

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

Alyssa Imes, Master of Fine Arts 2022

Thesis directed by:

Associate Professor Shannon Collis, Department  
of Art

### POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

“Trauma ebbs and flows

It is unstable and unknown

A terrain of progress

While you weep,

Lean on your willows

The only way to stabilize,

.....is to lean”

(Alyssa Imes)

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

by

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## Preface

Sometimes to work through your trauma, you need to rip, tear, cry, cut, shred, blend and transform.

## Dedication

To Gwen and Mary. Without you two minions by my side, this thesis would have not been possible!

## Acknowledgements

There are A LOT of people I have to thank for getting me to this point:

Steve, thank you for being my amazing supportive husband, love you cutie.

Mom and Dad, thank you for your support of my path to be an artist.

Mercedes, thank you for being my sculpture wife.

Mary and Gwen, my sculpture assistants.

My advisors Foon, Shannon and Patrick.

.....And to all those whose lips I made molds of.

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## 1: INTRO + PERSONAL STORY

In many ways, I sought to become an artist because I realized the need to overcome a trauma I had experienced. When I was in sixth grade, I was sexually assaulted by a family member whom I had looked up to and trusted. My subconscious desire to come to terms with the trauma, ultimately led me to attend graduate school.



*(Figure 1. Resin Willow Seed, Trauma Bedsheets, My Hands)*

It took me 13 years to face my trauma, which had chained me. It had destroyed my trust, faith, innocence, strength, and intimacy. Even writing this is difficult. Rather than just live with my trauma, I decided to transform it into something positive for both me and my community. Restructuring, reforming, and remolding the trauma meant I could regain control of my life.

My thesis, entitled, *Post-Traumatic Growth* is a three-part physical installation composed of resin, shredded bedsheets and castings. This installation is the culmination of years of realizing that I can transform, re-mold and eventually release my trauma.

## 2: PAST ARTWORK

My interest in sculpting began when I was an undergraduate student at Shepherd University. I was immediately drawn to the labor-intensive rituals and community of metal casting. I experienced a sense of power and strength by working with these materials, bending steel to my will, and casting molten hot metal. I transitioned from a dancer concerned about her weight to a strong and empowered metalworker.



*(Figure 2. Iron Pour at the University of Maryland.)*

Pouring iron quickly became a deep love of mine, I was mesmerized by the process of forcing hard materials into something soft, and molten and then reforming it. Iron

pours are also incredibly communal events. I enjoyed being surrounded by a group of fellow artists who, like me, love pouring metal.



*(Figure 3. Casting Crew at Shepard University Iron Pour 2018.)*

When I came to the University of Maryland (UMD), I was eager to continue my love of melting iron but was still open to the future. Again I bonded with my fellow

