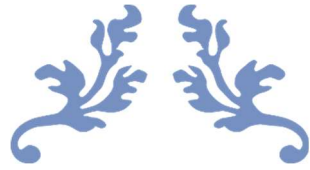


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A PLEA FOR SENTIENCE

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts.



2022

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Abstract

This thesis is a tale of uncovering *Senties* by the author/artist — Tiffany Tucker, whilst interweaving intersecting theories to address themes of fear, feelings, feminism and fairy-tales. The pieces created stem from the raw emotions that come out of Tucker's borderline personality disorder (BPD), and are in response to this absurd digital, post-_____ world.

Senties are colourful beings, which can shift and adapt to different mediums. They are a form of emotional catharsis without fetishization of identity to remind and provoke the viewer/reader of their own emotions. In this decade, where weaponry is more accessible than therapy, there is a complacency to destruction. The work is grounded in surrealism and humour, alongside moustached men of the past. Tucker brings forth the strength of 'woman's work' of craft and care to guide their hands¹. Historical sampling and psychedelia are building blocks of this practice, informed by an empathetic nature for outsiders. This practice is a parody of perfection. Tucker works with an array of mediums with a level of faux-naivety approaching each piece, a sort of 'raw-dog' approach. They work with a combination of cheap/accessible materials and put them through processes that require detailed, skilled craftsmanship to create works of art.

In this document, Tucker unpacks their journey with *Senties* relating to the endeavour of academic research, artmaking and validates their existence with an exploration of emotional abject and moralistic media.

¹ Writer Lucy Lippard observed that the Women's Movement in the 1970s empowered artists with the confidence to draw upon feminine differences in artmaking (*Women's Work*).

Acknowledgements

A deep, appreciative thank you to my supervisors Kerry Ann Lee and Anna Brown for guiding me along this year, tolerating and encouraging my attitudes and juggling the weight of their own lives.

Thank you to Shannon Te Ao for egging me on to do the MFA and thank you to Julieanna Preston for her jewels of sentences and matriarchal comforts.

Thank you to Craig Cherrie, Dick Whyte and Martin Patrick for offering me your advice and helping me clear my confusions at times in this document

Thank you to Hamish and Ben for sharing a studio space with me and for various chatter of topics that disregarded books entirely.

Thank you, Mum, and Dad, for doing the best job that you two could do to raise me with a moral structure in an immoral world.

Thanks to my bookbinding boss Andrew, for passing me on your knowledge and allowing me the room to grow.

Thank you to April, for being my best friend, and for your unconditional care and comforting presence. Thank you for metaphorically and physically holding my hand since we were kids. We aren't done yet xx

A big hug of a thank you to my friend and flatmate Antonio, without your relentless support that takes a variety of forms, I wouldn't be where I am now.

Thank you to all my friends I have cried too, rescheduled, and declined invites, your patience for me is not unseen.

Pour one out for the homies.

Glossary

Sentie: A medium-shifting creature that is birthed from emotion.

Sentient: Responsive to or conscious of sense impressions. To be able to feel (the Latin roots have this specified to be different from the ability to think).

Sentiment: A refined attitude or thought prompted by an emotional response.

Empathy: The ability to share or sense someone else's emotional responses by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation. Different from sympathy which is an understanding of feelings.

Well-being: The state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy that has multi-dimensional facets. Can also be read as a term developed by the wellness industry for 'profiteering'.

Cancelled: To destroy the force or validity of; to decide not to conduct with; removal of support. Exposure of opinion/feelings/thoughts leaving open the critique of that view. Originating in marginalised humour, transforming into an act of agency that once popularised by mainstream media, started to cause frustration and fear (Clark).

Scat: Animal faecal droppings. A slang to refer to rushing something/one off in a haste; Jazz singing in nonsense syllables.

Accessibility: To be easily obtained, reached, and understood. Though typically used when referring to those living with disabilities, my take on the word is not referring to the logistical accessibility of a location or tool but rather access to emotional knowledge. There are organizations like Arts Access Aotearoa that contribute to this cause (Arts Access Aotearoa).

Outsider: A person who is not involved with a particular group of people or organization or who does not live in a particular place. When used in an art-language context it refers to self-taught or supposedly naïve artists. Often, depicts extreme mental states, unconventional ideas, or elaborate fantasy worlds are categorised as 'outsider art'.

Abject: To be cast off. An extreme reaction of disgust. Often used as a form of derision, or a point of curiosity, Filmmaker John Water's work has been described as being located at 'the intersection of art and the abject' (Marine).

Discovering *Senties*, a rough telling

Senties are illustrated, humorous, colourful, poignant beings that I have created, resonating with emotion. The word 'sentie' takes its inspiration from 'sentiments', and 'sentience'. The sentient sentiments. They are an expression of my emotions. They are radical guardians of empathy, and they are meant to connect people to their emotions in hopes of reminding, provoking or mocking—a sensation that is felt, especially when one is thinking uncritically or unclearly.

To begin discussing the discovery of *Senties*, I must provide you, the reader, with some background of myself.

I was raised in a home-schooled, Christian community by a solo mother. Being a solo parent can be a soulful, lonesome task of giving to others with little thanks. My mother carries Siksika² blood. Her mother moved over from Canada in the 1940s, she left my grandfather when my mother was quite young, and they never had the chance to reconnect. I attended her funeral, but I never met my grandmother. A lost connection to another land. My mother can be politely described as a crafty hoarder. She would gather discarded trinkets, creating decorations from the jewellery, toys, ceramics, clocks, broken wooden furniture, old books, and scraps of cloth she collected from locations like recycling tips. Compiling things that were going to be tossed out by others and gave them another chance. Her pop cultural tastes were stuck in her youth of the 70s before she became the teen mother of my sister. Most of the media and materials I was surrounded with as a child were held onto over the years. Wholesome and nostalgic, full of queer and psychedelic undertones that the religious side of my mother, chose to ignore.

I spent my early years in her home with my brother, who lives with Weaver Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder. He cannot walk, he cannot complete tasks unaided, he cannot communicate with words. My brother can moan, grizzle, cry, laugh and smile. If you know him personally you can tell when he is engaged with something, and you will likely know if he does not enjoy something. Many arguments have been had between doctors/outsideers and my mother, (or my mother and I), regarding my brother's level of 'sentience' relating to capacity and depth. He is 23 years old as of writing.

I spent my formative teen years with my solo father, who also was stuck in the nostalgia of his youth but his 70s was the edgy, queer, psychedelic, transgressive era. He has XXY chromosomes, one of many variations of a chromosome genetic makeup, leaving him without naturally occurring testosterone, so no sperm. I am an IVF baby; a sperm donor was selected by my parents who gifted their sperm to create a life. My father is Māori and gave me my first name 'Koha'. Being somewhat of an outsider himself, he associated warmly with others of that description, mostly a wide array of addicts that are deemed less than desirable by many. My father provided me with a safe place to explore the undertones I had dreamt about in my childhood. These people and others I met during this time became the cumbersome bunch that exposed to me the loopholes in my once square-eyed view.

² Siksika Nation is a First Nation in southern Alberta, Canada

I have experienced certain realities that to outsiders of those worlds, might consider dark and distressing, but it is my truth, that has shaped my worldviews going forth. This has granted me the gift of being open and embracing those considered odd.

