



Undergraduate Fellowship Research

Visualizing the Visceral

2017

Introduction

The art which I am drawn and respond to comes from a very raw, intimate place. Art which makes people react, talk, makes people happy, angry, confused. Art, to me, has the power to give voice to something which words do not suffice to say. This idea of art voicing what I cannot has been a driving conceptual factor for much of the work I have made during my time as an undergraduate. As an artist, it has been important to me to make art which reveals the most private and personal experiences of myself. I use my artistic practice as a means to confront my own intimate vulnerability and create a visual language which resonates with those thoughts. The process of making and sharing my art has been wrought with emotions: frustration, uncertainty, satisfaction, fear, eagerness, disappointment, joy. The time I spend in my studio is focused on making work which others can connect to emotionally, an expression of my inner existence presented to the world. My hope is the response to my work leads to empathetic conversations about human emotion and experience.

Bodies of Work

Visualizing the Visceral

As the eldest of six, I was given a lot of responsibility early on in my life. Because I was frequently relied upon by both my parents and siblings, I found myself shouldering other people's emotional burdens, and not taking the time to express my own. Thus, as I grew older, that ability to express myself often alluded me. My perceived need to outwardly be strong and reliable led to internally being emotionally encumbered and left me yearning for an outlet. Because of this, I often express emotional difficulties in my work, aiming to create something tangible out of the experiences which I struggle with.

After speaking to people in my circle who also struggled with expressing themselves—often due to negative reactions they encountered from society—I began to develop my series of works on paper which I exhibited under the title *Visualizing the Visceral*. With these works, I intended to visually present personally emotional experiences in a way which was uniquely and completely my own, but simultaneously made my deeply felt emotions accessible and available for interpretation by the viewers of these works.

I wanted to express emotions which I often dealt with, and ones that I have found many people experiencing to differing levels. I chose to use drawing processes to visualize the corporeal and emotional experiences of stress, anxiety, and depression. I chose these three due to their prevalence in discussion in my larger peer group, and seemingly on a national level, but also because they were so strongly intertwined together for me. Often times as I get stressed, it then leads to strong feelings of anxiety, which drains me and leaves me depressed. I wanted to present these feelings both as a mental experience, a physical experience, and a scientific occurrence. For this series, I did a lot of psychological research, both on my own as well as through guidance by faculty in the IU Southeast Psychology Department. I researched how the body handles and processes emotion, how the nervous system controls emotions, body language and facial expression linked to emotions and why that happened, as well as a basic psychology of color and mark. I used this research as a basis for my methodology, but allowed my interpretation of it and my own experience to dictate what was actually represented.



Figure 1. Figure 1. *Visceral Anatomy Triptych*, mixed media on mylar, 2017

The triptych *Visceral Anatomy* (fig. 1) explored emotional responses as biological reactions. Emotions are more than simply feelings, but rather complex reactions utilizing many different areas of the body. This triptych was designed to mimic anatomical charts and pinpoint where in the body certain emotions are felt and originate from, stemming from the activity in

the nervous system and being represented as physical sensations. I chose to use drawing as the medium for this triptych because of its strong connection as a tool in the medical field. In utilizing medical references, I sought to emphasize that emotions are bodily responses to situations, written within our biology. I wanted to visualize the reason I felt the way I did, to explain it as a reaction beyond my control and completely normal for me to experience. I wanted the description of the bodies to be less important than the internal happenings, drawing them in gray scale and using specific colors to describe the emotional and inner sensations.



Figure 2. *Visceral Anatomy: Ubiquitous*, mixed media on mylar, 2017

To begin, I depicted the differing levels of activity in the nervous system using the gold leaf and graphite from the brain down into the body. As seen in *Visceral Anatomy: Ubiquitous* (fig. 2), the nervous system branches down from the brain into the body. Bits of gold leaf represent the nervous system activity radiating into the torso and limbs, signifying the activity of stress causes in the body, pumping energy throughout the body as the flight or fight response is activated. Next, I chose material and shapes which I felt represented the sensations within the body attributed to the emotion. I placed these designs in the areas of the body which my research showed the emotions originating and where I felt them. In *Ubiquitous*, I placed the tension as a central column within the

ribcage, with threads being pulled from it every direction, to signify the feeling of being pulled by outside influences every way, which I associate with stress. This column is dark and dense, sitting heavily within the body. I added greens and purple with prismacolor pencils and soft pastels in the dense pit of the stomach to represent queasiness, which stress often induces within the body and I severely experience. In this particular piece, I developed the body fully;

however, as the triptych progressed, I allowed the body to dissolve in areas as emotional states took over a sense of self and bodily presence.