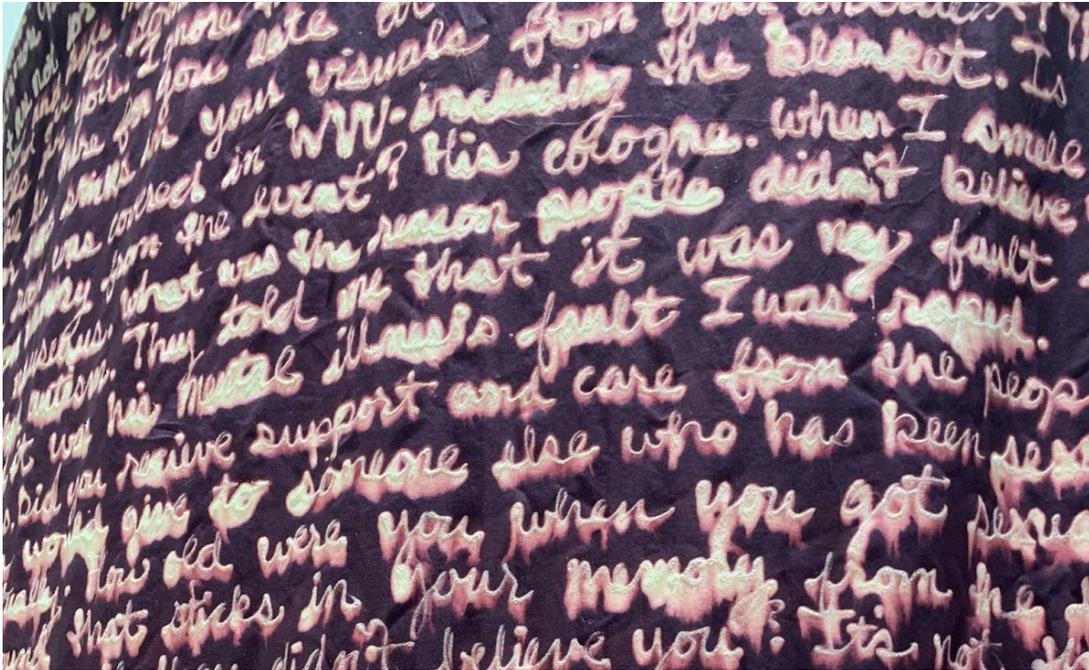


students and other artists through our love of metalwork. Yet I was also still open to the future. It was time for me to address what I had long been avoiding: the sexual assault and resulting trauma.

In my first year I started working with bedsheets as a medium. The sheets were a direct link to my trauma, and I wanted to see where I could push them as a material. I started by ripping the bedsheets and then experimented with ways I could transform the material through stitching, patching, weaving, and even sewing (see Figure 4). When I

*(Figure 4. Ripped and Reassembled Bedsheets)*

reflect on these initial efforts, I think they were me beginning to realize that I could not simply erase my trauma.



*(Figure 5. Handwritten stories with bleach on bedsheets)*

In another project, I used bleach to write other people's stories of trauma on sheets. The bleach spread through the threads and bled into the fabric, giving the words the privacy which I believe they needed. My three-column sculpture rose but also collapsed, like the process of healing after assault (see Figure 6). I have continually circled back to this idea of the network around us—namely, the people who have endured trauma—where this network includes people who have helped us through our trauma.

After my first-year show, I was triggered and relapsed in my trauma. I went backwards along my healing path. I believe that this relapse was a result of reading

and writing other people's assault stories. At this point, I realized that I needed to reflect inward and make my work more personal. Creating artwork about others' sexual traumas is difficult when you have not reflected on your own experience.



*(Figure 6. Unstructured Rise).*

In the second half of my first year, I worked in a home-based studio due to COVID. I grounded my practice and further explored bedsheets as my material. I developed work incorporating peaks and valleys (see Figure 7). I approached dealing with my trauma as an unstable and unknown terrain with progress and relapses. As I gained acceptance and patience with myself during this time, I manipulated the bedsheets into peaks and played with the material even more.



*(Figure 7. Bedsheets and plastic coating.)*

In my second year, I explored artwork that could parallel how I felt about transforming my own trauma into something positive, which is how my interest in “post-traumatic growth” emerged. I wanted to deconstruct the sheets completely until they were fully transformed. This reflection enabled me to gain acceptance. Through this work, I realized that transformation is good. I finally understood that one cannot heal completely from trauma; rather, one must transform.



*(Figure 8. I Will Keep You Upright in Silence).*

In my second-year show, I stayed connected to metal casting. I cast 200 female lips for my piece *I Will Keep You Upright in the Silence* (see Figure 8). This work reflected the silence some women are pressured to maintain by not speaking about the resulting trauma. These heavy cast lips lean on each other in support, keeping them upright. I cast iron lips from my support community and built an installation on the floor to allow the lips to lean on each other.



(Figure 9. *Post-Traumatic Growth*).

I also cast weeping willow seed shells out of iron so they could spring from a wall in my piece *Post-Traumatic Growth* (see Figure 9). This was the first time I used willow seeds, which I wanted to use for various reasons, as I will explain later. I also gave life to the first iteration of my shredded bedsheet mountains, using piles to build little peaks and valleys on the floor.

Although these installations did not yet achieve my ultimate goals, they opened my mind to the possibility of my work engaging and enacting post-traumatic growth. They served as a hopeful step in experimenting with a new medium: transformed bedsheets.

### 3: LETTING GO OF MY IRON LOVE

Following my second-year show, I was determined to address some of the issues I identified in the pieces I had made. I knew the lips were powerful, but I realized that they should not be cast out of iron. I contemplated casting fabric. I worked with Pyramid Atlantic, a local arts organization with paper-making facilities, to experiment with different ways I could reconfigure the bedsheets to turn the lips into fabric casts instead of the heavy iron I had used in the past (see Figure 10).