I describe myself as a feminist, but I struggle to claim the title of Feminist artist. I love the Romantic art/literature period but am not really a fan of romance. The queering of Queer is such a fun tongue-twister for the mind. I come from a small rural town and when I moved to Wellington, a vibrant city full of sharp tongues, to pursue university, I was unaware of the distinction between lowercase and uppercase F's R's and Qs.

Feminism is a multi-faceted term in the art and real world, that involves a lot of being boxed-in and upholding of accepted ideologies. I tried my hand at creating works that emphasised their feminist aspects, but lacking appropriate criticality, I fumbled. I saw abstract, conceptual works being praised around me and I thought to myself "Who said cartoons are not art?". I found comfort in a variety of male artists that I discovered in the aisles of libraries and video shops as a child. Artists who are considered 'quirky', but have produced thought-provoking, surreal, humorous, and sexually frank works, Salvador Dali, Keith Haring, Henry Darger, Howard Ashman, Tim Burton, and John Waters. It wasn't until I was at university that I start to uncover artists of colour and varying genders. Two who helped me find an identity I could connect to were Susan Te Kahurangi King and Jess Johnson. Both are female, from Aotearoa, and create colourful patterned illustrations handling the content of humanoid /anthropomorphic forms.

In all this, was the foundation of *Senties*, I was just unaware of it at the time.

When I decided to proceed with my MFA studies, I came into the programme with an interest in fashion and chronological snobbery.³ I was reading through historical diaries and newspaper journals to find silly stories of crinoline struggles and what I found were vibrant stories of excitement and pain struggles that resonated with me — such as moving locations, tedious homemaking tasks and the oppression of the outspoken. My interest shifted to empathy for these women I found amongst the threads of history. This opened a significant path for me to put myself into my art.

Living with borderline personality disorder (BPD) has its blessings. I feel deep empathy for other people although this can be detrimental to myself if I have no boundaries in place. I started to place portrayals of emotion into my artwork, trying to push its ambiguity continuously. I started to explore medium and mode — often with readily accessible materials/tools. My art often requires long hours of detailed and laborious physical work to create. Having BPD has provided me with intense feelings that can be quite draining at times but by putting my emotions into my art I have found an outlet. I am lucky enough that I was able to access therapy to learn the skills to manage my emotions, as not everyone has this opportunity⁴ (Rucklidge et al.). My art and writing both deal with the subject of mental health from my perspective and lived experiences, alongside my friends/family.

³ A term describing the uncritical view that ways of the past are wholly inferior due to our advancements in knowledge and technology.

⁴ In the mental health inquiry that the New Zealand Government conducted in 2018 found that whilst our rates of mental health cases and costs for the required medications are rising there are not enough psychologists available in this country to adequately treat each patient with care, every 80 cases to one. This offloads the treatment to social workers not capable to deal with such extremes at times. The inquiry also found that there is a system of reaching a certain level of consistent harm to self or others before being accepted into treatment which has resulted in many prevented deaths (Rucklidge et al.).

NOTE TO THE READER: Throughout this essay, I will switch between regular and italic font/colour, each representing a different voice that of the academic and personal.

This is my academic voice

This is my personal voice

Senties are my creations and in some part rooted in my own experiences with the mental health struggles that I visually project out onto the world, but they are here for others to interact with in individual ways.

1. The *Senties* are not bound by humanly rules and restrictions when it comes to body. They can take many shape, form and colour.

When starting the MFA unit, my head was in a swirl between honing my craft and emotional healing. This was reflected in poetry and humanoid form. I was working heavily in what I describe as the sketching portion of my process; quickly getting out my ideas of thoughts and visuals, often utilising whatever closest tools are next to me at the time; pencil, paint or ink pens, that I use to draw on varying qualities of paper (figure 1 & 2). I was struggling to locate myself with an identifier of art; feminism, critique of environmental treatments, or acknowledging colonialism. *Guardians Of Empathy* (figure 3), was the consequence of this struggle, using my hand as a starting point. The cheap acrylic paint I used created mucky tones that contrasted with the bold straight-out-of-the-tube colours. I later combined this with a variety of gel mediums to gloss and intensify different elements of the creature. Despite using artificial materials and alien-like imagery, the painting evokes elements of the natural world such as octopi and flora. This painting was the a-ha moment for me in the creation of *Senties*. I started to question who or what can feel empathy? How far can it be extended and where can it be focused?

On the surface, Senties are not leaking with body fluids that one would typically see in abject art, but I (the author of this thesis) am saying that emotions, the primal, instinctive, unedited “#feels” are now as abject as scat (a slang term, with multiple meanings). Senties are a fun-house mirror reflection of polarizing emotional responses, between the source and the outburst. Example of an out: an outburst of an opinion in 140 characters about a ‘harmful’ subject can leave one cancelled. This action of ‘cancelling’ usually results in three months punishment of digital call-out, whereas, in the real world, abusive people still hold power, they have received their punishment. Real-world victims are left feeling unsafe.

This action of ‘cancelling’, though rooted in positivity and support for marginalised groups, can grow into a toxic mindset (Toler).

I started to craft lore surrounding the *Senties* in hand-bound books, encased with black and gold coverings to reveal hand-illustrated, hand-written dreamy psychedelic scapes and forms (figures 4,5,10, 11, 20, 21). These books are made alongside other art I am working on. I try to work on a few projects at a time. The imagery in these books derives from a wide range of historical artworks/designs.⁵ As well as my imaginative figures I see in plants, walls, clouds, etc. The word combinations that I conjure are more like poetic sentences rather than a flowing narrative or lyrical tune.

I constantly storyboard in my mind about my figures, how they transform from one shape into another, how they move around our environment, and what sounds would they create alongside their motion.

⁵ From the Bosh followers of the 1500s to the Dada and Surrealists of the early 1900s. Lithographs, etchings, and illustrations. Some designers/artists to paint a range; Phillips Galle, Peter Flotner, Virginia Frances Sterret and George Grosz.



Figure 1. Tiffany Tucker, [a display of curated sketches and poems. Pencil and ink on watercolor card and copy paper], March 2021, personal photograph by author.



Figure 2. Tiffany Tucker, [Image of a red hand-shaped figure surrounded by a bird-like creature created under the influence of LSD] May 2021, acrylic paint on canvas, personal photograph by author.



Figure 3. *Guardians Of Empathy*, acrylic, glass beads and gloss gloss gel on a circular canvas, personal photograph by author, May 2021.



