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The Blue Print

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An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Severine Costa

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To Julieanna Preston, whose generous nurturing, questioning and unconditional dedication to my completing of this project will forever stay with me,

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Preface

The subject of how art communicates and registers, even prevents or fuels anxiety and depression has been in my practice for a long time. I recall in the second year of my visual arts degree at Otago University in Dunedin how I considered jewellery in relation to the body and identity. Since then, I have been interested in combining sensorial and semiotic aspects of diverse materials in order to explore this liminal space between myself and others. I originally intended to study Art Therapy after that degree. After discussing this idea with my jewellery tutor Johanna Zellmer, I realised that I wanted to develop an art practice rather than pursue the study of clinical art therapy.

Throughout this MFA journey, I have noticed that by situating my work further away from the body than jewellery and moving to installation has surprisingly led me to a more introspective and reflective research practice. In a sense, modulating space and objects with a looser relation to the body and its spatial experience drove me further into my own interiority. As the jewellery works felt more like they were reaching out to the outside world or an expression of the barriers between the inside and outside, the installation works have somehow switched the direction of the valve: I became more concerned with how much of the outside was coming in, and how it affected me. In a sense, I switched my view of this in-between space. Instead of blocking and filling this space with stuff to protect or cushion myself—packaging and foam—I became more interested in negotiating the borders and seeing how objects, spaces and materials entered and affected the space, and how much I would let them in.

I asked myself: How was the border operating?

My experience of anxiety and depression has always been rooted in a scattered sense of identity. I have found my art practice to revolve around how I perceived my own self in relation to others. With installation, I am still exploring this border; I want to understand a little further not what I actively and consciously do in this location, but how this location was unconsciously shaped, and how it influences the way I operate within it. Maybe with installation, I have been developing a more mature “border” process.

How can I describe this fluctuation and the elements that constitute it?

In the first chapter of this exegesis, I will identify the challenges of depression and anxiety at present and set my intentions in response to them. The second and third chapters will establish the use of water as central to my practice and explore the ways I use it in relation to my experience of depression and anxiety as an artist. Chapter Four will attempt to inscribe my practice in a broader context. Chapters Five, and Six further elaborate themes which frequently emerge in my practice, and Chapter Seven will offer some preliminary intents for the examined work in this MFA journey.

I Shaping Depression and Anxiety

In *Black Dog Blue Words: Depression and Gender in the Age of Self-Care*, Kimberley K. Emmons argues that “metaphoric language structures both (depression) sufferers’ experience of illness and also the social, institutional and medical responses to it” (2010, p. 95). In the chapter “Isolating Words,” the author argues that metaphors have the power to “shape illness identities” (p.95). This is a substantial argument, particularly in regards to how depression is depicted in the media, film, television and art, where there is sometimes a sense of selling shock, pain and/or discomfort. The link between mental illness and physical self-harm is far too prevalent in the conscious collective. It is a direct result of the way discourse around mental health is shaped by the media. This over representation of physical self-harm and pain have a negative normative impact. Depression doesn’t start at self-harm, and anxiety isn’t just self-flagellation. These deserve more nuanced and complex representation. Depression can also be exhaustion from working too hard to fit in and can arise from a combination of learned behaviours that have nothing to do with the intention to self-harm and everything to do with wanting to get better. The dangers of this over representation of self-harm also sets an extremely high standard of how bad one needs to feel before pain feels legitimate enough to be noticed by others.

There is a recent interest in the seeking of responsibility in mental illness representation. Actor writer and director Will Sharpe consulted Mind in order to discuss better ways to represent depression and bipolar disorder in the second season of his television show *Flowers* (Sharpe, 2018). In the series, Will Sharpe uses shock value to bring attention to the issue of invisibility of the mental illness of racialised people, ending the series by shifting from the white family’s storyline to the Japanese character’s storyline, when the character Shun goes into the woods with a gun; the sound of a gunshot follows. Suddenly, we understand how this character’s story was treated as a side story all throughout the two series, depicted almost exclusively as a cute and endearing young person. The white family are given the space to heal; they get better. Shun doesn’t, and even though his death isn’t depicted on screen and its occurrence is left open to interpretation, it made me start thinking of depression in terms of visibility.

Hana Aoake’s 2012 performance at the Blue Oyster Art Project Space in Dunedin, *Fall*, also made me think about shock value and its function in the discourse about depression. In this work, Hana repeatedly falls upon a pile of sand, grazing her knees repetitively over a period of twenty-minutes. Blood starts dripping out of her knees; she keeps going despite the wounds. Every time she gets up and throws herself back on the floor, a rhythm was established to the broken momentum of getting up and falling back down. I was touched by how this work related to some of my mental patterns. This powerful work was too much for me to watch in person, and even on video. It made me wonder how it was affecting me and whether the shocking nature of it has some merit to explore in my own work. I soon learned that even that was too much as the pain it depicted and shared wasn’t the way I wanted to open conversations about depression.

These two works helped me shape my decision to speak to the near-invisibility of depression, both for the depressed person and their entourage. I didn’t want to make depression too visible; I wanted it to take time to be seen. I wanted to provide a view from the inside. Depression can just pass as a way of being, which hurts deeply but also unconsciously, and is thought of in terms of personality traits such as “over thinker,” “lazy,” and “not a morning person.” I don’t mean to assign these “traits” exclusively to depression, and in a way, these just might be used to describe someone who doesn’t attend to a neo-liberalist and capitalist view of a “healthy” person, a person who produces value to be sold and capitalised. Depression never operates in a vacuum. In a sense, it is always diagnosed in comparison and against societal values (Fisher, 2012,p.1).

So how do we talk about it then? Do we centre it as an individual experience, or as a societal trend?

With this project I wanted to explore this complexity of discourse. How was my own view of my depression influenced by my environment, and what could I learn about the way these influences affected me to understand it more and get better? How was depression shaping my identity, and how was my sense of identity shaping my depression? How did my depression behave in terms of visibility? Could I learn to see it in more helpful ways? How could I learn to see the way I saw, and was it even possible?

