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Reflections From The In-between: Visualizing The Mental Thresholds Of Dissociation

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Abstract

I am fascinated by the state of being in-between; by the mental spaces that are somehow neither here nor there, but also somehow both here and there. At a young age, I began to experience depersonalization and derealization, and this dissociated state left me feeling trapped somewhere on the threshold of reality and non-reality. My artistic practice is concerned with the psychological antitheses of dissociation – comfort vs discomfort, safety vs danger, and reality vs non-reality, and the continuum of space between these polarities. Often through large-scale installations, I create a physical space for the viewer to enter. These spaces, like that of the mental state of dissociation, have an uncertainty about them. They are simultaneously comfortable and uncomfortable. The objective of this thesis paper is to look back on my experiences living on this threshold and examine my resulting artistic practice that works to make sense of it all.

**REFLECTIONS FROM THE IN-BETWEEN: VISUALIZING THE MENTAL
THRESHOLDS OF DISSOCIATION**

By:

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B.F.A, Louisiana State University, 2013

B.S., Louisiana State University, 2013

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University

May 2021

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Reflections from the In-Between..... | 1 |
| Bibliography..... | 29 |
| Vita..... | 31 |

Carl Gustav Jung never regarded the writing in *Memories, Dream, Reflections* as a scientific work, and requested that the memoir not be included in his anthology of collected works. He referred to the book as being a project of Aniela Jaffé's, his co-worker turned recorder and editor, to which he was merely a contributor. Jung was largely hesitant about this project in comparison to his other works, stating "It became clear that all the memories which have remained vivid to me had to do with emotional experiences that arouse uneasiness and passion in the mind – scarcely the best condition for an objective account! (1961, p. 10)."

Unfortunately, I do not have an Aniela Jaffé to edit and contextualize my experiences and thoughts. I am simultaneously acting as both Jaffé and Jung. I am both clinician and client, attempting to be both objective and subjective.

My art, while deeply rooted in events and observations from my childhood as I recall them, is not so much about the specific people and places from my past, but the associated emotions and psychological processes brought about by these experiences. By taking a step back and looking at these more objectively through the lens of psychological theory, my art becomes not a closed autobiographical narrative, but rather something for viewers to reflect upon their own experience.

...

"I'm Katie. I have a BFA in Sculpture and a BS in Psychology from LSU. I was originally going to grad school for Art Therapy but then decided that I'd rather make art about my own issues rather than help other people make art about their issues, so here I am."

That is how I introduced myself to my critique class first semester. Is it selfish? Maybe.
Do I stand by it? Yes.

...

I am fascinated by the state of being in-between; by the mental spaces that are somehow
neither here nor there, but also somehow both here and there.

...

We had 4 parakeets in a large cage in the corner of my 6th grade classroom.

The cage, which was not so much a cage but a small environment, had been built by my
teacher out of 2x4s and screen. It was large enough to walk into, with a door on the front. In the
front left corner was a potted tree, and there were other potted plants throughout. In the back
right was a small black plastic pond. I do not remember what the ground was like, if it was
gravel, or wood chips, or maybe just a tarp. There was also an iguana that lived inside, along
with the parakeets.

...

*“You’re different than your classmates. Smarter. More mature. Don’t waste your time
with them. Stay inside during recess with me instead.”*

“My sweet little cherub”, he insisted on calling me. Once, I told him not to call me that,
but he told me that as my teacher, he could call me what he wanted to. I was afraid to argue with
a teacher – my religious upbringing had taught me to respect and honor authority figures - so I
went along with it. When he would start to get too close to me, my mind would float away from

my body and join the parakeets fluttering around the cage while my body would freeze in place at my oversized desk.

...

My teacher called the cage the “biocube” and bragged about his creation at parent-teacher nights and open house events as an immersive educational science tool to give students hand-on learning with botany, ecology, and the like.

It was all just for show. He did not actually use the “biocube” to teach.

By the end of the school year, most of the plants had withered and two of the birds had died, one presumably by drowning in the pond, and one presumably by flying too hard into the side of the structure.

...

At the end-of-the-year awards ceremony, I had to stand up in the front of the church and be awarded the most prestigious and coveted award my school had to offer: the 100% attendance award. I watched the congregation – including my family - in the back, clapping and beaming, completely ignorant – or perhaps in denial – at how broken that child had become.