Figure 4. Tiffany Tucker, [close up shot of *Senties*, *Unearthing the Senties* and *The Baring of Senties*, three books with black coverings and gold type, n.d, photograph by Hamish Besley. October 2022

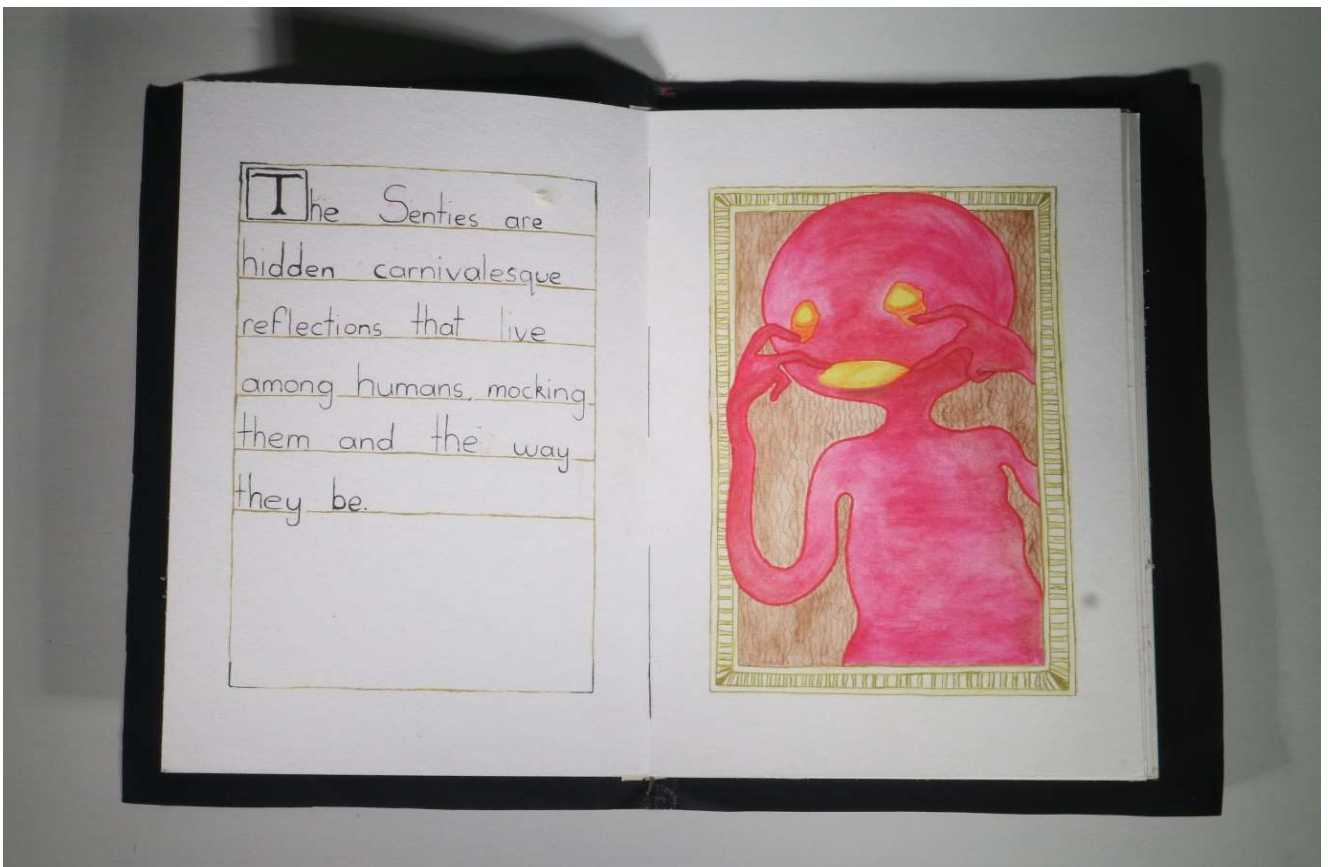


Figure 5. Tiffany Tucker, [photograph of red figure with yellow features, in watercolour pencil surrounded by gold ink border, accompanied by ink text], June 2021, photograph by Hamish Besley, October 2022.

This constant whirring that occurs in my mind was juggling between; a panic for human connection in a post-covid/digital realm, developing lore for *Senties* and thinking about females that suffered in the asylums in the 1910s/20s, for mundane activities such as reading and pre-marital sex. In contrast to my experience as a female in the 2010s/20s who can participate in all that and more, even with my diagnosis. *Ooze*, (figure 6, 7, 8, 9) is the title of the 2D animation that oozed out of me and refers to the black goop in the animation.

My drawn animations are created in a slow style in contrast to readily available technology, however, through mark making and the hand-rendered aesthetic, it reveals the artist's craft. There is a balance required when completing an animation of what is achievable in a time frame and the compromise of the artwork. I have tried to collaborate with others in the past when I lack the required skill set but due to reasons beyond my control, this rarely works out and forces me to learn skills quickly or figure out a creative solution.

I use low GSM, low-cost paper pads. No one has taught me how to animate, nor am I a team of many working on any individual project. The choices I make regarding my materials are mostly economic, regarding funds and skill set. I use the flipbook method, I create hundreds of individual drawings, proceed to scan my drawings, place them on a timeline on cheap/free software and do very little editing to the overall moving picture. I work at a rapid speed because of my natural manic state. This allows me to work on multiple projects at a time, as I bore quickly when committing to one mode of art. Colour selection is a part of the process, but it is not the core of the work. I tend to stick to bright, simple colours that I use in contrasting ways for a psychedelic effect which often mute themselves to an eclectic floral palette when I create watercolour pieces. I try to be aware of different interpretations of certain colours to better inform my practice, creating greater ways to allow others in and find different readings to my work. The speed of the motion and audio increase in pace each time the animation loop, giving it industrial angst when the metal guitar begins, creating a hair-standing, uncomfortable experience. I say hair-standing, but that is entirely subjective, some people enjoy the over-powering audio that creates a sensory experience. It makes me want to vomit; it is a negative reaction to something outside of me. An abject reaction.

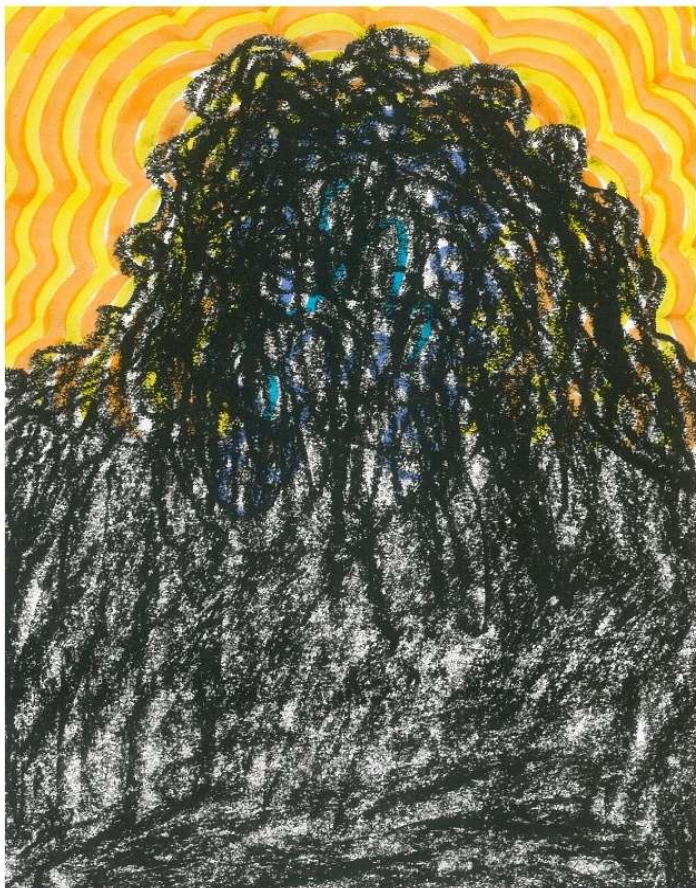


Figure 6-9. Tiffany Tucker, "Ooze", still from video by author, October 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYf9d58o2-l>

“It is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled” (Kristeva 4).

“Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (Kristeva 4).

