

ABSTRACT

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COLLECTOR OF NOTHING GOOD

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My work stems from a fascination with our reactions, both mentally and physically, to ideas of stress and anxiety. Referencing interviews and conversations gathered from others as well as my own experiences my work creates a dialogue for these often-unrecognized occurrences.

Each of my pieces is a conglomeration of several different ideas of stress. Often during conversations and interviews it becomes apparent that bases of tension cross paths between multiple individuals. This paper will discuss the work presented in my thesis exhibition as well as the ways that the work is initially created through the interview process.

COLLECTOR OF NOTHING GOOD

By

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Using ideas of stress and anxiety gained through interviews and conversations I create sculpture that discusses our reactions to, and understanding of, tension. Stress and tension are constantly evolving ideas which is why I focus mainly on the ideas gleaned from other people. Occasionally my work can involve some kinetic elements to allow the work to mimic or exaggerate the movement of the human body during these occurrences of stress. This can be something as small and almost unnoticed such as a curling of the toes or it can take on a more theoretical idea of personal space. My work varies in size and sound, as it can be both silent and clinical or aggressive and loud. It's important that my work reflects the differences and similarities between different individuals ideas of stress and anxiety.

My thesis work is an ongoing search through the arena of anxiety. I occasionally include my own ideas or relationship to stress, but the pieces often become conglomerations of many individuals' feelings on stress. I use sculpture as the main means to create this dialogue of stressful understanding. With my older kinetic work I focused on certain areas of the body and expanded on their motions during these situations. Using steel and rubber with simple mechanical designs I look for the viewer to gain an understanding of these often overlooked or unidentified problems that occur daily. Most recently I have begun using screen-printing as a new media to expose the more rigid and still aspect of this tension. Using screen printed images of related people I'm looking inward and through these individuals during interviews

and capturing the awkward rigidity that can arise during questioning. This essay will trek through my understanding of stress as well as the processes used to create my thesis work.

Chapter 2: Being A Creeper

My interests in anxiety and stress go back several years. I had the unfortunate luck to receive a job in the then booming Dot Com industry of the late 1990's. I spent my days trapped in a cubicle that was not much bigger than a coffin. In this strange business environment I began becoming a voyeur of sorts. I started becoming acutely aware of the stress levels of the people around me. It was most likely due to being in close proximity to these people for an extended time, but I started to pay far too much attention to people's reactions to situations in the office. During business meetings I found I enjoyed watching people squirm, as they were getting ready to present new ideas or report losses of some type. Watching others from a distance and attempting to survey their stress level became an odd game for me at a time when I was not dealing solely with art.

My own relationship to stress goes back much farther than that awful cubicle. When I was 15 years old, I was hospitalized with Crohn's Disease. It caused me to miss an entire year of school and due to medications also changed my physical appearance quite drastically. Crohn's Disease is an immune system disorder that affects the intestines and lower stomach. Basically the immune system begins attacking perfectly healthy cells for no good reason. There is no known cause or cure but most doctors believe that stress is a mitigating factor in its occurrence. Crohn's Disease is what is called a First World Disease since it only manifests itself in industrialized countries. Due to this problem I developed a new attentiveness to stressful situations.

Crowded locations or high stress instances such as a job interview began affecting me in much greater ways. Noticing and relatively understanding these occurrences provided me with a backdrop for my concentration in sculpture

While developing this body of work I began to understand that only relying on my own ideas of stress, or my own reactions to it, greatly limited my ability to access an audience. Stress and anxiety are things that manifest themselves in multiple ways among many individuals. So I decided to move outside the reality of my own experiences with stress and began having conversations and ultimately interviews with other people about their own ideas. Initially I began with only those people who I directly knew and approached the process rather simply during normal conversation. After the first few attempts at this format it became obvious that while stress or the reactions to stress are manifested differently in people sometimes these problems cross paths between individuals. While the end result might be different there remained similarities to other peoples issues, which could not be ignored. For example when talking during one interview a person might say that being in a subway train in close proximity to a crowd of people causes them to become rigid and constantly aware of their space. Another individual would take it a step further while including the same circumstances they might add on a level twitching or actual muscular tension. I began to see these commonalities between people as an area of intense interest and possibility.