Figure 3. Headspace Triptych, oil and mixed media on paper, 2017

The next triptych which I did in this body of work explored the internal experience versus external expression of these emotions. Often times, I find myself hiding the emotions I am dealing with, either from shame or uncertainty of how to express it. This experience drove me to create the oil paint *Headspace* triptych, a set of three portraits depicting the faces which I present to the world—overwhelmed, removed, cheerful—which then dissolve into the chaos actually occurring in my mind. These pieces were driven from personal experience rather than reference to psychological and scientific research. They were more narrative base, depicting the actual happenings of the experience. I did these pieces in oil paint to emphasize the presence of the body and tactility of the experience, describing nuanced flesh tones and the visceral barrage within the mind. I chose composition, lighting, and colors based on my visualization of the emotion.



Figure 4. *Headspace: Draining*, oil paint, charcoal, and gold leaf on paper, 2017

The composition in *Headspace: Draining* (fig. 4) was designed to describe depression. It presents the body mostly facing the front, with the head and eyes turned slightly to the side. This was to show an attempt to be present and engaging, while at the same time being removed and desiring absence. The face, although significantly covered, still shows an attempted, half-hearted smile in the cheeks and eyes. I used charcoal in the background to create a dark, chaotic undertone, overlapped by the paint drips. The drips symbolize the energy and emotion draining out, my inner self dissolving. The gold leaf was used to signify that this was happening within the body, linking back to the nervous system in *Visceral Anatomy*. In this portrait, I covered a large portion of the face with the emotional description, because depression is the most

difficult emotion for me to work through. It is the one which I, and several of my peers, seem to be the most overwhelmed and entrapped by. It robs the most of my identity from me.



Figure 5. *Inner Space Triptych*, graphite and prismacolor pencil on Reeves, 2017

For the *Inner Space* triptych (fig. 5), I sought to find a way to represent bodily experiences without describing the body. Knots are often used figuratively to describe physical sensations linked to emotional responses. Referencing this often-used description, I designed tangled threads in a way which would mimic both the placement of these knotted sensations within the body, as well as how those feelings differed and were specific to each emotion. My hope was to create works which invoked an emotional response and were recognizable as bodily responses to stress, anxiety, and depression, without depicting an actual body.

For each work, I took some thread and knotted it as close to what I envisioned as possible. I used this reference as a basis, but then altered it in the drawing process into what I imagined represented that feeling to me; whether the knotted feeling was tight and dense, or bubbling, or loosening and falling. For example, *Inner Space: Whelming* (fig. 6), is my interpretation of anxiety. The focal point of the knot is located higher up, referencing the chest area; it is pulsating and writhing as an anxious, pounding heart, large and dense and heavy, meant to hinder the ability to breathe. The string then loops down to what would be the pit of the stomach, with loops bubbling back up, as the “butterflies in the stomach” feeling. The strings are placed in a dark, recessed sort of space, with a dark red in areas, to create a sense of the internal body space.



Figure 6. *Inner Space: Whelming*, graphite and prisma color pencil on Reeves, 2017

As part of my artistic practice, I actively look to other artists for inspiration and guidance. Relevant artists to whom I looked while working on this series were Wangechi Mutu (fig. 5 left) and Jenny Saville (fig. 5 right), both of whom are artists who depict the body in order to explore visceral experiences and identity. These artists inspired me to allow my figures to

lose stability, to dissolve into space, and to be only one element telling my story, not what I relied fully on.



Figure 5. (Left) Wangechi Mutu, "A Fantastic Journey", installation view at the Museum of Contemporary Art; (Right) Jenny Saville, "Intertwine" 2011-2014

I showed these three triptych sets at a solo exhibition at Silica Ceramic, where I was able to engage the broader public with my work. I was able to talk with several people about my work at the opening reception, including people who knew me and my work, as well as people from the community who I had never engaged with.

One gentleman, who was a biology teacher, was very supportive of my concepts. He stated that he agreed that these emotions are biological nature and a part of our animalistic roots. He pointed out, though, that as a dominating species with a long life span, we have created social structures which we confine ourselves to through boredom. We are no longer fighting to survive, so we built a complex society and dictate what is acceptable for us to feel and how we deal with it. Because of this, as I speculated earlier on, it is difficult for individuals to deal with these emotions, because they are so stigmatized, even though they are reactions written into our DNA.

Another gentleman I spoke to recently told me he could actually feel color as a physical sensation, which I thought was really interesting. Although he could "feel" color, he had never thought about it relating to emotional responses, which is how I have always experienced color. Having that conversation describing my practice and relating it to his physical response to my

work was very interesting and he told me that he would look at art differently because of it.

Conclusion

Overall, listening to people's reactions to my work and their description of what emotions the pieces felt like to them was very intriguing. Sometimes it matched up to my personal interpretation, sometimes it was completely different. But I've always felt that that was the beautiful thing about art and something I've accepted within my practice. While I can portray my own experience, a viewer will be bringing their lives and experiences with them, which can dictate something completely different from my work. Either way, everyone I have spoken with has told me how much they enjoy the powerful conversation my work brings up.