I wanted to create a place to contemplate some of the challenges of healing without falling into dangerous stereotypes. Throughout the MFA journey, I had a few choices to make. The first choice concerned the confrontational aspect of the work. Where on the scale of confrontation did I want my work to sit? Understanding the way I see, not with my eyes, but with the combination of all my senses, means understanding how I am connected to the phenomenal and emotional world. Through therapy, I came to learn I wasn’t able to decipher the language that my body learnt to speak when I was a child. I wasn’t able

to recognise anger, sadness, frustration, excitement, and how they translated into sensations in my body. I had learnt not to listen to them because they put me in danger. I still had the emotions of course, but I had learned to numb them so efficiently that it became an automatic process; I had virtually no control over it. So it seemed to make sense to try and find this language again. The most accessible way to do this for me was through exploring touch and spatial sensations. Spatial installation afforded me direct and sensorial experience .

Having my body physically present in the work has been a recurrent question throughout my MFA journey especially while I tested making performances. My decision to move away from performance came about after several test works and was informed by the way these works placed my body, my person, in a vulnerable state, one that I found to be triggering. They brought up questions about self-preservation. I realised physical bodies are too engaging. If there is a body, eyes to look into, or arms or leg movements to follow, the viewer's attention is already grabbed at the get-go. If there isn't much to grab the attention, then the viewer might not see the work, and therefore the question of visibility become intrinsic to the work. You have to actively look to find something to see, to grasp almost imperceptible movements, slow changing states, erosion. If the work isn't particularly confronting to start with, it unravels as you spend time with it. I turned to the materials in installation works to do the leading without my body explicitly present with heavy reliance on their oneiric and haptic values. These tests did, however, question how was I going to find the line between talking about my own experience without exploiting myself and inviting voyeurism?

The second choice I had to consider was to what degree my creative works were exclusively about me and my personal healing journey. How was I to negotiate my presence in the work? It was crucial to attend to the different layers of responsibility when it comes to a person's healing journey. How was I going to address the correlation of personal, interpersonal and institutional levels of responsibility in my work? How did materials and serendipity help me understand myself better. How can touch and materials help healing? What is the semantic value of materials in this situation?

I am 22 years old, I am lying on my left side under my duvet, facing my bedside table, the bedroom door to my back. I feel waves of anger I am overwhelmed by when I lie in bed and my flatmates are drunkenly shouting in the lounge. I don't understand this body of anger. It feels bigger than me. I want to hit things. I want to scream to expel it from my body. I want to rush to the lounge and let it out, maybe even crush them with it, or shake them to silence so I can lie in bed without hearing it. If I had a gun I might shoot it in the air to terrify them to into silence. I am not going to do any of this and instead I start sighing. I have asked gently already. I don't want to be aggressive; I don't want to be violent, and so, I stay in bed. I lay there hoping it stops soon. This burning water has to leave my body somehow, and so, I start sobbing, and my legs are restless, I kick my legs, hit my head against the pillow. the next sound might kill me. I don't know why I feel this way. Other people seem to be doing just fine sleeping when there is a party in the lounge. I know this isn't normal. My emotional response is heavier than the night.

I am lying on my left side under my duvet, facing my bedside table, the bedroom door to my back. I am 16, and my father is drunk. He is speaking loudly, almost yelling, some insults, they sound like violent cries for help. My mother doesn't speak. She knows not to feed the fire, but she forgets the smoke is just as intoxicating. I find myself wanting to believe what he says, some of it is true, but I shouldn't have to hear it. I love him too, and I don't know how to make him notice these aren't words I can hear. I am scared of yelling. I feel like if I start screaming maybe he'll stop talking, but maybe he'll just keep talking for longer. Maybe if I yell at him I'll just make the situation last much longer, and Mum will blame me for it. But this is too risky. I need a way out. I am going to pretend I need a glass of milk. So I get up, turn the kitchen light on and grab the bottle out of the fridge. He notices and moves to the kitchen to talk to me. Having someone who listens and nods seems to calm him down. My mum will finally fall asleep. And then, when my work is done, I'll go back to my bed, cover myself with my blanket, and pass out. Crisis resolved.

I am lying on my left side under my duvet, facing my bedside table, the bedroom door to my back. I am 23. I remember this time I was 16, and now I understand. When there are uncontrollable sounds and I am trying to sleep, I know my feelings of unsafety and anger are justified in my body, even if they are not in time. I know that the deep currents are unsettled, and they are causing the waves rushing through my chest. But I know now where they are from and I know there is no flame to extinguish, and so I get my earplugs, and let myself sink into the deep.

II

The Pull of the Deep

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk explains:

People with PTSD have their floodgates wide open. Lacking a filter, they are on constant sensory overload. In order to cope, they try to shut themselves down and develop tunnel vision and hyperfocus. If they can't shut down naturally, they may enlist drugs or alcohol to block out the world. The tragedy is that the price of closing down includes filtering out sources of pleasure and joy, as well" (2014, p. 70).

Here, van der Kolk associates sensory overload to water through the use of the floodgates analogy. We can easily imagine a person being battered by incessant waves, crushed by overwhelming sensory information. After all, sounds, touch, and sight are all frequencies we perceive which behave like waves. Maybe this visualisation exercise taken from Matthew Johnstone's *Quiet the Mind* will help set up a better view of the phenomenon:

Picture yourself as a scuba diver sitting on a rock.
The water is warm; it's clear and it's very tranquil.
Think of the Ocean's surface as your conscious mind - it's there, it may even be a bit choppy -
but it's not affecting you.
Each time you breathe out, oxygen bubbles slowly make their way to the surface.
Like the ocean around you, you become more and more still. (2012, p.9)

In her 2018 work *AMA*, Julie Gautier dances at the bottom of a diving pool. Her movements are soft, light. The lighting is quite dark, and there is a sense of deep calm. The beginning of the video shows Gautier under heavy rain and the camera moves forward into her eyes. In the next frame she is at the bottom of the pool, dancing as if the underwater dance is happening in her mind. Her movements are flawless and completely eclipse the fact she isn't breathing throughout the dance. Gautier is a freediving champion, which means she can in fact stay underwater without breathing considerably longer than an average person. This piece was particularly important for my practice because it introduced water as a carrier, an enveloping element which slows the body down while also making it weightless. It speaks to transferring the body to a different realm or world, which I find interesting in terms of pinpointing the effects of depression (Gautier, 2018).