By collecting all the information through interviews or conversations the use of my own ideas of tension became almost unnecessary. However, when I do uncover a new idea during a conversation I will ultimately cross-reference it with whatever strange idea I currently hold of the issue. So to say that each piece is a reflection of only other peoples ideas is not accurate. For this body of work it has always been important that it reflects more than one individual's relations to stress. That way the work becomes less about how I or any singular person feels. Each piece can then be viewed as constructed by a group of diverse people.

Chapter 3: Manipulateral

The works that I have made for my thesis exhibition represent a shift in my body of work produced over my time at The University of Maryland. Previously I was engrossed in the reactions our bodies undertake during moments of stress or tension. Often this leads to using parts of the body to express that reaction or movement. In these pieces I would only use sections of the body so as to leave the image devoid of any recognizable definition like facial features. Mostly this was done as a way to separate myself from the work in an attempt to let the audience be unconcerned with my role in the work. A large majority of my older work was kinetic and while my new works are no longer in motion I believe that through its static rigidity it eludes to a different aspect of movement on a different scale. Rather than aggressive and loud my thesis work moves in an almost imperceptible molasses or muck. The reasoning behind this shift in my work is a result in re-investigating my collection of interviews and conversations. Many people discussed issues with group settings or family functions that I had previously never investigated. I looked back into this information and understood there was a new area of focus available within the current framework of my existing body of work that had been unexplored.

Residual

I started calling this new area of focus the “residue” (*figure 1*). I began looking at interactions of groups of people and focusing on the stiff tension that can accompany them. I began thinking of an invisible muck that engulfed the surroundings during

these awkward moments. This muck is not too dissimilar to an oil spill as it is a thick tarry membrane, which traps that which it touches. When I first began exploring this goo I began with these sketches of human forms. These weren't sketches on paper but rather physical pieces that I made using cast plastic. When thinking of casting spaces around objects I became re-introduced to Rachel Whiteread. She often casts the spaces around common objects such as stools or sinks and presents them as a new understanding of the space which that thing is occupying. So with these first sketches I was considering the space around these figures while not actually capturing the figure itself. I was looking for the leftovers of these interactions that were frozen in a rigid tension and hanging in the air.



Figure 1. *Residual*, 2010

These first studies in the residue arena (figure 1) utilize a basic human form that is covered in cast plastic in layers to capture the space around the individual. The remnants are ghostly and heavy as they are dragged back into the ground. I continued to cast variations of these figures but it ultimately led me in another direction. Instead of capturing the person in this goo I moved to address the direct environment of these stressful interactions. During conversations a common interlink between subjects was the general location of these events. The home environment was by far the most common hub for these brutally stiff engagements. The environment itself seemed to be playing a roll in ideas as much as the occupants of that space.



Figure 2: *Residue*, 2011

Residue

Residue (figure 2) is an encapsulation of the space between our rigidity and the objects that we are directly encountering. Cast plastic is applied in layers over top of various parts of a dining room set. The actual furniture is then removed leaving only the space captured between our bodies and the seats we occupy. The use of the entire dining room set highlights an entire area of stress rather than to focus on a single muscle twitch or toe curl. The use of the dining room space as a setting speaks both to the location and to the relationship of the group dynamic. For the majority of the people I spoke to the family setting was the most important variable. To reflect this family idea the set contains four chairs rather than six or eight which might lean to close to a board room or business meeting. My intentions with *Residue* were to expand the conversation of tension as it relates to these gatherings and the often ambient or underlying currents of stress that can occur. That is not to say that all family dinners are full to the brim with anxiety, but once again the work is created through a process of information gathering from multiple sources that I ultimately have no control of.



Figure 3. *Please Remain As Still As Possible*, 2011

Please Remain As Still As Possible

Recently I have begun experimenting with screen-printing as a new medium. It's a very process oriented medium that lends itself to layering. As I continued to think on this idea of a residue or capturing leftovers the layering offered by screening produced new areas of interest. Moving on from ideas within the home or actual objects in space I began with a starting point of personal history. I have known several people who suffer from many different types of hereditary disorders or diseases. These are things that are passed down through our families and they may go unnoticed for extended time. For instance Crohn's Disease is often believed to be something passed down through genes yet it wasn't originally diagnosed till the 1980's. Trying to locate that genetic link can be almost impossible and certainly

frustrating. As well as providing a wonderful source of tension in many individuals' lives.