*(Figure 10: Fabric Lips)*

The willow blossom installation also needed a different material. Again, iron just did not feel right. In addition, I explored ways to change the form of the willow seeds to reference the seed shape so, the seed would be turning into a blossom. I decided to cast the seeds out of resin while incorporating bedsheet strands into the seeds themselves (see Figure 1).

Meanwhile, the fiber bed sheet pile installation felt too forced. I decided that it needed to be two separate works. I wanted far more shredded bedsheets to be included in a more natural display (see Figure 11).



*(Figure 11. Shredded Bedsheets on floor)*

Ultimately, it was hard for me to let go of my love of pouring iron and not include any iron in my thesis. There is something powerful and empowering about the act of casting iron and the ritual of collectively coming together to pour iron. I knew I had to find a sense of community and ritual with these other materials.

*PS: Iron I still love you; I had to let you go for the release and freedom necessary to carry out my thesis work.*

#### 4: CATHARSIS + PROCESS + POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

Mercedes, a fellow graduate student introduced me to Aristotle's concept of catharsis. In contrast to his teacher's belief that artists are dangerous to society, Aristotle believed that humans needed art that gave them the capacity to feel extreme sadness or tragedy, in order to help them realize their own emotions were normal and should be expressed. I had never considered my process to be cathartic until Mercedes identified this link.

Reflecting on such a perception, I realized that I wanted my work to become cathartic for both myself and the viewer alike. As a result, labor became a core part of my process. Although the pieces in my thesis may simply look like delicate lips leaning on each other, soft fiber piles, or tiny delicate seeds, they are actually the result of countless hours, days, weeks, months, and years of work, both physical and mental. I believe that I was seeking a process that would give me the time and space to transform my own trauma into growth.

Another concept that has become integral to this body of work is: post-traumatic growth, which psychologists Richard Tedeschi, PhD, and Lawrence Calhoun, PhD researched. They define post-traumatic growth as "a positive change experienced as a result of the struggle with a major life crisis or a traumatic event." I identify strongly with this philosophy—both literally and metaphorically—because it is exactly how I feel living and surviving as someone who has experienced sexual assault. I have good

and bad days. Some days I believe in the possibility of my work, and the promise of the future; other days, I feel the weight and burden of my past and wonder if I will ever overcome the darkness I have experienced.

Living as a sexual assault survivor means understanding that I have to live with my trauma on a daily basis. Through my art, I will transform it and turn it into growth. With this cathartic work, I have terraformed my brain to be far more under my control. I have gained a greater sense of clarity and patience making this work than I ever have with past works.

## 5: PART I: POST TRAUMATIC GROWTH (BEDSHEET PILES)

*Comfortability.  
Ripped,  
Stripped,  
And shredded... from me.*

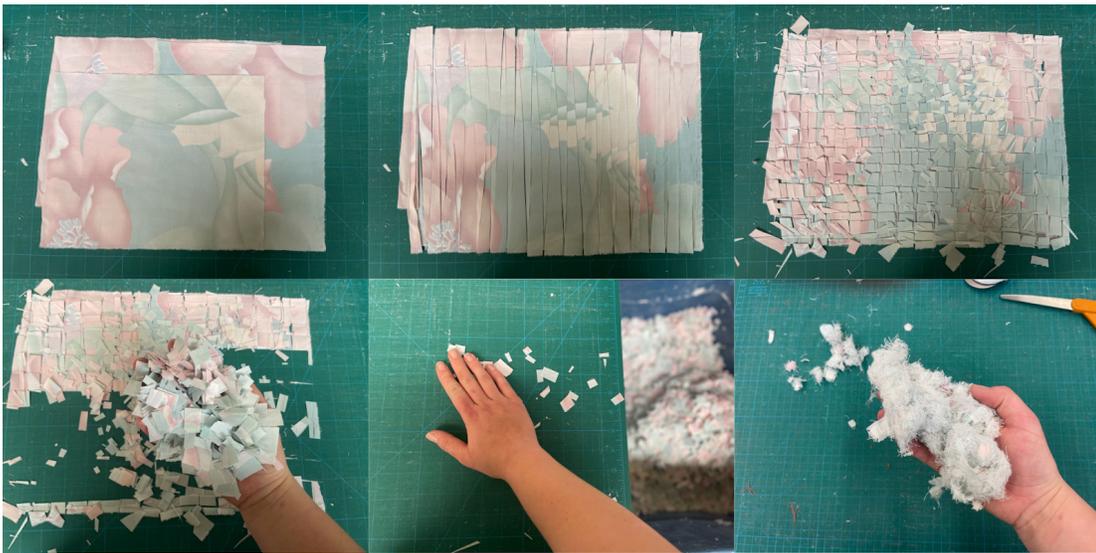
*To sit in the lowest valley and on the highest peak.  
Patient. Waiting. Sitting. Healing. Labor. Self-Love.*