I am wanting to create an opening for a conversation about weighty emotions and the gravity of them, pushing aside the exploitative discourse of artists that live with mental health disorders. I use abject theory as one of my footings and yet...

Julie Kristeva's *'Approaching Abjection. Powers of Horror'*, describes a first-person encounter with a corpse and the confrontation of the lack-of border of self, the borders of mortality and bodily functions between the viewer and corpse. She explains that it is not the sight of an oozing wound that makes us look away but the lack of containment. Abject art/literature is normally textural, performative, and shocking, with some form of excretion. The inwards become outwards. It is the carnivalesque response to the religious order that brings forth taboo subjects that question the status quo. This idea of the inner becoming outer is the key point I take from Kristeva's theory into my practice. In reading her work I had to distance myself from her descriptions and assumptions of patients living with BPD. In her work she referred to patients living with the condition as 'Borderlines', treating the patients as subjects that display her theory of borderless abjection regarding the often metaphorical and intense descriptions of emotional sensations. To present an example at length.

“The outburst of abjection is doubtless only a moment in the treatment of borderline cases. I call attention to it here because of the key position it assumes in the dynamics of the subject's constitution, which is nothing other than a slow, laborious production of object relation. When the fortified castle of the borderline patient begins to see its walls crumble, and its indifferent pseudo-objects start losing their obsessive mask, the subject-effect — fleeting, fragile, but authentic — allows itself to be heard in the advent of that interspace, which is abjection.” (Kristeva 47).

This reinforced notion of flitting, weighty emotions lead to a reading of BPD's feelings being invalid. This fetishist way of thinking of someone living with what is considered a mental disability is in opposition to the conversation I am trying to create.

Now, I'm not sure whether to laugh or cry when regarding academic work such as Kristeva's. When she discusses 'Borderlines' as being on the border between neurosis and psychosis or the lack of border between emotional mood changes, being on the border of society because of stigmatization as a 'borderline', being raised on the differing borders of moral opinion, living in the era of the blurring of the border between digital avatar and physical body/self, the lack of border in the globalization news vs border map lines. I live and breathe abjection. The butterflies in your stomach, the shivers down your spine, feeling an exposure of one's anxieties, desires and guilty habits coming out, is an uncomfortable one to sit with. To potentially be socially outcasted is a fate worse than death so it seems, one could be seen as vulnerable, seen as a monster or not seen at all. I'm sick of losing friends from fear of expression and disappointment in self.

Thinking about the idea of inwards becoming outwards I'd like to present a nuanced form of abjection, difficult emotions.

In Jennifer Doyle's '*Hold it against me: difficulty and emotion in contemporary art*', she discusses how feelings and art interplay with one another, referring to artist and viewer. In the first few chapters, she breaks down the romanticization of the artist relating to self-indulgent readings of abstract art and how that shaped the language of the field. Doyle then goes on to discuss the works by marginalised groups (queer, people of colour), she breaks down the burden of affective labour about identity. The work becomes an oversimplification of themes and dismissal of any discourse that does not fit within the borders of the work understood by the viewer. This disengagement allows the categorization of art to occur and the deeming of value to take place. These over-simplifications and disengagement of works cause a lack of relation to the work holding an emotion, but rather a response to the marginalised artist (Doyle 94).

Emotions are a response to interaction, with an object, or other outer factors. They have no flesh to represent them yet they act as the boundary and a surface for self and others (Doyle 109).

2: Senties typically hide amongst the beautiful & ornate.
Often going unassumed of the power they hold. Sometimes
when in hiding Senties will share their abilities
with the shells they are using.

“Humour, disgust, and failure are disruptive forces. When operating together in art they generate particular and compelling aesthetic experiences. Working with humour, disgust and failure unfolds multiplicity and disrupts the limits and clichés of gendered representations.”
(Polkinghorne 170).

Often our first societal encounters with moral norms come in form of fairy-tales and are used to guide and persuade children to comprehend the world around them. They often simplify struggles through an imaginary lens (Bettelheim). What society deems as acceptable has morphed and shifted throughout decades, thus fairy-tales have also adapted. We can see this in the world regarding homosexuality.

Post-2000, there has been a slow trend to popularize country-wide legal same-sex marriage. Children’s books have helped promote these ideas, with works such as *Promised Land*, by Adam Reynolds and Chaz Harris. This fairy-tale tells of an adventure and love story between a prince and a farm boy. In contrast to Hans Christian Anderson’s 1837 *The Little Mermaid* and the 1989 film retelling by the Walt Disney Company powered by Howard Ashman — both famous for having homosexual references and painful, longing tones hidden beneath the surface.

I wanted to play around with some different techniques of storytelling to push how one would read and interact with Senties, to concrete them in this world.

Fairy-tales have a long history of story transportation; How stories have passed down through history, what shifts have occurred when the story has travelled to another location and what forms it takes. Those considered classics, such as *Cinderella* and *The Gingerbread Man*, have darker undertones than shown in popular entertainment. Their roots begin in oral storytelling, exchanged between various women and children around a fire or table. The acts of violence that would occur, were not so much about moral warning but were for amusement purposes⁶ (Lucas).

I’m intrigued by the fascination of violence as a form of entertainment throughout history. Watching hangings, slapstick comedy, and crime cycles.

⁶ Storytelling has always been alongside us humans, recounting adventures to one another but like many stories that are spread orally, details change, become forgotten and embellished along the way. The role of storyteller and story-consumer has been segregated throughout history, placing differing levels of importance on old & wise to old wives (Lucas).



Figure 6. Tiffany Tucker, [close up shot of *Unearthing the Senties*'s book spine, detail of page sections and tail band], January 2022, photograph by Hamish Besley, October 2022.