The main interest in these issues was the manner in which information regarding these kinds of genetic problems can often be collected. Batteries of tests including those which expose people to various levels of radiation are commonly used. I narrowed my focus down to one machine that provides such insight while also causing exposure and discomfort. Magnetic Resonance Imaging or MRI is commonly used in the medical profession to access images of unseen parts of the body. Several variations of the machine exist but most commonly a patient lies on a table and is inserted into a large machine that resembles a robotic doughnut. The space inside the machine is notoriously small and claustrophobic. While inside the running machine the sound levels can reach high volumes and increase one's general discomfort. The MRI produces layered images of the internal aspects of the patient's body. These imaging sessions can last from ten to forty-five minutes depending on the type of scan required.

Utilizing the slicing and layered aspect of MRI machine images I wanted to create a piece which reflected the tension and movement restrictions associated with the machine while also addressing the fear or apprehension at discovering something which is unseen. Fifteen layers of varying tension are achieved by screen-printing images of an individual on fiberglass then resin coating those layers together to

achieve a solid form filled with information. Rather than present the finished work on the floor it is hung on the wall in the same way a doctor might view results.



Figure 4. *I Know You Are...But What Am I?*, 2011

I Know You Are...But What Am I?

My most recent investigation led me back to a place that I have been before. The previous works had become ideas of family and relationships and I wanted to keep that commonality alive so I traveled to Virginia for dinner. There I sat down to a simple dinner with a family that I have known for years. I have used many interviews and conversations over my investigations from this group so to sit at a dinner with them is a treat. The family, which I will refer to as Family C., consists of a mother, father and 3 brothers ranging in age from twenty-five to thirty. These brothers are my main focus as they are often so similar yet so different that it can become difficult to be in the same room together. In my previous history with this family I have become aware of the attack and defense modes of each brother. I wanted to locate a way in which I could capture that disparity and use that as a basis for a piece. Between the brothers it offered such an interesting glimpse into people who are so close yet their ideas of stress and anxiety are so different. To draw this disparity out into the open I interviewed each brother alone and photographed him during our conversation.

For each brother the questions are the same. Questions about relationships to the others in the family and certain uncomfortable situations. Brother 1's reactions to the questions caused him to be in state of constantly twitchy motion. So the images captured were blurry and constantly out of focus. Brother 2's reactions were more thoughtful as he clearly considered his answers before speaking. His images showed stillness and questioning expression on his face. While Brother 3 did nothing but joke his way around the questions and never really take a gap toothed smile off his

face. After reviewing the images I selected two from each series that I felt represented the general mood and situation of the conversations. Those images represented a set within a set of reactions to each other without any of them being present in front of the other. These images were then screen printed on both sides of Plexiglas sheets (figure 4) then hung together as a two-sided triptych. One side of the piece represents the main “common” reactions while the other shows each brother in a more defensive posture.

This was the first time I have used images that directly correlated to actual people. My previous problem with this idea was that it became too much about the individual in the image rather than representing a group. With *I Know You Are...But What Am I?* I believe that the differences found between the brothers emulates the slight differences in our own ideas of these relationships.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

My work stems from a fascination with our reactions and ideas of stress and anxiety. To feed this fascination I conduct interviews and conversations with many people I encounter. Each piece represents a conglomeration of ideas and issues associated with anxiety or stress. Through this melding my work creates a dialogue for these often unrecognized or unaddressed occurrences in life.

I always acknowledge that not all people will see certain things as tense or stressful. That is because anxiety, or whatever you like to call it, is an evolving idea. Each day or month or even decade we are exposed to new forms of stress. I imagine this routine will continue for the foreseeable future. The ultimate goal for my thesis work is to create a new dialogue for these, often unperceived, occurrences. To bring out those tiny things that we do not always realize we are doing and see them for what they are under a different light.