...

That was the 2001/2002 school year.



Figure 1. K. Virag, Aviary (2014)



Figure 2. K. Virag, Aviary (2014) Detail

The same year as 9/11.

We had just gotten back from morning mass when another teacher stopped by our classroom, whispered something to my teacher, and he flipped on the TV. At 11 years old, I was too young to understand the politics behind the attacks, but I knew lots of people died and words like “war” and “terror” were now ever present and everyone was scared and I was scared and everything was different.

...

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory centers a child in a set of environmental systems: the microsystem (the institutions which the child has the most direct interaction with, like home and school, which most affect development), the mesosystem (connections between and amongst the microsystems), the exosystem (things in the environment the child does not directly interact

with but can still highly impact development, like mass media), the macrosystem (overarching culture), and a later addition to the original model, the chronosystem (changes and transitions over the course of time). (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

...

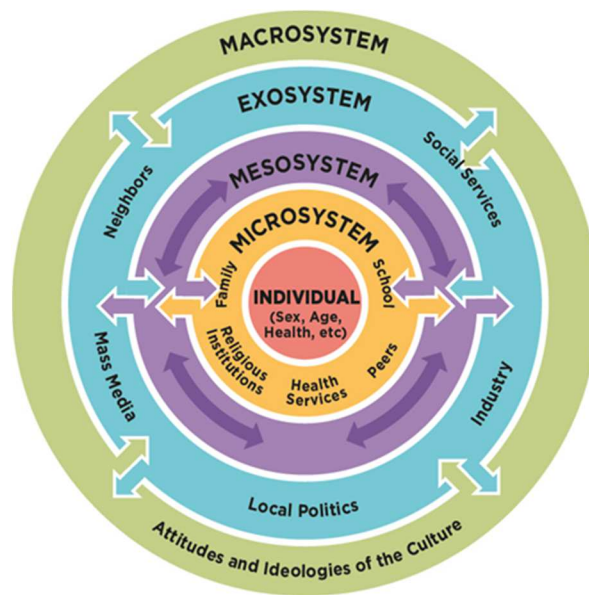


Figure 3. <https://www.nap.edu/read/23482/chapter/5#73>
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

I began experiencing dissociation as a coping mechanism for all of this chaos, going through bouts of depersonalization and derealization where it felt as though I was separate from my body and my surroundings. This disconnection from reality was simultaneously comforting and terrifying. This condition brought on bouts of emotional numbness, sensory symptoms of seeing the world through tunnel vision or a telescope-like lens, and people's voices and other sounds seeming echo-like or as if they were coming from far away. Looking into mirrors or otherwise seeing my reflection became a surreal experience. I saw my reflection, but it seemed alien. It did not look like me or feel like me looking back. In severe instances, a strange mind-body disconnect happened where it felt like my body was made of lead while my mind was floating, similar to what happened when my mind joined the parakeets in our classroom. In some cases, I became mute, physically unable to speak. It was a paradox of being trapped inside my body and being trapped outside of it at the same time. It was as if I was watching myself go through life in third person, with a distorted threshold between reality and nonreality. As mentioned above, This disconnection from my surroundings was simultaneously comforting and terrifying.

My work is concerned with the psychological antitheses of dissociation – comfort vs discomfort, safety vs danger, and reality vs non-reality, and the continuum of liminal space between these polarities. Through large-scale installations, I invite the viewer to enter a physical space. These spaces, like that of the mental state of dissociation, have an uncertainty about them and are simultaneously comfortable and uncomfortable, safe and dangerous.

In a broader sense, these concepts are not limited to pathological dissociation, but also applicable to other experiences and transitions in life where one finds oneself at an uncertain threshold between two points, particularly adolescence.

...

In 2006, he was on the news. “Local Catholic school teacher arrested”.

I was not angry, nor was I elated, that he finally got what was coming to him. I felt nothing. Absolutely nothing.

...

I eventually discovered that I could bring myself out of a dissociated state with a jolt of physical pain. I began to carry around a piece of broken glass with me. I needed maladaptive coping mechanisms to deal with my maladaptive coping mechanisms.