If we keep exploring this analogy of the mind as an ocean, we can contemplate how this body of water can be used to visualise the way depression and anxiety feel. If I imagine myself as a body of water, the surface of it being my consciousness and the underwater world being my subconscious, Guillaume Néry's description of "the exhilarating peace of freediving" translates very strikingly into a depiction of the battle against depression:

I sink into the blue, the pressure slowly comes crushing my lungs, and as it is the volume of air in my lungs that makes me float, the more I go down, the more the pressure crushes my lungs, the less volume the air takes, the easier my body sinks. Around 35-40 m, I don't need to flip anymore, my body is heavy and dense enough to sink freely into the deep. It is the best moment of the descent, that is why I continue to dive, because we feel pulled by the deep, we don't need to do anything, I descend from 35 m to 123 m without making a single move. I let myself be pulled by the deep, and I feel like I am flying under water. It's a completely hallucinating sensation, an extraordinary feeling of freedom, and I slide very slowly to the bottom.(...)80 metres under, the pressure becomes much stronger and I really start to physically feel the oppression, the diaphragm is completely compressed, the thoracic cage reversing on itself. (...) on the surface, there's something unpleasant, we want to resist. We put ourselves in opposition, we struggle. Under water, it doesn't work. (...) So what we must do, with the mental, is to tell ourselves "nature is stronger, the element is stronger than me". I let the water crush me, I accept this pressure and I go along with it. And then , I give the info to my body, the lungs, everything relaxes, I let go, I relax completely, and then the pressure crushes me and it isn't unpleasant at all. I even feel a cocoon sensation, I feel protected, diving can continue. 80m, 85m, 90m, 100m. (...) 123 metres I arrive at the bottom. (...) it is cold, a glacial cold, the pressure crushes you completely, 13 times greater than at the surface.(...) when I am at the bottom I feel good. An extraordinary sensation of comfort, maybe because I completely abandoned all these tensions and I finally let go. I feel great and I have no urge to breathe.

I feel myself as a small dot, a grain of dust, a grain of star dust floating in the middle of the cosmos, in the middle of nothingness, amongst immensity. It is a fascinating sensation, because I look everywhere around me and I see the same thing, this infinite blue, very deep, there is nowhere

else on earth you can have this sensation, to look everywhere around you and to have this same uniform vision, it's extraordinary. (...)

I decide to go back to the surface because this is not my place, my place is up there on the surface and I start the ascent.(...) there is a massive shock that happens the moment I decide to start to go up. (...) it takes a colossal effort to tear yourself from the bottom, (...) I need to flip two times harder. Then, I am hit by (...) narcosis. (...) what we call the drunkenness of the deep. Nitrogen dissolves in the blood and sows trouble between the conscious and subconscious. Many thoughts come from all sides, everything spins around, I don't control anything and you really shouldn't try to control anything, you have to let go, (...). The more you try to control, the more complicated it gets to cope. Third thing adds up, the urge to breathe(...) With everything that goes on then it can be really easy to (...)fall into panic. At that moment you can tell yourself, where is the surface, I want the surface, I want to breathe now. You can't ever do this. Never look towards the surface, not with your eyes, nor with your mind. You have to stay (...)in the present moment. I keep my gaze right in front of me, on the rope, the link which brings me to the surface. And I stay focussed on this, on the present moment, because if I want to find myself at the surface I panic, and if I panic, it is the end (Néry, 2013).

Most days, when I get out of bed and for a few hours other people's movements around me are blurred, as if I were seeing them through water, and their voices are distorted and muffled. There is an abysmal silence, which is not unpleasant. It isn't painful either. Trouble comes when I try resisting it, when I try to keep interacting with the people I love because I know that I need to take care of them. When I try to keep swimming through my day, going to work, making food to eat. Depression is the irresistible pull to the deep. In my experience, suicide ideation isn't about stopping to live, it is about finding peace. When that is impossible, maybe death can seem like the only way. It is about being too exhausted to fight against the pull.

The perceived stillness and uniformity of the water at the bottom which makes Néry feel good, the fact that he doesn't want to breathe, and it feels peaceful sounds very similar to how a now-sober heroin-addict Olivia Nicolet describes a heroin hit in her YouTube video as a feeling of sinking into her body, and finding peace (Nicolet, 2019). The only space we feel the way Néry feels at the bottom of the sea is probably the womb of our mother, where we are one with water. The ultimate urge to be carried, to feel transported. This isn't a feeling we ever get to experience once born without putting ourselves in grave danger; free diving, shooting heroin and to a certain extent, even scuba-diving, have a potential to be life-threatening.

The Blue Room is an installation that I created in 2019. It originated from imagining the sky as the sum of potentials, an infinite space of opportunity, and through an examination on how anxiety transforms it into a sticky liquid which becomes impossible to manage. The urge to make the best choices and exploit that "potential" becomes a source of anxiety. The blue paint was used to embody this liquid. I wondered what would become of a room in which I tried to contain this leak. In preliminary sketches, my effort to make the most of this liquid, the room eventually becomes all blue, and its edges blur. In other sketches, the blue paint leaked onto a person and they tried to control it.

I wanted the ambiguity of this specific mental space to come through the installation. It was a room which wasn't quite perfect but would trick people into thinking it could be, and eventually become oppressive because of the gap between expectation and reality. I painted for two days straight and spent the evenings sewing cushions. The work was so labour intensive that while creating it I forgot that the intent was to make a room that wasn't quite right, and I convinced myself that it should be perfect, which of course it was never going to be; it was a basement room with a fridge-like background noise. The cushions also weren't really comfortable enough and there wasn't quite enough of them. The lighting was a harsh white and made the room feel like a butcher's backroom. I had just managed to trick myself into thinking that painting a small basement room with the Resene "Comfort



Figure 1. Severine Costa, *The Blue Room*, Massey University, 2019.

Zone” blue and installing cushions in it would make it the idealised space I wanted to elude to. By the time *The Blue Room* was actually blue, I just wanted to go home, sleep and forget about the whole thing; I despised it so much so that I burst into tears of exhaustion and disappointment during my critique. It took me a whole week to get over the disappointment. I was stuck in that familiar room, the room which should be good enough but isn’t perfect. “Let’s not should ourselves” I hear my therapist’s gentle whisper in the distance.

If I were to imagine a safe space, it would be a space where this moving water would be managed properly. If depression can be described as a sinking into the deep, anxiety is more of an over-developed water management system. Through the anxious lens, this water is seen as a menace. The mind seems so dangerous to itself that it becomes impossible to envisage letting it move freely.

In “Violent Water”, in *Water and Dreams*, Gaston Bachelard writes :

We do not come to know the world all at once, with a placid, passive, quiet knowledge. All constructive reveries—and there is nothing more essentially a builder than the reverie of power— are brought to life by the hope of surmounting adversity, by the vision of a vanquished adversary (1942, p.160).