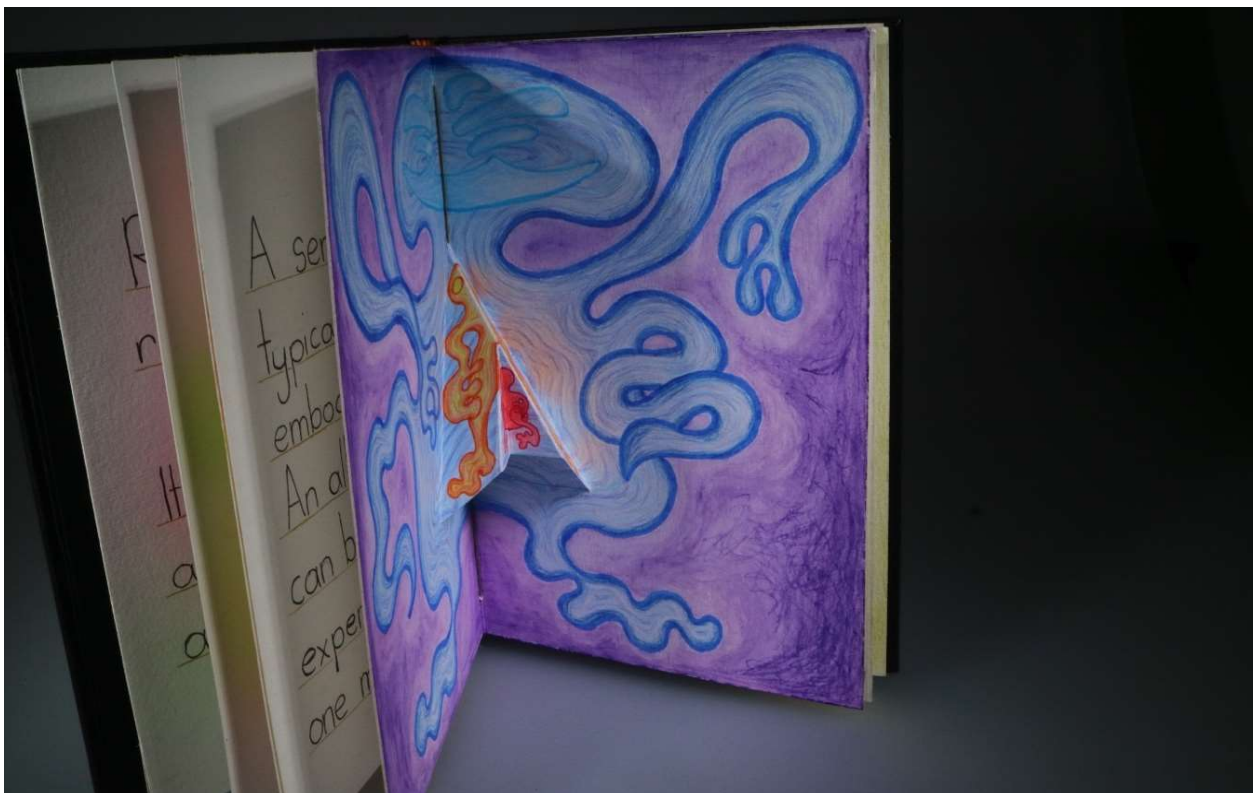


Figure 7. Tiffany Tucker, [closer up shot of pop-out fold in *Unearthing the Senties*, watercolour and ink illustration of red, orange and blue figure, stitching visible from hand-binding], January 2022, photograph by Hamish Besley, October 2022.

The toning down of these stories started to occur as they became recorded in a written form. These now required soft, colour-washed, meditative imagery of characters and landscapes. Many women participated in acts of creative leisure that were later claimed sculptural, painterly, and performative works.⁷ These arts of watercolour painting, alongside material knowledge/technique provided a pathway for women into the workforce (Goodman). There are a small number of female artists before the 1950s that broke into the mainstream, undergoing a form of affective labour that I earlier addressed with Doyle's writing.

Mary Shelley and Frida Kahlo gained a stamp of approval whilst living by having pain sensationalized, consequentially pushing storytelling into a more vibrant tone.⁸ The time of golden illustration and golden fairy-tales coincided at the turn of the 19th to 20th century, featuring ink and watercolour mythical imagery. Florence Harrison, Virginia Francis Sterret and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite are some standouts of the period⁹. This was followed by an onslaught of cartoon propaganda. The illustrative books and blocks that often portrayed typical stereotypes of housemaker girls and hunting boys were typically in the hands of the wealthy and white, which caused a response in further stereotyping of the working class and people of colour in illustration (Weinstein).

I came across the *Tom Thumb Picture Alphabet*, an illustrated book for children originally published in 1850 that featured wood engravings of humans in different roles, e.g., the drunkard, and the waiter. These engravings each had a letter hidden in the picture, concerning the accompanying text. The head or body would be shaped like an 'A', or 'H', by exaggerating either clothing or bodily form. The sentences were often exposing some superficial stereotypes of the working class.

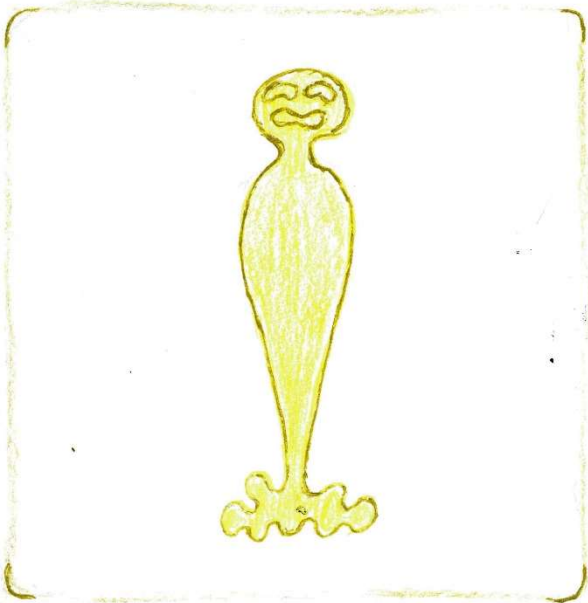
Unlike Ed Gorey's *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, containing rhymes of a macabre, humorous nature describing various ways of each one's death using word lessons and descriptions of demise. Gorey's work made me feel safe using text as another medium.

When thinking of how to create sentences for the *Senties Alphabet*, it seemed quite simple: create a list of all words regarding positive feelings/sensations/emotions to each letter of the English alphabet, do the same for negative; combine a balance of 4 words from each side to create an alliterative sentence for the letter, that makes readable sense for that individual letter. I created juxtaposing sentences, that sat somewhere in the whimsical in-between of Gorey and Tom Thumb (figures 12, 13, 14).

⁷ A few select women were glamourized as hard-drinking abstract artists, but much of the feminist art movement sought to break into the market/space via alternative means. Creating spaces to hold female artists working with materials and methods, less dominated by male artists and that connected to a gendered history of roles in society (The Art Story Contributors).

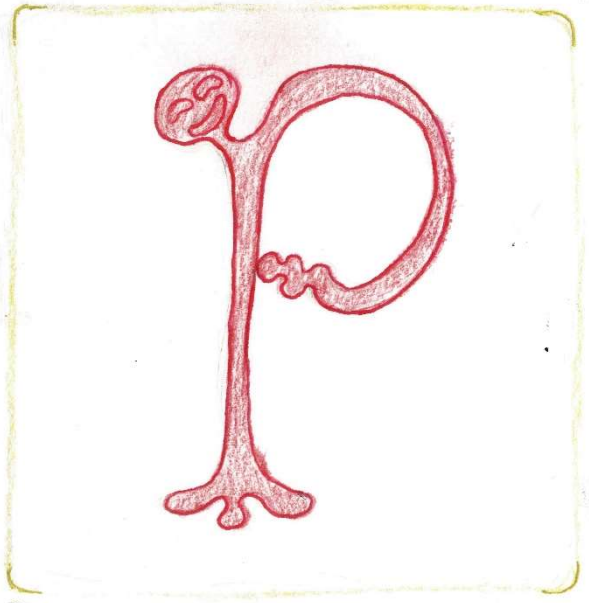
⁸ Shelley and Kahlo grew in popularity posthumously, with political and feminist recognitions. At the time of living, both were famous to some extent, but were recognised through and aided their husbands' careers.

⁹ Two of three were Australian and depicted landscapes/animals they saw.