...

Cage: a structure of bars or wires in which birds or other animals are confined. (Oxford Languages)

Confine: keep or restrict someone or something within certain limits of (space, scope, quantity, or time). (Oxford Languages)

...

When raised and treated properly, many well-adjusted domesticated birds are happy to retreat back to their cage after spending time outside of it with their human. While they very

much enjoy the socialization and new experiences outside the cage, the cage is their home, where their food and their toys are. It is not just a source of confinement, but a source of safety, comfort, and familiarity. When birds are not socialized properly or are neglected, they take this to the extreme, developing anxiety that is similar to agoraphobia in humans where they will refuse to leave the cage at all and become terrified of the outside. It is not uncommon for birds in this anxious, cage-bound state to engage in self-injurious behaviors like feather plucking.

(Johnson)

...

When I started working with twine, I was trying to make a form that had an ambiguity about whether it was supposed to be a cozy nest or a confining cage. I was thinking about the binary of comfort and discomfort and how a



Figure 4. K. Virag. *sub specie aeternitatis* (2017-present)

place or a mental state like dissociation, could be neither, or both, or constantly changing. Twine was interesting to me because as a material it is soft, but it can be used to bind things in a harsh way, and its natural color and fibrousness seemed appropriate for the idea of a bird's nest. I stiffened the twine and molded it into dome shapes, reminiscent of the domed top of a stereotypical bird cage or an inverted nest. I began by making a wall-hanging form, and then several more, and then completely abandoned the idea of making these forms to be viewed and displayed individually, but rather began to make them as modular pieces to make up one massive

installation that viewers could walk through and interact with. I was thinking about space and environment, so I decided I should actually create that space, rather than making wall-hanging sculptures. The pieces began to come off the wall and onto the floor. Bust forms in the installation were either rising up from the installation or being sucked into it. I wanted the ambiguity. I added small round mirrors sporadically behind the twine so that viewers could literally see themselves in the space, slightly obscured by the twine.

In one recent iteration of the twine installation at Burchfield Penney Art Center in January 2020, I swapped out the perfectly round, manufactured mirrors for jagged broken pieces from shattered larger mirrors, not unlike the shard of mirror I would use to jolt myself out of a dissociated state. I also cast round concrete shapes reminiscent of the modular twine pieces and intentionally broke them and incorporated those into the piece. Up until this point I did not have actual birds in the piece, but I liked the idea of having these little things hidden throughout the piece – a fun little surprise for the viewers who really looked closely. For this iteration I added small cast iron and cast concrete birds amongst the piece, some quite hidden and a few more obvious with the hopes that viewers might see the more obvious ones and read that as a clue to look for more.

...



Figure 5. K. Virag. *sub specie aeternitatis*. (2017-present). Detail.

“Dissociation is not, properly speaking, the result of a damaged brain, but the result of a learning process. A learning process, it is true, that should never have had to have happened, but nevertheless something that is in itself a positive. The way out of complex trauma is to recognize the different fractures of your personality not as a wound, but as a badge of survival — not as something that should be excised, but as parts of you that require reintegration.” (Franco, 2018)

...

The initial traumatic experience of 6th grade in conjunction with the drifting in and out of bouts of this dissociated state of varying degrees of severity, especially at an age that developmental psychologists say is crucial to identity formation, created both a very fragmented view of reality and a very fragmented view of myself. At the end of that school year, I found my sense of self completely turned upside down and shattered.

This idea of psychological fragmentation has been a major concept in my work. In this fragmentation there is a process of the destruction of the self into pieces. Likewise, there is then a subsequent reconstruction of those pieces when the smoke clears, or in short, a process of breakdown and recovery. There is not necessarily a definitive break between the two, where the destruction stops and the reconstruction begins. Rather, the two can happen simultaneously in one step forward two steps back manner for some time until the reconstruction finally overpowers the destruction. Can the pieces be put back the way they were before or is there no going back? Will the reassembled pieces always be flawed, or at least different? Should the pieces even attempt to be the same as they were before?



Figure 6. K. Virag. *Stronger* (2019).

...

Individual therapy, family therapy, group therapy, lather, rinse, repeat.

