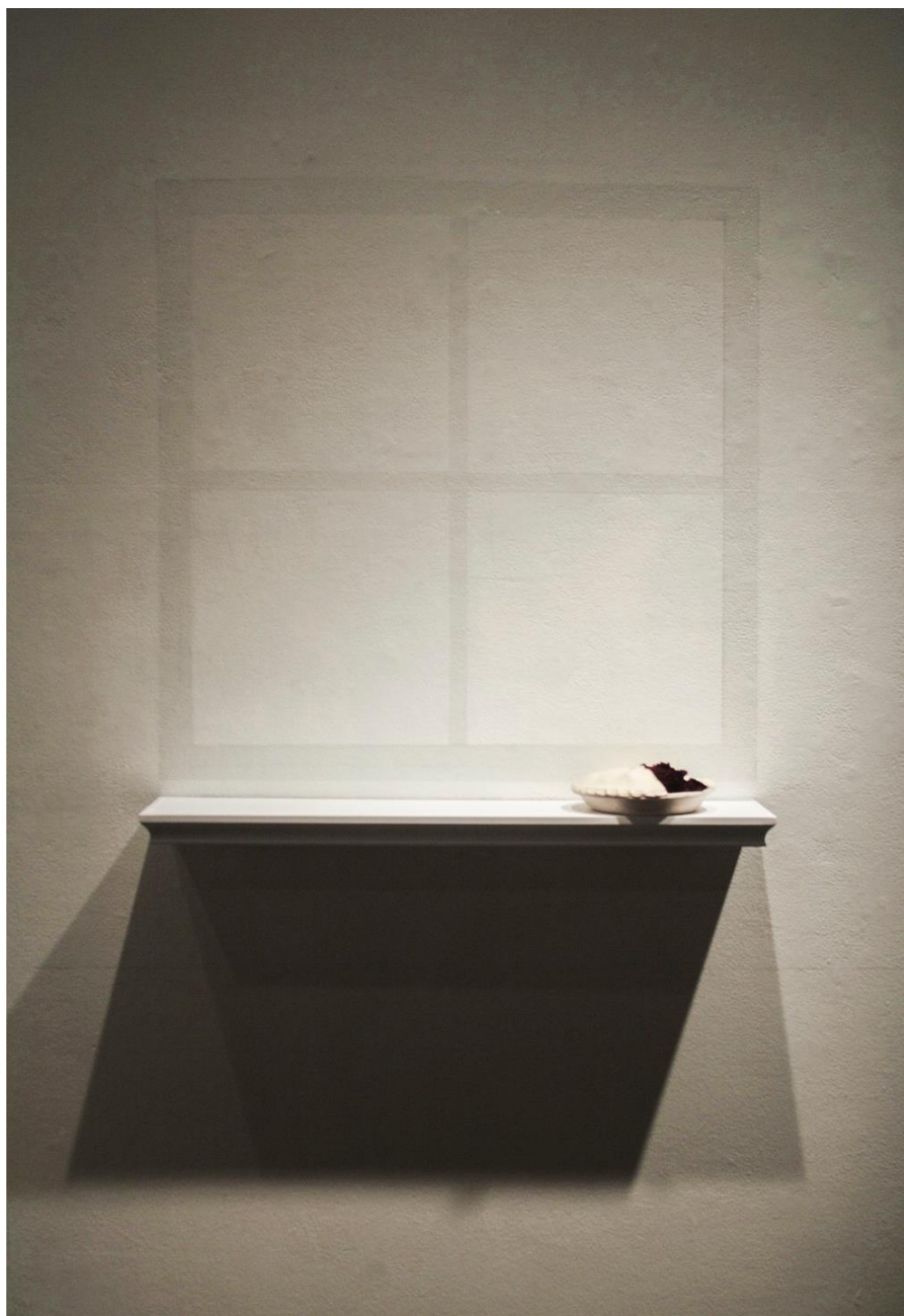


Figure 1. Rachel Ballard, *How Does It Taste?*, 2017
clear high-gloss paint, wood, porcelain, and dried roses 36 x 13 x 21 in.



Figure 2. Tracy Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, 1995
appliqué tent, mattress and light, 48 x 96½ x 84½ in.