The perception of water as an adversary became a significant aspect of my practice. It seems important to note the moment I started really doing the work necessary to heal from depression was the time water appeared in my work. Water became an omnipresent element at a moment where I really started grasping how much I needed to do in order to manage my mental health and to secure my will to be alive.

The house I grew up in had been my father's grand-parents' home, a straightforward and simple colonial build from the 1940s. By the time I was born in 1990, the house was already showing signs of neglect. Nouméa's tropical weather is tough on wood. It was too expensive, perhaps also not as urgent an issue as others, to change the broken gutters which slowly but assertively made the walls around us permeable to the outside. The white paint chipped away with the waning and waxing of the wood underneath it in response to the rain, the sun and the heat. The wood, not treated regularly, became an ideal ground for the termites, who built their own palace out of our growingly brittle and weaker walls. Eventually the south-facing wall, which did not ever get as much sunlight as the rest of the house, started disintegrating. I must have been quite young, maybe five years old when the first window fell off, during a birthday party. Not long before it happened, I watched my father build a window meant for another house. I was amazed with how the white joining material was applied to the gap between the glass and the wood. And so, happy to demonstrate my newly learnt skill, I enthusiastically marched to the tool drawer, grabbed the putty jar and suggested we use it to stick the window back on the wall, confident this was the way forward.

In New Caledonia temperatures don't go very low during the colder season. In fact, houses with outside kitchens or bathrooms were not an uncommon sight at the time and many people I knew had stoves on a veranda or under a small structure outside. There was really no urgency in fixing the window, and the rectangular hole left in the wall was eventually patched up with blue tarpaulin on the outside, and a piece of fabric pinned into the wall on the inside. I remember watching it breathe. The furniture was piled onto the other side of the room, and my bed was moved into my older sister's bedroom.

As I grew older and more conscious of others, and especially of their tougher waterproof concrete homes, I became ashamed of my house and started resenting my parents for letting it soak water, nest termites and literally fall to pieces.

Recently I chose to forgive them. As I developed my art practice throughout the last year and started working with water, I came to identify the water rotting the walls of my childhood home as a materialisation of the intergenerational depression in the family. I now see it as the seeping liquid which slowly but relentlessly was pulled by gravity through time and through the walls of our cellular family, to make them more porous and more vulnerable to the weather.

III Erosion

Water became a key element in my practice, a metaphor to represent depression. I needed to fine tune how I would use it in order to stay true to the emotions I was feeling. My water wasn't choking me or drowning me anymore, and I wasn't even sure it was there anymore. But I was still under its grip, and it was still affecting me every day. This water seemed linked to my identity somehow, and I knew I had to dig deeper to understand how it worked.

Kaixuan Feng's 2009 performance *La Maîtresse du Thé* helped me articulate how water can be used to speak to identity. In this performance, Feng wears a dress made of teabags sewn together. She is in the centre of a circle of white men, they are sitting on cushions in the courtyard, their attention on her. She pours warm water from a teapot over her head, which trickles down her body to brew the tea, and fills the tea cups placed around her. She then walks to each man and gives them the cup of tea to drink. The water transports or dilutes her into the tea that she is serving to these men. As they consume the tea, they consume her. Her body is merged with her cultural identity through the tea ceremony, a white men's consumption. The power dynamic is slightly ambivalent. The men are not moving, or brewing the tea themselves. She controls the pour, she decides who drinks the tea next. She is at the centre of the circle. But it is her body, her identity and her culture that are being brewed and consumed.

The title of Feng's work also conveys this ambiguity. The French word "maîtresse" means master and mistress (as in an adulterous relation) but also means a female school teacher. She is at once the master of the tea ceremony, the mistress of the tea, the mistress of these men, and maybe the teacher of these men too. The brewed dress is brown now and one can imagine how the dress became heavier as the performance occurred. Feng controls the water, and determines the conditions under which the men sip at it. The water embodies an offering of herself and her culture, both of which have been commodified to please or to serve the men circling her.

This work is important to my practice because it highlights water as a transformative, creative and destructive element. It situates water as a potent material to talk about identity, emotions and mental health. Water changes its shape, it can sit still, it drips and it leaks. It can be used to water a delicate plant or to violently wash away mould. And it can alter other materials slowly. It also keeps us alive.

The performance also made me think of identity in terms of fluidity, and provided a tool to explore the issues around that fluidity in my work. It provided me with a new understanding of how to define power dynamics in my works, especially in terms of self-exploitation as a commodity to please others, and how it might play out in terms of mental health. Being the master of how much energy you want to give others and how much energy you want to keep for yourself involves the tough work of drawing the lines that won't be crossed.

Giving a work an ambiguous title is a method I have tried to apply, for example, the work titled *Ab(so)lution*, (to be discussed later in the text) offered a play between ablution and absolution, to link the notion of washing to the need to get rid of guilt and shame.

John Veia's practice also had a great influence on my practice, especially his 2013 performance *29.09.09, Tribute to Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga*. In this performance filmed at Piha Beach, John Veia is standing knee-deep in the water, the waves crashing against his back and the cinderblocks he is assembling in what looks to be a wall. This work is a response to the 2009 Samoa Islands tsunami. He keeps going even though it seems a futile, impossible task. Veia often places himself as a builder, a way to explore stereotypes around Pacific men. He says about this work :

I filmed a 32min video of myself trying to construct a wall out of cinderblocks in the rolling surf of Piha. Frequently overwhelmed by the waves, I continue to build the wall until it stays standing. Often when the spectators begin to view the video installation, they found the work amusing at first, but the longer they watched the video the more powerful the performance became, anticipating the futility of the actions in the video. One female spectator, who viewed the work, broke down in tears in response to the work. A gallery assistant asked her why she reacted in that way, she replied that her family members had died in the 2004 Indonesian tsunami and she related to the action in the video with the rebuild of not only her village, but also her life (Veia, 2015, p. 29).

The way Veia utilizes time in his works is very specific. His performance works always seem absurd to start with, and almost humorous. In contrast to Hana's performance work *Fall* (discussed above), which deploys

a similar use of repetition of performed actions, the tasks in Veá's work are not violent in and of themselves. He and his colleague are not hurting themselves when they build a path out of bricks in the hills in *Concrete is as Concrete Doesn't* (2017). They immediately pull it apart, using the same bricks to advance throughout the landscape. The violence of the work is slow to show: it comes with the finely tuned pairing of uselessness and endlessness of labour which Veá performs in the videos. It is a violence linked to the slow realisation of the amount of resilience and prolonged effort needed to keep the performance going. This operates very similarly to how anxious thoughts or emotional abuse erode your sense of what is rational and what is not. Like continuous waves of negativity flowing and crashing on your attempts to build a strong structure.