As a teen, I spent many hours in my therapist's pink and green corner office on the 14th-but-actually-13th floor of a massive office building in one of the wealthier suburbs of Detroit. Most of those hours I spent clutching a fraying pink throw pillow to my chest like a life-preserver to keep my mind grounded in reality and not flying out the window or drowning in her ugly patterned rug.

Sometimes, the pillow-turned-personal-floatation-device failed me and I could hear her voice from far away saying *"Katie, I need you to please come back. I need you to talk. Katie, I know you can hear me."*

...



Figure 7. K. Virag. Video still from *see you again next week* (2019)

therapeutic process as the client pieces their life together. In both my exhibition at Sugar City in Buffalo in August 2019 and in Random Access in Syracuse that same October, the viewer was

In my case, as with many others, reconstruction of my fragmentation was aided by a therapeutic setting. Chairs play a central role in the process of therapy. Often, both therapist and client sit in chairs, face-to-face, week after week throughout the course of the

surrounded by repeated imagery of a single armchair, representative of the repetition of this process. My video piece titled *see you again next week* in which I smashed 52 found ceramic plates (representative of weeks in the year) and then proceeded to pick up all the broken pieces and pile them onto an armchair was the central focus of these exhibitions. I overlaid the footage of the smashing and the picking up so that the two scenes were happening simultaneously. The video was displayed alongside the actual chair and a re-creation of the scattered plate pieces.

...

Somewhere, there is a file that exists within the depths of my therapist's office, bursting with loose, yellow pages. While I was grasping a pillow as if my life depended on it, my therapist was grasping her pen and taking notes on a legal pad. Sometimes, I wonder what those mysterious pages contain. I imagine they must be filled with hastily written, fragmented notes about my fragmented life, many of them about things that I can no longer even remember, like a forbidden, forgotten archive of my own psyche.

...



Figure 8. K. Virag. *Client Notes* (2019)

To be displayed alongside *see you again next week* and the corresponding installation, I also created 52 linoleum block prints. I printed an image of the chair on pages of pre-written client notes from “The Adolescent Psychotherapy Progress Notes Planner, 3rd. ed.”, with select notes printed on semi-transparent vellum and overlaid atop the image of the chair to highlight them. I mounted the prints on coloring

book pages, which was a nod to mainstream media's portrayal of adult coloring books as a form of self-administered "art therapy".

The individual notes I chose to highlight are ones that I imagine could be in my personal file, and I arranged them on the wall in a rough chronological order of how I imagine they would show up that file. The brightness of the ink signifies the nature of the note: the darker the ink, the more positive the note and the lighter, the more negative.

...

In his paper "The Use of an Object and Relating Through Identifications" (1969), D. W. Winnicott "emphasizes the use of rage or fury or destruction in feeling and becoming free. The personality explodes in reaction to its sense of unreality. The self tries to break out of its fantasy bubble..." (Eigan in Schwartz-Salant & Stein, 2018, p. 74). *See you again next week* and the related works focused on that destruction of self but stopped there. What happens after the pieces are shattered and picked up? What becomes of them next?

...

I began to work on a new performance piece, in which the resulting fragments would become something new after the destruction. This project involves sculpture/ceramics, bookmaking, video performance, and a live component. I created my own cast iron and porcelain slip cast forms, some with birds or flowers added. I found that in the previous work with the found plates, viewers were having associations with the plates that I had not foreseen, and that took away from the meaning that I intended the work to have. I realized that in creating my own

forms I could eliminate unintentional associations with existing functional objects. Slip-casting also allowed me to economically acquire the bounty of objects that I would need to make such a performance successful. Additionally, using objects made by hand adds another conceptual component to the work. I am not just destroying mass-manufactured things, I am destroying things that I personally spent time creating - customizing, intricately cutting, and smoothing each form.