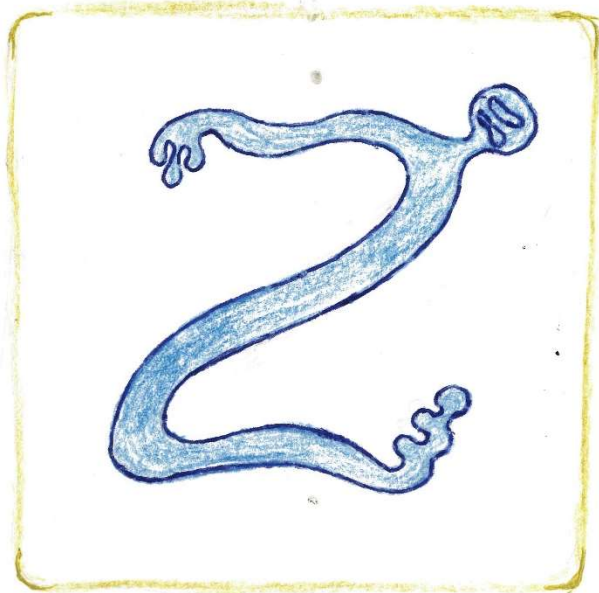
Insecurity leads to Inertia
whilst Infatuation Inhabits
Inspiration.

Figure 12. Tiffany Tucker, [pencil illustrated yellow figure surrounded by gold border, accompanied by ink text], March 2022, personal scan by author, October 2022.



Pity the Prideful for they
are Paranoid in their Peak,
take Pleasure in the Possesive
nature of Passion.

Figure 13. Tiffany Tucker, [pencil illustrated red figure surrounded by gold border, accompanied by ink text], March 2022, personal scan by author, October 2022



Zealous were the Zombies
in their Zany pursuit of
Zen.

Figure 8. Tiffany Tucker, [pencil illustrated blue figure surrounded by gold border, accompanied by ink text], March 2022, personal scan by author, October 2022



Figure 9. Tiffany Tucker, [close up shot of *Senties Alphabet*, a black box with gold debossing, slightly revealing the contents of the insides] April 2022, personal photograph by author, April 2022.

I pushed aside any idea of trying to create a narrative that flowed from one letter to the next. With this alphabet, I wanted to expose emotional words that my English-speaking tongue knew, to provoke some form of reaction. I feel that the English language is limited in its ability to describe feelings, but it's the one I know. The rule of balance between words categorized by positive/negative is important to me as a dichotomous thinker. My brain will naturally respond to seeing the world in extremes, it's all or nothing, good or bad, it's either love or hate. I am aware that this is not the case and there is a whole scale of grey when it comes to how people will emotionally respond to something.

I wanted to see what could be expressed between the polarising forces

The sentences I crafted were not inspired by any particular emotion or feeling but unintentionally and pleasantly ended up holding their own. The imagery of a *Sentie* takes the form of each letter, in watercolour pencil, and felt tip, in a primary colour set. This was an ode to the colour palettes of the early fairy-tale illustrators, who worked in a limited set. I crafted a box for them to be contained in, about the size of tarot cards (figure 15). When presented to a friend before any official 'art-viewing', they said they felt like some of their personal behaviours were being addressed. This concept of the humorous call-out was made successful with this *Alphabet*. The first time I displayed them was in a white-box gallery location, hung individually next to one another in a spiral form around a column (figure 16).

In this setting and with this hanging, the audience could not interact with the cards, the discussion centred on the logic hierarchies between emotional and analytical.

Grant Lingard's *Swan Song* (figure 17) and Tracy Emin's *My Bed* (figure 18), are both intimate ready-mades placed into a white cube, questioning the setting and what can be seen as art. Though this set of cards is not readymade, the thumbtacks were store-bought. I use materials that are cheap, and mass-produced. I first discovered Lingard on a class field trip to the Adam Art Gallery, the work I saw left a powerful mark on me. Lingard who was dying of HIV/AIDS in the early 90s left a set of instructions for his partner to display a set of white enamel-coated drying racks that each held a towel, bedsheet, and pillowcase of Lingard's after his death. A holy display of affection between the artist, the carer and the materials against their skin (Christchurch Art Gallery).

Emin's display of vodka bottles, lubricant and period-stained clothing is a far more confrontational display of turmoil, leaving the audience to have an affinity with the religious and macabre leftovers of a four-day manic-depressive episode (Cohen). This use of materiality in the white cube to display an amount of time passing disrupts the stagnant nature of calm reflection and confronts the viewer with ideas of mortality and memory.

This use of material to create a conversation around intimacy, as well as be a disruptive force is how I relate my work to these artists. The question of how to display my art within the white-cube setting has been a trial of stumbles, with some hits and misses. Previously in undergraduate studies, I would paint across walls, a sort of cartoon graffiti. Throughout my time in the MFA programme, I have attempted to insert my art into a square that forsakes logic yet still adheres to strict unspoken guidelines.¹⁰

¹⁰ As a form of silly academic/artist validation.



Figure 10. Tiffany Tucker, [a hanging display of *Senties Alphabet*, in descending, alphabetical order, hung up to the column with thumbtacks], March 2022, personal photograph by author, March 2022



Figure 17. 'Swan Song', Grant Lingard at Adam Art Gallery. Personal photograph by author, 24 July 2021



Figure 18. Tracy Emin, *My Bed*, 1999, mixed media, Turner Prize Exhibition Tate Gallery London, Photograph by Stephen White, Artsy, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-tracy-emins-my-bed-ignored-societys-expectations-women>

I understand the white cube works the way it does to avoid the artwork taking damage and for the art to be the focus, but it does leave one slightly dissatisfied at times. Jennifer Barker, an associate professor at Georgia State University, explains in her contributed chapter *“Touch and cinematic experiences”* how textures and processes can give us further insight into ourselves if interacted with other senses than visual. By just observing a work rather than connecting to it physically we situate it as a momentary experience within a location we don’t entirely lose ourselves within. We can connect with our emotions for a moment by viewing a film in the cinema, but the film will end and we can return safely to our non-fictional lives separate from what we felt (Melcher et al.).

I started to realise that if I wanted to have this work to confront people, there needed to be a connection whether that be physical or digital. I posted the set on Instagram, with some people writing alliterated sentences in response. I then made three physical copies that I sold to individuals around the country who responded (on Instagram) that they would like a set. I reached out to these people with some questions about their relationship with the boxset

Questions

- How did you initially interact with the alphabet set upon receiving it?
- Do you continue to interact/incorporate with the set in your life? If so, how?
- How do the sentences make you feel?

Responses

1: “How did you initially interact with the alphabet set upon receiving it?”

— *“I showed it to people at school — a bit of a ‘pick a card’ based on your emotional state vibes. People picked the card they resonated with”*

— *“I first admired the box and the text on the box, then opened it up and read them all while pondering the context of them — which also lead me into thinking that it’s quite cool to get a glimpse into how the artist thinks/ views the world/ values as traits in people.”*

— *“I treated every letter as its own object/artwork. handling them delicately and inspecting them intricately.”*

2: “Do you continue to interact/incorporate with the set in your life? If so, how? “

— *“I have the cards at school for people to look through.”*

— *“I guess so, I look through them occasionally/ they do pop up in thought a lot — they have given me inspiration on writing and also on different ways of looking at things — I enjoy the concept of using just one letter to express; so that has stuck with me a lot”*

— *“Yes, it is one of my prized possessions. it lives on a special shelf with my special ‘things’. I keep the alphabet inside the box and take it out to show people. I have plans to use the letters to maybe spell some things out on a wall but for now, they are too precious and must stay sleeping in their box.”*

3: “How do the sentences make you feel?”