*The landscape is unknown.*

The first part of my three-part series for my thesis is “Post Traumatic Growth” which is the most obsessive and process-orientated work within my installations. The work incorporates soft piles of shredded bedsheets of varying heights. The soft growths—or peaks and valleys, as I refer to them—represent the time needed to heal after trauma. Even the process of creating this work was slow and time-consuming.

The artwork physically references a landscape, alluding to the ebbs and flows (peaks and valleys) of trauma that many perceive as a weakness. I however, see them as a strength. At one point, I realized that the path followed when walking hand-in-hand with one’s trauma is an unknown landscape that requires patience to navigate. Like my good and bad days, the work crescendos and decrescendos, as if traversing an unknown terrain. I wanted this work to be the largest of the three so that the viewer could enter the space and feel the immense possibilities of post-traumatic growth as if entering a landscape.

To achieve this vision, I first ripped the sheets and then cut them into squares. From there, I cut them on a mat using a rotary cutter. The back-and-forth motion of the cutter became cathartic as the minutes turned into hours. I then put the pieces into a blender, representing a makeshift cleaver that cut the fabric even smaller. This final step in the process, completely transformed the bedsheets into soft piles of post-traumatic growth.



*(Figure 12. Process of shredding bedsheets).*

Repeatedly engaging in this process enabled me to realize the physical and psychological strength it takes to be constantly blending, cutting, and ripping. Such a process can undoubtedly take its toll, yet I find it empowering, liberating, and cathartic. In the midst of the process, I moved my hand away from the cutter where more complete bedsheets were being torn to the softness of my completely transformed piles. As if by magic, the positive charge of static electricity attracted the soft transformed fibers to my hand. In this single moment, I realized I was taking

back my physical body and being. My aggressive and physical movements made the positive ions of my hands attract the fibers!

This experience was incredibly awe-inspiring. This was the sign I needed. I have always been obsessed with the core principles of physics, so it was wonderful to have that small reminder that the work I was doing is positive and worthwhile.



*(Figure 13. Post-Traumatic Growth view one)*



*(Figure 14. Post-Traumatic Growth view two)*



*(Figure 15. Post-Traumatic Growth view three)*

## 6: PART II: LEANING (CAST LIPS)

*The guilt to lean.  
...Additional support.*

*Without these people, I would not be standing.*

*Lean on me,  
And I will lean on you.*

As previously discussed, I made an iteration of this work for my second-year show at UMD. I wanted to reflect on how survivors (including myself) often simply need someone to provide support, and let us lean on them in silence. The work was actually born in a moment of being supported.

I was casting lips with the idea of making a work that referenced the need for supportive silence as a survivor. While I was working with the wax, a third-year graduate student came to talk to me. I was showing her the forms, when she gently took the lips and set them up to lean on each other. “You and I, we and our community—we have to lean on each other, in order to survive.” In that moment, I understood that, rather than welding the pieces or using any type of material to glue them together, the lips should simply rest or “support” one another.

I am here to write this thesis and make this work, because in my life, I have truly been fortunate to have a community of people who have let me lean on them and who have leaned on me. Remove one lip, and the structure falls apart.

Through the process of casting the molds of the lips, I recognized that even the process of making this work possibly referenced a darker side of the piece. Survivors of sexual assault or trauma are asked not to shout it from the rooftops but rather to keep it close to them or even completely private. Making casts of people's lips showed me that this process was silencing them. For 20 to 30 minutes, they could not speak, as if their mouths had been taped shut.