There exists a preciousness to these objects that I am just



Figure 9. K. Virag. Octahedrons. (2019-present)

going to haphazardly smash. I photographed each of the objects and created a handbound book with the images. The book is reminiscent of a scrapbook, memorializing these objects before I destroy them. I created a performance set with pink walls and hung the forms from a framework above at varying lengths using brass chain (Figure 9). The plan is to film myself ripping them down and smashing them, interspersed with periods where I will be moving about the set in a more contemplative manner, touching the forms, and allowing myself to get gently entangled by the chains. This video will be projected life-size in an exhibition. In front of the projection, I will scatter all the broken pieces and do a live performance where I first try to reassemble the pieces – a nearly impossible task. Ultimately, I will give up on trying to reassemble the pieces and use them to create something new. Not only is the use of my body important in this piece but so is the passing of time. I spent a considerable amount of time creating each of these objects just to smash them in a considerably less amount of time but will then painstakingly spend time trying to assemble the pieces only to eventually give up and refocus more time on creating something

different. Unfortunately, because of Covid-19 social distancing, I have had to put this project on hold until I am able to do a live performance again.

...

Besides the idea of a fractured self-identity, the idea of the fragment is also interesting when considering how our brains store and recall memories. Different types of memories can become fractured over time. Dissociation can certainly increase the fracturing and distortion of memory, but it is the nature of memories that they fracture and change in everyone whether that person experiences dissociation or a mental illness or not.

...

Originally conceived as purely material, a second self, [the] soul lives on when the physical self dies. The fact that this immortal soul was initially thought to be embodied in one's shadow or mirror-image indicates that loss of self, of personal individuality, was unbearable, even unimaginable to our forebears. (Rank, 1950, p. 11)

...

On June 14th, 2010 my friend Jordan killed himself.

On June 14th, 2012 my friend Anthony killed himself.

...

Anthony and I met in middle school. He lived and breathed airplanes. By the time we were in high school he could identify different planes solely from their sounds and had multiple run-ins with the police and homeland security at Detroit Metro Airport while trying to videotape and photograph planes taking off from the top of the parking garage. In May 2012 he graduated

with honors with a degree in Aeronautical Engineering and a multi-engine commercial pilot's license. A month later, he was gone, completely blindsiding his family and friends.

He was this stable person in my life through so much. And he was gone.

...

I did not know what else to do with myself so I made bad "art" with toy airplanes from the dollar store to cope with my grief and guilt. The image of a white commercial airplane in my art morphed into a white bird, which the more I thought about, the more fitting it was. In various cultures and religions, birds, especially white birds, represent some sort of spirit, including the ubiquitous dove-as-Holy-Spirit in my own Catholic upbringing. Even in Jungian dream interpretation a white bird in a dream represents a visit from a spirit (Singer, 1972, p. 169) I ran with this imagery, thinking about the boundaries of life and death, using the bird as a visual metaphor for a part of oneself that is not physical – a soul, if you will.

...

Virág: from the personal name Virág (from Hungarian virág 'flower', one of several female names which derived from an affectionate nickname). (Oxford University Press)

...

In several pieces as an undergrad, continuing to think about death and grieving, I used irises in my work since in ancient Egypt they were put on graves to summon the Goddess Iris to come take the deceased on their journey to the next life, such as in my BFA thesis piece, *Carousoul* (Figure 10) In this piece, using a carousel, I depicted a transitory space or state

between life and death, which in retrospect, was really when the idea of an “in-between” space first appeared in my work.



Figure 10. K. Virag. *Carousoul* (2013)

...

My first iron pour was on November 14th, 2012, five months to the day after Anthony died. In those months of grief, I had reverted back to a constant dissociated state. For the first time in those months, I felt something. I felt grounded. I felt connected.

Iron is among the last elements released by a dying star before the star explodes in a supernova and the star matter gets propelled through space. Iron is in the Earth’s core and it is in our blood, linking us to our planet, each other, and the universe.

The process of creating art with iron in and of itself is intriguing. Old unwanted radiators and pipes are smashed into fragments and melted down. The resulting molten metal no longer

resembles these previous objects. It is a temporary, amorphous state brimming with potential before it is poured into molds to become something transformed.

...

“The coziness of the domestic space is a lure; as any student of sentimental fiction knows, homes are haunted... (What domestic scene isn’t?)” (Doyle, 2013, p. 6)

...

For safety reasons, I was not allowed inside any of my grandparents’ houses.