— *“The sentences made me feel like I was reading into that emotion. kind of like a deck of like an oracle deck.”*

— *“They give me a sense of pondering, they also make me feel vulnerable, quiet, and expressive — they make me feel intrigued? I guess they all make me feel different things”*

— *“I can’t explain how the sentences/ (and Senties) make me feel— but I relate to them wholeheartedly. they convey strong messages in a few words and are effortlessly poetic!”*

This confrontational intimacy is the interaction I was seeking. By placing my craft into the hands of others, a playful connection occurs.

3: The *Senties* become cumbersome until they can no longer contain themselves causing a reaction in the human world.

Is art accessible? Is therapy accessible? One could say, yes, they are. The white-wall institution exists and often places like museums and galleries are free to visit, despite being incredibly intimidating.¹¹ The physical look of these places with pristine floors, open space, and history embedded in the walls (whether that's archives, environmental scars, or ghosts) leaves one feeling small, maybe even insignificant. Humans have been drawing on walls for thousands of years now; cave drawings, chapel paintings, graffiti, and crayons on the wallpaper, despite that, the gallery has left one feeling like they are not good at expressing themselves creatively.

Earlier I related Doyle's work to the concept of abject, but her writing can be used here also. Because of the fetishization of artists that has occurred throughout the 20th century, prescribing the artist as a deep-thinker with the ability to critically unpack their feelings regarding hefty topics, it has left many who could not access higher education of the art institution on the 'outside' (Doyle 100). The setting of the white walls on hard floors creates echoes of every micro sound and low-temperature room settings struggle to embrace metaphorical warmth. Whispers, stifled cries, and hushed waves of laughter allow for the space of silence for deep contemplation, but also a lack of emotional response.

One could argue that is not the responsibility of the gallery/museum to act as a therapy couch. I am wondering that since therapy is inaccessible to most due to costs, waiting lists, stigma, and people looking for emotional endorsement elsewhere, such as the arts, what role can artists play in aiding well-being?

The term well-being refers to the state of being comfortable, happy, and healthy and is a broad term to cover a variety of specifics —physical well-being; mental well-being; social well-being etc. The word itself has gained traction over the years on various blogs to promote activities or habits to incorporate into your daily life to overall improve aspects of well-being. "Drink water, exercise!!". The technological age of self-improvement was amplified by the COVID-19 outbreak with the world participating in activities of a slow, mindful nature such as the baking of bread, for a week or so before relying on essential take-out drivers (Tolentino).

Fighting adversity is not a new concept, humans have fought throughout centuries, we are just doing it with buttons(hit the subscribe button, click that like button, comment with your keyboard buttons) rather than swords. This doom-scrolling, constantly refreshed, digital avatars playground has left us empty of connection, editing ourselves into curated forms, leaving no room for the messy and cringeful, some attempt to hide the stench of our personal sins.

¹¹ In this writing, I am only referring to accessibility concerning mental health/emotional outlet. I am quite aware due to life with my brother and the history of the term 'outsider' that pertains to physical ailments, that accessibility into the gallery space is a topic that deserves it's own exegesis.

To discuss means of access and stench, I present, John Waters. Waters is an American filmmaker of art-exploitation films and a provoker of sensibilities. Producing works in the 1970s, on his 8mm and 16mm cameras that his grandma gave to him, with a budget of \$10,000 and a desire to create films. He and his group of friends called 'The Dreamlanders' would perform their own outrageous stunts and use what props, costumes and locations were available, to expose perverted truths of reality, under the guise of pastel-toned comedies (Walker). These works were screened at places outside of the mainstream cinema setting; in midnight theatres, art schools, and rented university halls (Sokol).

Waters is popularly known for his films formed in an era of censorship set to a standard in Hollywood before rating systems were in place. This self-imposed rulebook that contained sensibilities of homophobia, racism, and anti-pleasure was what Waters was pushing against at the time. In an interview with *RollingStone*, Waters discussed that people have to have the ability to joke about themselves and poke holes within the worlds they occupy, to improve themselves¹² (Grow). Waters' works are exaggerated physical pantomimes that bring light to societal issues. His two most iconic works differ in their acceptance by mainstream media with *Pink Flamingos* still banned in some locations and having integrated high schoolers performing the Broadway rendition of *Hairspray* in front of their racist grandparents. This idea of self-mockery or self-critique, by means of exaggeration, is what I aim to achieve with my works.

Throughout human history, there has been an attraction to violence for entertainment, and things of a gruesome nature. Macabre curiosity, slowing down to inspect the car wreck. A subject for thought that has always intrigued me. We used to watch executions of criminals and flesh out gory details in fairy-tales for entertainment whilst undergoing mundane daily life tasks. Then we developed technology to ease the mundane tasks, only to still be watching emotionally exploitative true-crime documentaries that fetishize criminals. A form of self-guidance to teach us who to avoid/how not to act or some kind-of violent catharsis?

Since the latter of the 20th century and turning into the 21st there has been a steady increase in gun violence, due to technological advances and access obtainability. In the western world, this can be mainly seen in America, with various articles discussing topics of gang warfare, terrorism fear and school shootings that lead to a cycle of violence and mental health issues in those who witnessed said crimes.

I live in Aotearoa, New Zealand where the violence inflicted by guns has started to increase. Our police and their use of firearms has been compared to other Western countries, questioning the trigger-happy, self-defence attitudes (Espiner, "Shooting to Wound 'something from the Movies' -Coster"). During my research into gun violence, I found this article conducted by *Stuff* with one of the co-founders of Gun Control New Zealand, which tried to reiterate the message that we need to step up our laws to protect civilians from the war on the streets but four sentences that the article included cried out a larger message to me.

¹² In the interview, celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Pink Flamingos*, Waters discusses why he hasn't been cancelled like other artists, regarding his severe work. In his opinion, he thinks it is because of his sense of correct though confused morale, his protagonists are driven by purity to themselves, not out of jealousy or judgment of another. He believes the key to his success and what is missing in this cancel culture age, is the ability to laugh at oneself and the world one occupies (Grow).

“A University of Otago study showed there had been 867 firearm deaths from 2000 to 2015 - an average of 54 per year. Most of these deaths were suicides, while the rest were homicides and accidents” (Tokalau)

With a culture of alcoholism, the high ranking of domestic violence, and a lack of access to mental health services, the flippant dismissal of death by suicide scares me. We are allowing the loss of many from marginalised groups to be swept under the rug (Phillips). I try, to the best of my ability to keep an openness to the portrayal of expression and wording within my work, to allow other people to feel seen.

Toxic positivity is a term to describe an ineffective state of constant optimism for a situation resulting in denial, invalidation, and minimization of an authentic palette of emotion. This action of constant optimism has become a popular, yet harmful situation in the age of digital globalisation and connectedness. In an interview with Radio New Zealand, therapist Whitney Goodman discussed the impact that social media was having on our mental health.

“We see a lot of perfection, positivity, all of that on social media, and I think especially throughout the pandemic, people have become pretty tired of that and are wanting to see something a little more real and honest...” We keep selling people the same things over and over, and then blaming it on them when it doesn't work” (“How Positivity Can Be Toxic”).