An important aspect of Veá's practice is that it is based on the concept of Talanoa, which he defines as a conversation practice, a process based on having conversations with people, and then making works in response to those conversations. (Veá, 2015, p. 4) If I were to position my practice in relation to the concept of Talanoa, I would say that the question of making works in response to other people's accounts of anxiety and depression seemed like it would drive the project onto a completely different path. I decided with this thesis project to invest in finding out more about my own experience of the relative intangibility and invisibility of depression and anxiety. This is very much a conversation with myself, still a conversation. Relying on my own relationship to materials and their haptic and semiotic associations meant I had constant access to my subject of study, and so, I made this decision to permit my work to advance more efficiently and to a level which would have been impossible to reach had I decided to go through a path comprising a predicted plethora of anxious blockages along the way, courtesy of social anxiety.

The empathetic exhaustion I felt when watching *Concrete is as Concrete Doesn't* at Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2018 stuck with me. It seemed to provide a powerful tool to talk to the despair I sometimes felt when the battle against depression started to feel endless and useless. I decided to try and use this in my work, and this resulted in the filmed performance "*But where are they running to?*" (Fig 2) This work was intended to speak to a perceived endless and futile race to unclear destinations, which I was especially inclined to ponder about while on walks along Oriental Parade, Wellington. What was the purpose of these incessant runs people seemed so engaged to perform along the waterfront? The semantic play between runners and escapism certainly isn't new but what if they weren't escaping, but trying to reach some unknown place instead?

In this filmed performance, the act of blowing bubbles is treated as a form of physical exercise. The female performer is dressed as if they were going for a run, starts by a short warm up, and then blow bubbles until they are panting and exhausted. They end up missing the fun and joy that the bubbles were supposed to bring them because they were so focused on blowing bubbles non-stop to exhaustion. In this performance, bubbles carry childhood memories of happiness and joy and excitement, but their value to the performer seems to be defined in quantitative rather than qualitative terms. With this work, I wanted to hint to the relentless performing of a task to the point of losing focus, and to the point of losing sight of what it was intended to procure.



Figure 2. Video Still from filmed performance *But where are they running to?*, Severine Costa, 2019.

Although this particular work was mainly playing on the same sense of exhaustion present in John Vea's work discussed above, the way I continued to explore the notion of labour, resilience and futility evolved to be centred more around water. John Vea and Kaixuan Feng's practices helped me develop the way I would use the element: it became evident it needed to speak of past times, and also of time passing. It needed to move slowly, to leave traces, but be in hiding. Water has the power to destroy things quickly but my water was more insidious, it was slow, coming and going, and wasn't managed very well. It wasn't an ocean I was building a wall against, not at least since I had left New Caledonia. It was smaller, less visible. It was coming through a badly plumbed water system, a slow leak.

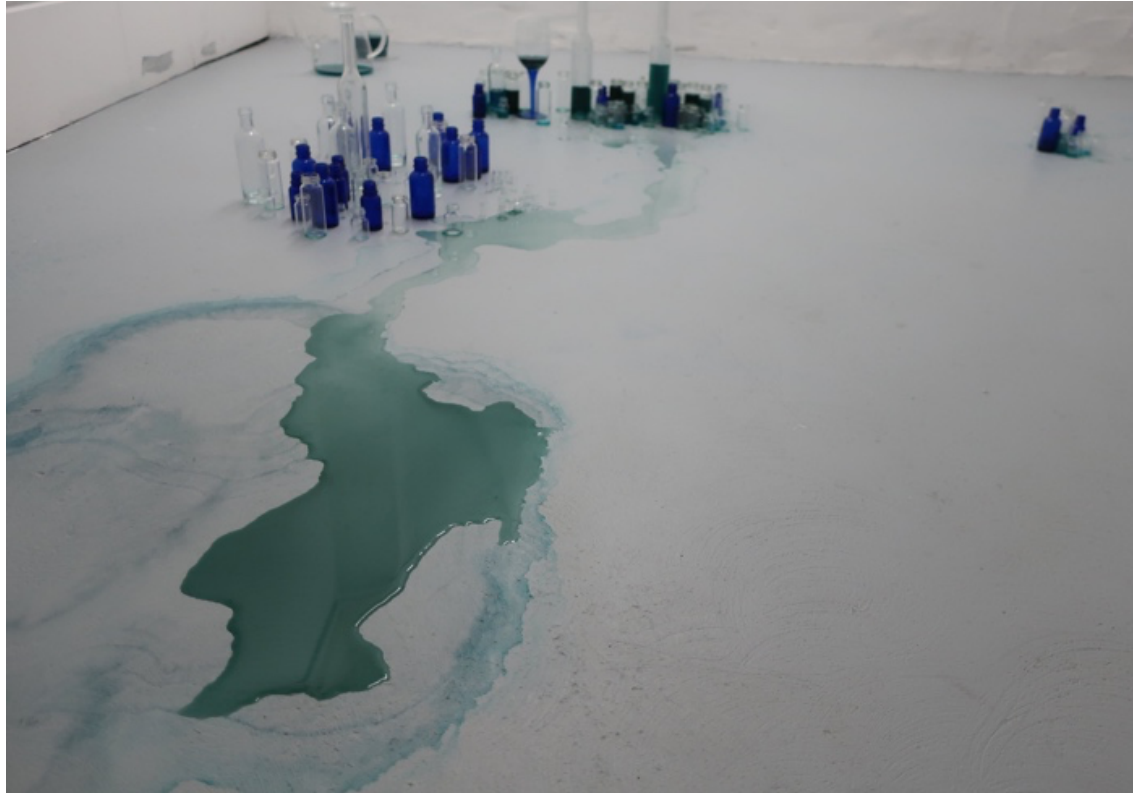


Figure 3. Still image from *Leak*, Severine Costa, Massey University, 2019.

With *Leak*, I sought to express the compelling nature of coping mechanisms, and how to situate them as a response to perceived threats. (Fig. 3) I installed a wonky piping system to catch water from a sprinkler. I wanted to make it look like the sprinkler might have been defective in the past, or could actually start spitting water any moment. The piping system would then collect the water and make the water more manageable, moving it along the pipes to different holes. The pipes were pierced in some places, and bottles and vessels of different sizes were placed underneath the leaks to collect the water. The sound of the water falling in the bottles was beautiful, almost delightful. A stool and a carafe were placed under the sprinkler, and used to pour the water collected by the bottles back into the pipes.