There have been moments as a survivor that I have felt this same pressure. I have been told numerous times to forgive, forget, and move on, based on my Catholic beliefs. However, I hope this work will help people understand that they do not have to be silent. Every time I share my story, I gain strength.

(picture of people in molds)

In my final iteration of this work, *Leaning*, rather than casting the lips from iron, I used shredded bedsheets. The lips softly lean on each other atop gently bent clear plexiglass. In each pair, one set of lips is my own and the other is someone from my support system—other graduate students, students in general, family members, friends, and even my first therapist who walked me through the act of surviving my sexual assault when it first happened. The work references the ability to give and receive support in silence.



*(Figure 16. Leaning, view one)*



*(Figure 17. Leaning, view two)*



*(Figure 18. Leaning, view three)*

## 7: PART III: TAKE ME WITH YOU [TRAUMA REGROWN]

*A canopy of shelter,  
Freed into the world by the wind  
The seeds simply let go.*

*I have processed,  
I have re-sculpted,  
Now, I release.*

*So that you may re-grow.*

Being under a canopy of weeping willows is incredibly comforting for me. I have always felt protected when surrounded by the feathery willow blossoms with their strength and resilience. Indeed, I have always been drawn to the way the willow blossom forms. The seeds are so small, yet over time they transform into beautiful blossoms that are eventually released into the world by the wind. The seeds simply let go. Willows also grow in relation to one another, networking to keep each other safe from the elements and strong wind storms. I see this third iteration of my work as the final phase in my post-traumatic growth process. I have processed (Part I), I have re-sculpted (Part II), and now I must release my traumatic material out into the world.

The third iteration of this series, *Take Me With You* is resin-cast willow blossoms suspended from the ceiling. Embedded in the cast willow blossom is a single fiber from the original bedsheets where my sexual assault occurred. The work is installed so that the blossoms are attached from treelike formations that extend from the ceiling. Viewers at the exhibition will be encouraged to pluck one of the cast willow blossoms to take with them. I hope to release the burden of my traumatic material

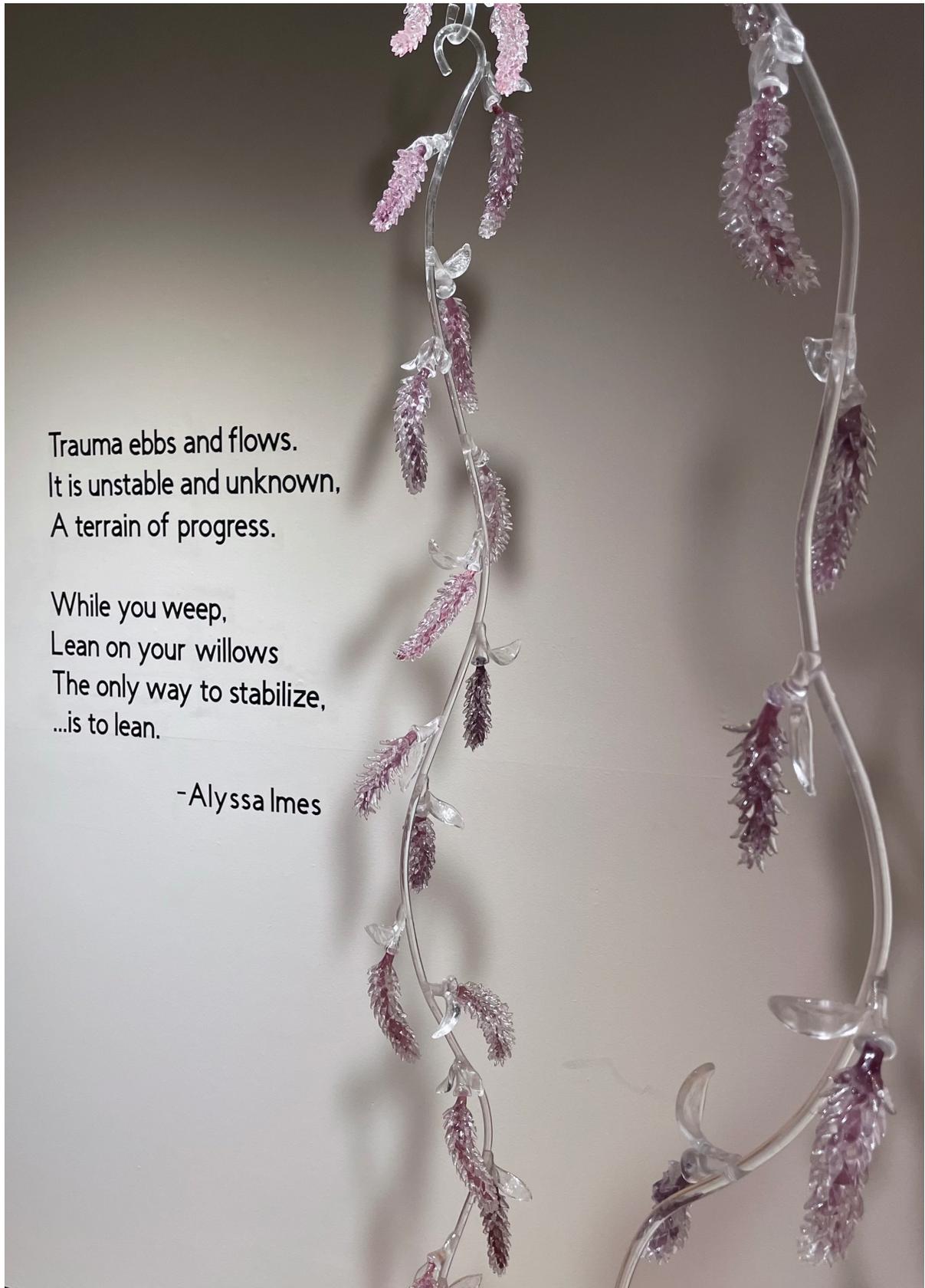
focusing more on the sense of release than burden. I hope viewers will hold on to the seeds to remind themselves that there can be strength and growth after trauma.