This perfection Goodman mentions includes the positive mantras and tips that various bloggers will post. This can leave one feeling worse than before because they cannot live up to this positive ‘healthy’ outlook on life. The characters in Water’s films play by a sense of morality within their norm, motivated by self-improvement. This action of combining taboo acts with wholesome sensibilities aided in shaping what became acceptable in the world of mainstream comedy, further pushing what has become acceptable, regarding the abject in mainstream media.¹³

To help me segway into the following part, I steal a quote from comedian and animator, Terry Gilliam:

“The whole point of animation to me is to tell a story, make a joke, express an idea. The technique itself doesn't really matter. Whatever works is the thing to use. That's why I use cut-out. It's the easiest form of animation I know” (Terry Gilliam Monty Python Animations)

Some of the earliest artworks that I encountered were scenes from animation and technicolour musicals, with a sense of vibrancy and movement. I was in awe of a bygone era on screen. I have a variety of ex-lovers and medical tests which confirm that I have synesthesia but I struggle to accept this reading as I see myself as a creative with an over-active imagination. With *Senties*, I tend to view them initially within the environment and architecture of a setting.

¹³ Positive and negative consequences, a subjective perspective.

If the reader would care to play the game of 'what animal can you see in the clouds? Then push that concept further, what can you see other than animals? Where can you see them other than clouds? What stories does this tree/post/rock hold?

Some images come directly from the imaginative viewing of my emotions as an entity of various sizes outside of myself, similarly, to how mythical beings are often portrayed in cartoon films. I illustrate an image that in my mind's eye, already lives with some form of movement, then shift the medium. 2D animation requires a repeating motion of multiple individual drawings slightly changing every edition to then compile into a moving picture later. The hand-drawn animation is a time-consuming process that is a labour of love, requires concentration, and patience. Skills helpful when caring for another.

I work rapidly, switching between projects. The animation *Growth Continues*, took me about a month and a half full-time to complete over four months. This was due to being set back by the infection of COVID-19. From the outset, I intended for this animation to shift mediums and be within a physical space, as to imbed the lore that *Senties* exist within this world and bring an aspect of materiality and empathy into the discussion.

This empathy is mostly directed to people of the past, a grounding element of my practice but I find using my hands to be grounding, forcing myself to focus on my body and how to interact with something other than myself, rather than giving energy to tormenting thoughts. Bringing myself back to a place to think calmly about a situation at hand that has caused an intense emotional reaction.

I was introduced to Len Lye's animations after I had started to create my own style of figures, but I do find a form of comfort in the wobbly lines, accessible materials, and upbeat music of his films. The first 15 seconds of my animation are hand-drawn, coloured, and scanned. I projected this audio-less clip at a large scale and provided a memorising/mediative space for people to reflect.

Alongside the projection of the animation was my first attempt to disrupt a white-cube setting. A friend of mine gifted me a small coffee table to do what I wanted. I *carved*¹⁴ out sentences on the legs and edges of the in hopes that the audience would be curious enough to get on their knees or lift the table (figure 19). This was not achieved without my encouragement and revealed the missing link between my medium jumping, of video projection on the wall to furniture in the room.

¹⁴ Carved is a loose description of what I did and is a serious undersell of the trade. I had woodcutting tools to create woodcuts for ink-prints. I sanded down the varnish, etched out sentences and a *Sentie* onto the table and revarnished it, all without knowledge of how to treat wood with respect, this reveals itself in the sanding scratches.



Figure 19. Tiffany Tucker, [Dutch angle photo from underneath *Senties Table*, with a projection of an untitled *Senties* animation in the background], n.d., photograph by Anna Brown, June 2022



Figure 20. Tiffany Tucker, [close up shot of *Senties*, an illustration of red and purple figures surrounded by orbs, starts and swirls with stitching of hand-bound book exposed], August 2022, photograph by Hamish Besley, October 2022



Figure 21. Tiffany Tucker, [close up shot of *Senties*, revealing leather interior and Coptic sewing], August 2022, photograph by Hamish Besley, October 2022

My later rendition of the work was accompanied by a snippet of audio from the song '*And the band played on*'. The song was written in 1985, the title is a popular expression to describe the downplaying of a catastrophe. The audio clip I sampled was recorded on a black wax cylinder to give it the sound of early 20th century, industrial crackling. This audio then transforms into foley noises that I created from household objects, to provide a physical grounding alongside the clay form, the combination breathes life into the *Sentie*.

Growth Continues starts as 2D drawings (figure 22), then zooms in and out, losing focus for a moment to transform into a clay being that stumbles around the room, in a variety of bodily forms to end up exploding out onto a canvas (figure 23, 24, 25, 26, 27). To receive an emotional response from the viewer (at, with, from) to my art means they have understood it. How they understood it, is a more subjective situation. The clay portion of *Growth Continues* reminds viewers of childhood, some from their interactions with the medium or unlocked visual memories. The use of contrasting audio and visuals creates a humorous tone. The ones who know it is my studio space are in on a secret with me.



Figure 22-27. Tiffany Tucker, "growth continues", still from video by author, August 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Fr8kqQ1oRg>

Some concluding thoughts and the future.

I started the MFA programme wanting to hone my craft and find academic threads I could tie myself to confidently. Over the past two years in my studies. I have grounded myself to punk sensibilities through means of softness and humour. I have started to question the agency of the white cube and the impact art has on mental well-being.

There is a tendency within the art world to exclude naivety, speed, and outsider work unless the work is framed and, on a wall, or the artist is dead. Yet humans have a primal desire for creative catharsis, an emotional release through music or projecting our feelings onto a film.

Emotions can cause extreme reactions or responses, and art (like that of Emin and Lingard) allows us to connect to the emotions that cause those reactions. Connection to art can happen via a connection of materiality. Using material, the way I have forces me to be mindful of my physicality and time; time spent, time passed. Our time is a constructed concept that only we can control yet we have allowed ourselves to get lost in the speed of it all, with exuberance falling by the wayside.

As a side effect of my studies, a lot of reflection about my identity and what I have and haven't experienced (relating to the 'outsider'), has occurred, leading me to further questions about how I place myself in the world. This topic will uncover many emotions for me and I'm excited about what it will bring to my art. I am curious about human psyches, specifically the concept of fetishizing pain for purposes other than sexual. Is it personal entertainment or a subconscious warning? The Grimm Brother's employed the toning down of details, whilst keeping enough violence within the stories to have the moral structure of the 'wrong' being punished. Whereas filmmakers like Waters, use physical violence to exaggerate social injustice. The access I had to grotesque gore films before I could understand the context is troubling since we now have access to emotional exploitative, gore-related topics (Looking at you Netflix and your true crime documentaries). This desensitization to violence concerns me greatly. This is an unresolved intrigue of mine.

I have dreams for *Senties* but I struggle to see myself committing to one style of art. I have barely begun to scratch the surface of stop-motion animation and what materials I can use to portray *Senties*. I will continue to use methods such as low-cost paper to create 2D animations but am keen to engage with other possibilities of the form. There is power in claymation, but the tools, materials and my hands need further development. I have ideas for using paper cut-outs or even a puppet show! There is always a dream of a large sculpture. Artists like Jess Johnson and Salvador Dali who have pushed their illustrative works into sculptural, location-encompassing pieces are what I strive for going forward. I want to continue to push my limits regarding the forms and mediums visual storytelling can take. I will continue to explore ways of getting my art out into the world like *Alphabet Senties*, I want to explore methods of confrontational intimacy.

I'm ending the MFA programme, feeling grounded but still so anxious about the doors I have started to open, eager and curious to explore.

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