A couple of food colouring bottles were placed in the room. The colour was a lovely turquoise blue to begin with because it mixed with the white paint used to paint the pipes. Only one of the four neon lights was installed leaving the room quite dark. The water dried and left tidal marks of different colours on the floor. This work was the first time I experimented with the idea of water being reused on a loop, which would become a recurring element in my subsequent installations. The next step involved finding out what depression was altering in my mind, and secondly, finding the materials best suited to represent this slow disintegration of matter.

I was told warm showers are better for your skin and hair overall. Not too hot, not too cold, just in the middle.

I prefer hot water. After a few minutes of standing under it, red marks appear on my skin and remind me of the life in my body. The slow burning is reassuring, I start feeling safe again. The best is when the water pours onto the top of my skull, and I have to be careful not to drown in the waterfall flowing down my face. It also means I have to close my eyes, which is convenient.

I did read somewhere that hair becomes shinier if you finish the wash with cold water, so sometimes I dare myself with a quick turn of the tap. I have never taken note of whether my hair gets shinier for it, because the urgent gasps of air I take to cope with the cold burn send me where the joyful and confident other is.

I don't want to see the patterns the mould is inscribing into the surface of the tub under my feet. For the first few months after I moved in, I routinely cleaned the tub with a brush, retrospectively deemed too abrasive, scrubbing it with such devoted violence the ceramic layer eventually became porous. Now mould grows in the microcavities on the surface and has become practically impossible to get rid of. I don't like to use bleach and always thought it was a bit zealous to be honest, but now I have to, nothing else will do.

The other day I had a breakdown when I realised the water was not going to get hot enough. I was last to have a shower and dishes had been done just before. It is alarming and I can't help but despise myself when I witness the speedy and overwhelming rage building up in my body. The water isn't even cold but it isn't burning my skin and I am denied what I am craving: transformation. There comes a time in the day when I simply cannot bear to be myself anymore, and there is no transformation in warm water.

IV

The Allegorical Bathroom

A reading of “The Civilizing Bathroom” in *Bathroom* by Barbara Penner makes us realise that individualism infiltrated domestic dwellings through the design of the “modern” bathroom. In this chapter, Penner argues bathroom design and evolution were closely linked to the propagation of moral values, especially in regards to gender, social status, and the establishment of white supremacism, a tradition that has been ongoing and widely spread through colonization (2013, p. 45-81). Considering this argument, we can effectively place the streamlined modern bathroom as a site of oppression and violence (Lupton and Miller, 1992). It is a space loaded with references to “becoming better”, transforming a person into the arbitrarily deemed “civilised” conforming version of themselves. Penner writes, “(the water closet) also helped to create a much more private subject who regarded bodily functions as a source of embarrassment or shame, to be kept hidden from neighbours and from one’s own family (p. 59). This quote helps appreciate just how much the “modern” bathroom was also designed to further isolate individuals. As well as asserting a hierarchy between mind and body in the domestic realm, it promoted a further separation of the individual from their community, and from their environment.

The association of morality and plumbing is perhaps better exemplified in Justin Novak’s *Confessional Sink* (2004). His *Kohler Sink* or *Confessional Sink* is a white porcelain sink with two side panels. These side panels comport a catholic pattern typically used to decorate panels which separate the person confessing and the priest. This means when the sink is being used, the panels provide a sense of secrecy around the washing, but also load it with shame and guilt, and the letting go of shame and guilt, of being forgiven for the sins committed. These panels usually have a function of in-between; it is through that the conversation which provides absolution to the sinner happens. In the case of the sink, when using it, it seems the person washing their hands assumes these two roles at once. They admit to sinning, and also are the forgiving authority. Typically a catholic priest might give the sinner a range of actions and prayers to perform in order to be forgiven; here the washing performs the function of a prayer.

This piece links Catholicism and the idea of cleansing together. It juxtaposes the letting go of sins and the letting go of germs into the one action of washing our hands. What does this mean? The *Confessional Sink* may tell us that washing and cleansing have a spiritual purpose. But it may also hint that these washing rituals are based on a social construct, and established as rituals which under the disguise of spirituality, establish a set of, one could argue, arbitrary moral rules. Confessing equals washing away our sins, off our hands, off our faces. The user gives himself a fresh new face at the beginning of the day, and therefore becomes aligned to the values of the society around him. In this work, the sink is at once a place to try and deal with guilt and shame, and a space creating that same guilt and shame. A looping process of self-care and self-harm.

In “Why Mental Health is a Political Issue”, Mark Fisher argues that the “privatisation of stress” is one of the consequences of the implementation of neo-liberal policies by governments since the 1980s (2012). Self-care is a word that has gained popularity in the last decade, especially on social media platforms. The relation between self-care, self-help and mental health is complex, to say the least. An overflowing promotion of and emphasis on self-care and self-help to overcome mental illness is dangerous as it can encourage self-diagnosis practices. Vikki Vandiver, in her 2009 book *Integrating Health Promotion and Mental Health: An Introduction to Policies, Principles, and Practices*, defines three levels at which health promotion can be pursued. The ‘intrapersonal’ level, that of self-empowerment, the ‘interpersonal’ level, based on facilitating the sufferers’ sense of connectedness with others, through raising awareness about mental illness in their families or friend circles for example, and the intergroup level, consisting of the promotion of mental health care on the socio-political and institutional levels (p. 192). She explains that mental health promotion needs to happen on all three levels to be truly effective (p. 194).

#Selfcare is a term I have used to refer to the type of self-care ideology that is omnipresent on social media platforms and takes the form of short motivational quotes, pestering advertisements for mindfulness and yoga apps, or pictures of #Healthymeals, among others. #Selfcare becomes an issue when it is used in marketing campaigns by companies selling their products or by individuals chuffed with their post-exercise selfies: the message barely ever reaches above the intrapersonal level, and the interpersonal and intergroup levels of health promotion as defined by Vandiver are often left out of the picture. The surge in popularity of #Selfcare, may be due to a lack of publicly funded mental health care resources, as Shayla Love, columnist for *Vice* argues in her 2018 article “The Dark Truths Behind Our Obsession with Self-Care.” This emphasis on self-care and self-empowerment is not exclusive of social media platforms though, but might in fact be deeply rooted in western neo-liberal ideology, influencing even the way many mental health experts conceive of their field of expertise. In “Capitalism and Psychiatry: Applying Marxist Critical

Theory to the Mental Health industry”, Joanna Moncrieff argues that “Psychiatric discourse underscores the principles of neo-liberalism by locating problems in the self, rather than in society or the community, by equating productivity and efficiency with health and by presenting the solution as personal adjustment rather than social change” (2018, pp. 307-09).