My father was the only child (or so we thought) of a Hungarian refugee and a schoolteacher. They divorced when my father was young, and my grandfather passed away when my father was a teenager. In addition to being a schoolteacher, my grandmother was also a hoarder, completely filling her home and



Figure 11. K. Virag. Grandma’s stuff (2010)

garage to the brim. The mounds of stuff were revealed to me only through her front window during the many summer afternoons I would spend visiting her, but only on her front porch. I set foot in her home for the first time when I was 20, when she moved into assisted living and the task of emptying her home fell on my family. The kitchen had not been functional in decades. Dolls were her major object of interest – Barbies, baby dolls, porcelain dolls – any type of doll you could imagine, she had literally hundreds, probably thousands. As, an undergraduate at the

time, I made a series of photographs documenting close-ups of the piles of stuff in her home as my family was cleaning it (Figure 11). Soon after, I began collecting some of the objects from her home and incorporating them into sculptures.

My maternal grandparents were also hoarders. After filling one house, the next logical step for them was to buy another house and fill that one too. Now in my 30's, I have yet to see the inside or outside of either of these houses. My grandfather passed away in 2010. I have witnessed many arguments between my grandmother and her adult children regarding her possessions, including numerous different china plate sets. It turns out plates can cause a lot of family drama. When I smashed the plates in *see you again next week*, I thought I chose plates because they were cheap at thrift stores, and I could easily get a multitude of them that I could store easily until I was ready to use them. I did not make the connection to my grandmother and my family until after, but perhaps I subconsciously went with smashing plates (Figure 2) out of frustration with my family and the emphasis on material things over relationships.

...

Episodic memory is funny. Some parts of a memory are so vivid, yet some parts are just holes. I do not remember where I was when my father called me. I was either in Baton Rouge, or Buffalo, or Colorado. I know he told me to sit down and that he had some news to tell me. I do not know if I actually sat down. However, I do distinctly remember his voice when he told me "*I have a sister*".

When he and my mother were going through some personal papers in my grandmother's house, my mother came across a shocking discovery: papers surrendering parental rights to the

daughter my grandmother had given up for adoption more than a decade before my father was born. My family had no idea.

I paused to process for a moment before asking my father, *“The dolls... Did she always collect those? Like, since you can remember?”*

“Always”

“Hmm. That makes so much sense now. It’s like she was trying to fill this void left by giving up this baby girl for adoption, or maybe trying to reconcile her guilt by collecting all these unwanted thrift store and garage sale dolls?”

“Damn. Oh my God. You’re probably right!”

When my parents confronted my grandmother, she denied it saying, *“That person does not exist”*.

Finally, she opened up.

It turns out, my grandmother had gotten pregnant out of wedlock and was sent by her family to live with nuns in a convent until she gave birth and gave the infant up for adoption.

The adoptive family named the child Karen. My father tracked her down and learned that she was still living in the area. My father met with her and later my whole family met her and eventually she met my grandmother.

Karen was only in our life a few years before she died of untreated cancer. She never married and never had any children of her own. Her adoptive parents and brother had already passed away and the only relative that she was in contact with was a cousin.

...

Even weirder than how our brain stores and recalls episodic memories, is genetics.

After Karen's death, my parents went with her cousin to her home. Upon entering, they found it full, wall-to-wall, of stuff. Her kitchen was not functional. She had not had running water in years. It was a chilling replica of my grandmother's house – her biological mother, with whom she had had no contact until she was 60 years old. One major difference was that instead of a preoccupation with dolls, it was mirrors. Big mirrors, small mirrors. Everywhere. My mother described it as one of the most terrifying things she had ever seen.

“Well, she was adopted” I pointed out, “Maybe the mirrors were a physical manifestation of her questions of self and identity.”

“Somehow I knew you'd have a theory.”

This discovery of the mirrors was particularly unsettling to me because I had already been collecting mirrors myself to use in my own art to look at self-identity through the lens of dissociation. Did she experience dissociation too? Is there a genetic factor to weird relationships with mirrors? It made me uneasy. It still does.

Perhaps the most haunting part of this whole situation was that although Karen's adoptive parents renamed her, the original name my grandmother had put on the birth certificate was Anna Katherine.

Over forty years later, with no knowledge of the existence of this person, my parents named me Katherine Ann.

...

“Liminality is imaged as “a place that is not a place, and a time that is not a time”
(Turner, 1974, p.239).