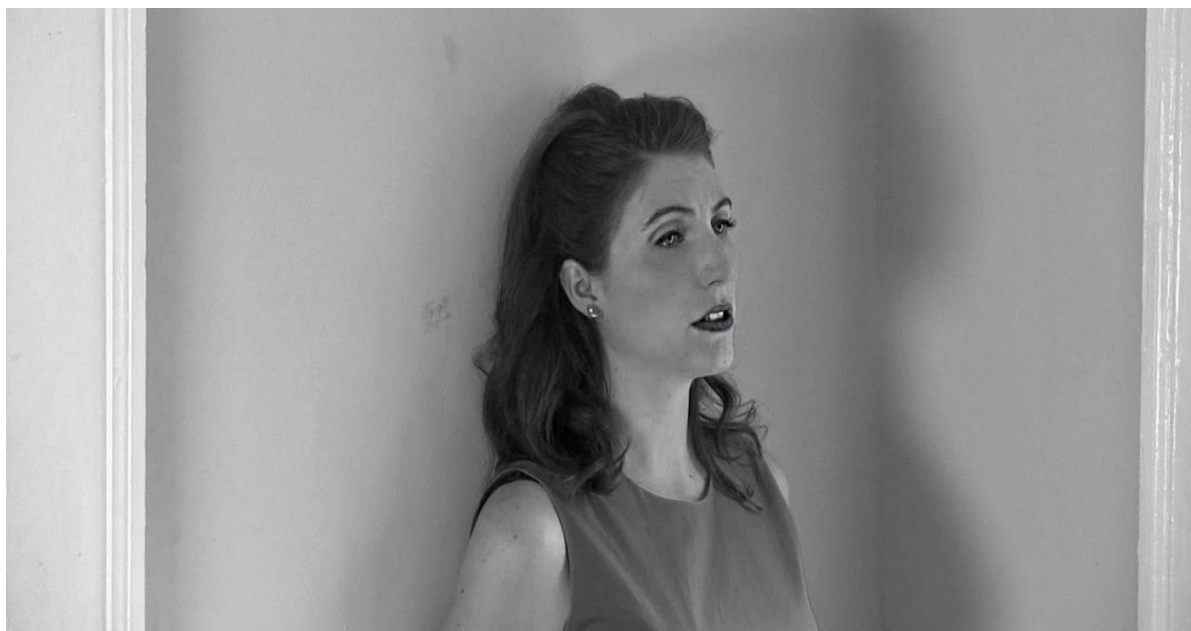


Figure 3. Rachel Ballard, *A Day For You*, 2017
digital video, dimensions variable



Figure 4. Mary Reid Kelley, *The Syphilis of Sisyphus*, 2011
digital video, dimensions variable



Figure 5. Maya Deren, *At Land*, 1946



Figure 6. Installation view of Sara Eliassen's *A Blank Slate*, 2014 during *Does the Oyster Sleep?* exhibition at SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art in Montréal, Québec, 2016



Figure 7. Rachel Ballard, Amber Fine Sparkle in *Use Me: Bathroom Edition*, 2016
digital video, dimensions variable



Figure 8. Alex Bag, *Untitled Fall '95*, 1995
video, dimensions variable



Figure 9. Rachel Ballard, *Let's Think About This Realistically*, 2016
sod, found table, earthenware, chia seeds, tap shoes, and grow light, 20 x 12 x 6 in.



Figure 10. Rachel Ballard, *Mrs. B*, 2017
archival pigment print and wooden frame, 10 x 1 x 14 in.



Figure 11. Rachel Ballard, *Listen*, 2017
clear high-gloss paint and wood, 18 x 24 x 8 in.



Figure 12. Rachel Ballard, *I think it's your turn*, 2017
clear high-gloss paint, wood, sod, stainless steel and porcelain, 36 x 21 x 13 in.



Figure 13. Alfred Hitchcock, *Shadow of a Doubt*, 1943



Figure 14. Rachel Ballard, *A Day For You*, 2017
digital video, dimensions variable



Figure 15. Rachel Ballard, *Choke*, 2017
neck ties, wood, and whiskey glass, 26 x 26 x 3 in.



Figure 16. Rachel Ballard, *Dick*, 2017
foamcore, 72 x 24 in.



Figure 17. Rachel Ballard, *La Vie en Rose*, 2017
white upright piano, foam core, picture frames, soil, sheet music, sod and roses, 36 x 72 x 96 in.



Figure 18. Rachel Ballard, *Asunder* Installation View 1, 2017



Figure 19. Rachel Ballard, *Asunder* Installation View 2, 2017



Figure 20. Rachel Ballard, *Asunder* Installation View 3, 2017

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