Figure 4. Severine Costa, *Ab(so)lution*, Artspace Aotearoa, 2019.

Sinks are used individually, are connected to a broader water piping system which is shared within the community, and their infrastructure system is regulated at the intergroup level. To speak to the concept of #Selfcare in my practice, I used bathroom sinks, which provided me with the opportunity to speak to Vandiver’s all three levels of responsibility at once.

The Tate states on its website “Allegory in art is when the subject of the artwork, or the various elements that form the composition, is used to symbolize a deeper moral or spiritual meaning.” In my installation practice, I have used the site of the bathroom as an allegory to explore the way societal values make their way into our individual system of values. I explored the way in which the self-care industry and consumerism are actively infiltrating our inner mental life through shaping new rituals, which transpired in many of my works.

In *Ab(so)lution*, I designed a system to equate the dangers of washing our hands with the same water over and over to the dangers of recurring thoughts. (Fig. 4) I designed a self-reliant DIY water looping system. I wanted to play with the abject of washing hands with reused soapy water that would collect dust, hair and dead skin cells overtime, as well as to speak to looping thoughts as being linked to isolation and disconnection from surroundings. By being so self-reliant as to deny the needs of the handwasher, this work attended to the notion of #Selfcare.



Figure 5. Severine Costa, detail from *Fixing the Template*, Massey University, Wellington, August 2020.

In *Fixing the Template*, toilet paper prints were taken of iconic arrangements of self-care products and mirrors. (Fig. 5) The toilet paper prints were hung on a structure made with galvanised pipes, which leaked water. Some prints were eventually soaked with water and fell on the floor; others stayed but were orange in some places where the water had slowly rusted the pipes and then coloured the paper.



Figure 6. Severine Costa, *Normative Utopia*, Artspace Aotearoa, 2019. Photograph by Andreea Christache.

Normative Utopia suggested the “normal”, “elegant”, “ideal” sink as a source of oppression, which in turn would cause anxiety and depression. (Fig. 6) In this work, I used an Edwardian style sink described as elegant by the sellers, and installed it on the wall without plumbing it, so it wouldn’t run water. A surveillance mirror provided the user with a distorted view of the whole room behind them, as well as a distorted view of themselves.

I am in my grand parents' living room, I am about eight years old. I recognise the room but the lighting is different. Everything is a strange dark brown tone. The curtains have changed, an instead of the white lace, long shreds of dry skins are hanging in front of the windows. I can tell it is made of human skin, even though the pieces are much longer than the size of a human being. They look parched on one side, and fleshy on the other, as if the skins had been ripped off their bodies. There isn't any blood though, it is all dry.

I am in my childhood courtyard, and my dog is biting her own flesh off, and eating it. This time again, there isn't any blood. It is like she is pulling out bits of her skin off with her teeth as if it were made of clay. I feel horrible and try to make her stop.

I am running after a train, trying to catch it in order to escape but it is too late. Everything is yellow around me, I am lost in a desert. I look at my knee and there is a weird scab, black, like charcoal. I scratch it to get the charcoal out of my knee, and eventually a very black liquid start seeping through to the surface. It is viscous and shiny like oil. It starts going down my leg, and I start taking small chunks of skin apart to let it out, as if my skin were play dough. It doesn't stop leaking until I wake up.

V Skins

In "Memory, Emotion, and the Imaginal Mind", chapter six of *Dreaming and the Self: New Perspectives on Subjectivity, Identity and Emotion* (Mageo, 2003, pp. 97-129), Michelle Stephen argues there are two different registers of memory in our brains, which operate independently from each other, "one which organizes information in terms of verbal categories and semantic understandings and one which records and organises all information according to its emotional significance"(p. 97). She goes on to explain that when we dream, the information picked up by our imaginal mind during the day comes through as visuals and sounds, and our brain uses this language to organise memories in terms of emotional value.

Our problems in interpreting the products of the imaginal mind are compounded by the fact that we are locked into the linguistic/semantic system, especially, of course, when we are engaged in scholarly or scientific discourse. The reason why the configurational system has largely been ignored by cognitive science,(...) is because it is so very difficult to conceptualize a mode of thought that does not employ language (p.104).

I believe the imaginal mind is accessible through touch. Since it seems to rely on senses to pick up information, exploring our sensations while awake may help us identify triggers, or identify soothing mechanisms. Art may help us do this on a personal level. We can find out more about what materials mean to us through exploring what we find is interesting about them. For example, I am interested in water, but more specifically, as an element able to seep through tight spaces. I want the water to pass through objects, to leak and to melt them; to slowly destroy them. And so, if I think about examples in my personal life where water did do this, I can come back to reflect on it and how it has influenced me.

Ripped, peeled skins seem to be a recurring theme in my brain's imaginal vocabulary. A tool of sorts my brain used to describe emotions I didn't yet have words for. Considering my many nightmares including skins over the years, it seemed important to try and decipher my emotional understanding of skin.

Fashion has been an interesting tool to explore the notion of skin. I have spent the last nine years searching myself through dress. It hasn't fixed my longing for a true sense of self, but it has given me the ability to experiment with it kinaesthetically. Fashion can bring visibility to the process of identity refining by anchoring the it through time and space. Over time, I have found my wardrobe fluctuate its way down to the colours and shapes I feel most comfortable wearing. These textiles skins have come to help me practice asserting myself. They are not stored in my bedroom hidden behind a door. They are on a rack made of galvanised pipes in my lounge, near the bathroom door. It is visible to visitors and friends, it isn't private. It has become a way to exist in the space, a physical trace of my identity. It is a curation of skins, which is organised so as to be visually pleasing. Although it may seem a superficial patch up, it is a layer of identity where I am in control, through these interchangeable skins textile skins, I can learn to negotiate my identity without excruciating pain. It provides me with a practice ground for the tougher, harder work I have to do inside.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 novel *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator's reality keeps being denied (Bauer, 1998). Her own accounts of herself as well as her freedom to write are being challenged by everyone around her. It makes sense that she becomes obsessed with the wall paper, as it is the surface through which she feels she must coerce herself to be who she ought to be for others to accept her. Being herself isn't good enough, her own words are not trusted and her emotions are not taken seriously. It is as if the wall is closing in around her, and the wallpaper is where she is allowed to exist. Tearing bits off the wall frees her as the mental wall between her and others is slowly being uncovered. It becomes real if she doesn't accept to be tricked by the wallpaper. If the wallpaper is inside the room, then so is the sexist and ableist discourse of John and Jennie, inside of her, internalised. She cannot bear it anymore. She wants to free herself from self-denial and be with her emotions and reality. This decoration she knows only makes the wall less visible, less tangible. That others deny her reality is hard enough; she can't bear denying it herself one moment longer. Like a wallpaper on which to write stories to make the wall more acceptable, the patterns on the yellow wallpaper move. The narrator is engaged in a bargaining with the surface of the wall because of the impossibility to get outside of the room she was bound to by the by the very people who are closest to her.