...

As a child, I found myself imagining what my grandparents’ houses would look like if my family was “normal”. I mentally constructed images from old TV sitcom homes and stories from my childhood classmates about weekends spent at their grandparents’ houses. I pictured these homes as warm, kitschy, and clean.

...

I am always looking for objects to use in my work, whether I am out shopping or out running or driving on trash day. Maybe I developed this habit while cleaning out my grandmother’s house, or maybe, with a tendency toward hoarding in my DNA, it is something that has always been there, latent. At a dollar store, I happened to stumble upon a coloring book titled *The Wallpaper Coloring Book* by J. Stokes. The images in this book consist of awkward, out-of-



Figure 12. Image from “*The Wallpaper Coloring Book*”
(Stokes, 2015)

perspective, stock-like photographs of furniture, household décor items, and pets layered atop repeated black-and-white patterns, or “wallpaper” to be colored in. While I had used coloring book pages in *Client Notes*, in the context of this

coloring book, I saw the transitory nature of this form of imagery. It is the start of something – a picture - suspended in a space of incompleteness or waiting. Regardless of how well it is colored, it will never be like a photograph - a true representation of reality. It will always have a certain cartoonish-ness to it. The combination of the real and the cartoon and the lack of coherent perspective or shadows in this *The Wallpaper Coloring Book* makes for a certain amount of unease but also intrigue about these domestic scenes. They exist on a threshold in between reality and non-reality.

...



Figure 13. K. Virag. *Desaturated (Living Room)*

I thought about what the images in the book would look like if they were enterable, 3-dimensional spaces. However, while the division between the “real” furniture and the coloring book walls is very distinct in the book, I wanted to blur the boundaries. I began with the chair from *see you again next week*, sectioning off areas in drip-like shapes, tracing the details of the print in black Sharpie, and painting in these shapes with white paint as though doing a reverse color-by-number painting, effectively “removing” color instead of

adding it, and then expanding the installation to include other objects like a rug and faux wood floorboards. The initial plan was to paint roughly 40-50% of each component in the installation, creating an effect of a blending of reality and non-reality or cartoon. However, I ended up abandoning this initial plan, opting instead to paint 100% of the

objects' surface area. I concluded that the physical existence of the objects in the space was enough representation of reality without preserving any of their original color.

The installation will ultimately become an entire living room. I envision it lit with diffused lighting to reduce the number of shadows projected by the individual objects onto others to further flatten and add to the perceptual unease of the space. I picture all the different layered black-and-white patterns creating a camouflage effect, where at first glance it becomes difficult to discern where one object ends and another begins, such as with the throw pillow on the chair.

...

While browsing Facebook Marketplace for furniture and other objects for this project, I came across a floral footrest. I was in Syracuse, and this wonderful floral specimen was located in Buffalo, so I called my partner in Buffalo and asked him to go get it from the seller. In the process, my partner made an offhand comment about how it looked like something that his grandmother would have had, and I had a moment of reckoning: what I was subconsciously doing with this room, was recreating that alternative reality I had envisioned in my head as a child of what my grandparent's homes would have looked like if they were "normal". The basis of this domestic scene could very much be someone's reality, but for me it is a fabricated non-reality.

...

"One may link up with transitional experience even from a split-off sliver of self, a self lost on unreality." (Eigan in Schwartz-Salant & Stein, 2018, p. 72).

...

Years ago, when I was 16, my therapist gave me a simple handmade fleece blanket. The front was bright pink with large, bright orange polka dots. The back was solid bright orange.

“I chose this for you because of the bright colors. It reminded me of your bright, fun, bubbly, personality that I enjoy so much.

“Cut the bullshit”

“It’s not bullshit. I can see it, your peers in group can see it. I know you don’t believe it yet, but it’s there. Eventually you’ll believe me.”

The purpose of the blanket, she went on to explain, was to use it to ground myself when needed. I was directed to wrap myself up in it and focus on the sensation and physicality of the blanket instead of reaching for my piece of broken glass.

...

In developmental psychology, Winnicott theorizes that a blanket can be a transitional object for a young child. It is one of the first “not me” (and not “mother”) objects a child interacts and connects with, linking the young child to the outside physical world (Cwik in Schwartz-Salant & Stein, 2018, pp. 100-101). Weirdly, in similar way, the blanket for me became a sort of transitional object out of a dissociated state and back into reality, as was the shard of glass.