This work was partly inspired by Felix Gonzalez Torres's work, "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), where he offers piles of candies that audience members can take. The pile of candy begins its life at the same weight as his lover, who was lost to AIDS.

For my installation, I hope to continue with the seeds until the sheets are all used up and released.



*(Figure 19. Take Me with You- Trauma Regrown, view one)*



Trauma ebbs and flows.  
It is unstable and unknown,  
A terrain of progress.

While you weep,  
Lean on your willows  
The only way to stabilize,  
...is to lean.

-Alyssa Imes

(Figure 20. Take Me with You- Trauma Regrown, view two)



*(Figure 21. Take Me with You- Trauma Regrown, view three)*

## 8: FUTURE OF THE WORK

I am truly proud of the work I have created during my time at UMD and for this exhibition in particular. I believe that I decided to enroll in a graduate program to create this work, and the experience has enabled me to grow as both an artist and a person. Where do I see the future of my practice and how will it change by my efforts in making this work?

I intend to install this three-part series in other galleries and museums. I would also like to create larger versions of all these thesis pieces. This might also be a reflection of my own process of transforming through post-traumatic growth. I may be just now be leaving the phase of processing my own trauma and emerging into the next phases of recasting it and releasing it into the world. In the future I hope to cast more lips as my community and support system grow and old friends reemerge in my life.

Part III of my thesis could also have a larger life in the future. Perhaps there could be more blossoms, or maybe they could be cast with different materials. It is conceivable that I am ready to move on completely. Only time will tell.

## 9: CONCLUSION

I am finally in a comfortable place with my body, thanks to my partner, that I can make this work. When people think of bedsheets, especially in relation to sexual assault, they might focus on a single idea. However, to me, the bedsheets that I have cut, ripped, shredded, transformed, remolded and released into the world are so much more. I am not just referencing my sexual assault. Many of these sheets (with the exception of those used in Part III) are from thrift stores. They have been slept on. They have been a source of comfort and a safe place for many people. But for those of us who have experienced sexual assault, bedsheets have a different connotation. Others took advantage of my comfort, stripping it away and forcing me to lose that feeling of being safe. I decided to shred these sheets—to both destroy and transform them—so that I too can find comfort in their soft and transformed piles of post-traumatic growth.