...

In my 2018 installation *Shards*, I used cut-up faux fur blankets and large foggy cardboard panels meant to look like giant mirror shards to contrast these items. The foggy surface of the panel made for distorted reflections of the viewer and the scale was much larger than life, emulating the distorted reality of dissociation.



Figure 14. K. Virag. *Shards* (2018)

...

I was first introduced to artist Mike Kelley's work when I was an undergraduate in the Fall of 2011, only several months before his untimely death, when I was using the found objects from my grandmother's house to make sculpture. I cannot recall any other works of contemporary art I had seen until that point that resonated with me at that deep a level as *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be*



Figure 15. M. Kelley. *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987). Source: <https://whitney.org/collection/works/7317>

Repaid (Figure 15) and *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites*, and I was thrilled to learn that Kelley was also from Detroit.

In an interview with MoMA in 2000, Kelley explained his reasoning for the handmade objects:

I became really interested in the idea of the gift. So I started collecting things that are obviously hand made, and that weren't made to be sold. Hand knitted afghans and hand sewn stuffed animals and things I knew that were designed to be given away. And then, I tried to come up with various ways of presenting them that I felt would focus on them as a kind of commodity. And I did that through accumulation.

Kelley went on to explain that a reason he stopped using these items is that viewers were projecting concepts of childhood trauma onto these works, which was not his intent. This personal projection onto his works is why I connected – and continue to connect - with them so deeply, and this disconnect between his intent and my own profound experience with the work is perhaps why when I show and discuss my own work, I struggle to decide how much information to give or withhold.

At the retrospective of his work at MoMA PS1, looking at the display of his photographic work, I unexpectedly found myself face-to-face with an image of an all-too-familiar sculpture. I cannot count the number of times I walked by that sculpture (made by Fritz Koenig) in my adolescent years in the courtyard of Westland Mall in the Detroit suburb of Westland, one of my regular hangout spots on the weekends for no other reason than to avoid being at home. This encounter only deepened my emotional connection to his work.

...

While my current focus is primarily on my coloring book room, I have recently begun collecting homemade blankets – fleece blankets like that from my therapist, but also quilts and afghans - from thrift stores to use in a future project. The handmade blankets speak to me because of the labor and love put into them. I find myself wondering about the makers’ decisions to select the fabrics, prints or colors that they did and the untold story of how or why they ended up being given away. Like Kelley, I am interested in these objects because they were likely gifts, but unlike Kelley, I am very much interested in the emotive aspects behind these objects. I am not yet sure exactly what this future project will be, but I have been thinking about the small blanket forts I used to make in my own living room as a child, and how I could recreate a massive environment like that out of these blankets. I am not yet sure if I will paint on these blankets or otherwise alter or distort them, or if I would simply leave them as they are.

...

At the point of ripeness, the lights must go on, and the liminal grayness must be left behind. At the propitious moment, one must step off the threshold of change into the change itself, into a more integral sense of self and others. (Hopcke in Schwartz-Salant & Stein, 2018, p. 129)

...

Perhaps the biggest necessity for leaving the “grayness” behind and reconstructing oneself is time. Many of my works mirror this idea through processes like creating dozens of twine components, printing the same image 52 times, casting a small bounty of the same object, trying to piece together hundreds of broken pieces, or painstakingly tracing and painting patterns on upholstered furniture. These processes, much like therapy and the reconstruction of one’s identity after trauma, take a considerable amount of time, intent, diligence, and focus.

...

Looking back on my artistic journey leading up to the present, I spent the earliest years of my undergraduate education just making things that looked cool until an unexpected loss pushed me to say something in my art. My artist statements gradually began to speak of general grief and discomfort. I spoke and wrote in generalities, avoiding my individual story out of, ironically, discomfort. Under a cover of vagueness, I was trying to tell my story without actually telling *my* story. It took time for me to become comfortable sharing my story. Graduate school helped speed up that process and made me realize the power of personal specificity in my work. I look forward to seeing how my artistic practice continues to progress over the years as more pieces fall into place.

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