As another type of skin, the wallpaper shapes a powerful analogy to identity. It speaks to an urge to cover the wall, to smooth the inherent brutality of separation between the narrator's reality and others' perception of it. The surface of the wallpaper softens the solid wall; it shifts the wall, a boundary between inside and outside, into a landscape, by bringing the eye alongside and around it. It becomes an illusion, a distraction from the violence of isolation.

The narrator is disconnected from everyone and everything else, and the wall becomes a metaphor of her mental space. She is alone in it and the people she loves do not want her to come out of it. She needs to shred this wall decoration inside her mental space: her internalisation of other people's ideals she feels a need to bargain with and learn to live with. She works to shred this layer of decoration and expose the reality of the wall to herself and others. She doesn't succeed, and gets trapped in it, becomes the wallpaper, her faux self.



Figure 7. Heidi Bucher, *Fliegender Hautraum (Ahnenhaus)*, ca. 1980–1982, Winterthur, Photo Andreas Schwarber 1980.

Heidi Bucher made a latex cast of a room and hung it. (Fig. 7) A reference to body and skin is made through the colour and texture of the latex that has been cast upon the interior of the house. The room becomes a skin, it becomes a material which can be worn, draped and hung. This work make us wonder about the relationship between the body and the building. This ripped skin of the inside walls of the room has a haunting feeling. It could be a ghost of the house but it isn't really, it is a soft negative of it. It looks like the room might have shed its skin in a process of growing similar to the one of a cicada or a snake. It isn't the skin of the room though, it is something else: it is the will of Bucher painting the latex with a brush against the walls of the room. It is Bucher taking a print of the room, and peeling it off when it is dry. What is there in this latex negative of the walls, doors and windows that Bucher might be interested in? Was she trying to create a body shaped by the room, or was she trying to remember it minutely? Or was this new body speaking of the impossibility to ever become more than a negative of its initial support? Is it confined forever into the shape it has been imprinted against?

In "Body, Mind, and Imagination: The Mental Essence of Architecture", Juhani Pallasmaa writes: "Buildings mediate between the work and our consciousness through internalizing the world and externalizing the mind" (Robertson and Pallasmaa, 2015, p. 52). We can imagine Bucher's mind spreading against and along these walls to exercise a function not unsimilar to that of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's yellow wallpaper. A bargaining with, an analysing of the wall and how it shapes her existence in this room.

I am a negative of you. When I find what you want me to say, it feels good. The walls I build are not for me, they are of you. I dig into myself to give you space. I fill your holes and patch you up until I become only but the trace of your will. Build myself out of what I can find here, in this relationship, until I become a perfect fit. You let me think I am responsible for fixing you, for the emotions you are not handling by yourself, and it is ok because I am here to patch you up. I love to do it, you think it is great sometimes. It becomes who I am. The little patcher up, who can fix and control your surroundings, and make everything ok for you, because if it is ok for you, it is safe for me.

I wish I were flexible, strong. I want to make you waterproof, so you will be whole and happy. I want to be the white tape to stop you dripping. But all I have left is the shame and guilt of not being able to fix you, and the inadequate prints of you around me. Time passes and you change your mind. So then instead of shattering into pieces against your changing will, I can hold on to my slow disintegration against it, and shape myself around the new material of you, press myself against your new shape. Then I become a new negative of you, more current. I don't exist without of you.

And so I go through all the castings I can to find the right fit, find the right place, to find the role you want me to play.

VI Casting



Figure 8. Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost*, 1990, plaster on steel frame, National Gallery of Art, Washington. This work is licensed with CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

It is a common misconception (and therefore becomes a recurring micro-aggression) that depression is due to a person wallowing on their past, wallowing in their memories, and failing to look at the positive aspects of their life. In my experience it isn't that at all. I don't go and find the bad memories. Some of them don't even need to come to the surface to assault me. They short circuit me into fear, control me from afar. In order to go through my day, to try and ignore them, I have to shut down my whole emotional system, including the ability to feel good emotions as well. This numbing is what depression is. It took me a long time to understand that I needed to understand these memories and how they weighed on me, so that they would stop harassing and haunting me.

Rachel Whiteread's *Ghost* is a cast of the interior walls of a living room. One can imagine a house mould being pulled off of the concrete block, like a silicon cake mould. (Fig. 8) This block of concrete is the negative space of the room it remembers. This memory is heavy, hard, solid, impenetrable. It shows us what was lost and will never be found again; we will never be able to walk into the room again. It literally makes the memory concrete, to make it exist and give it the physical appearance of the loss endured. I imagine myself coexisting with this memory and find myself overcome with the realisation that my body is powerless against it. I can only press myself against it. I might need heavy machinery to move it, to destroy it. This memory also doesn't show what might have been inside the room. It shows the wall surface, the way it was shaped by the walls, chimney, plinths, and ceiling boards. It is there but unmovable. I can only build around it or on top of it, decorate it, cover it with wall paper. *The Eye*, a series of documentaries launched by Illuminations Media in the UK, made a 2005 film about Rachel Whiteread in which she talks about standing with her work and realising that she "was the wall."

Her work talks to the overwhelming mass of memory. It seems to liken itself quite adequately to the type of weight that pre-semantic memories can have on a person's psyche. (van der Kolk, 2014) The inevitability of *Ghost* blocks the view, fills the room so that we have to walk around it. It is a memory that can't be revisited but that weighs on you like a few tons of concrete nonetheless. It is a form of trauma which isn't penetrable, but which manifests as a weight to carry physically as a presence to accommodate. An exhausting burden that can only be seen from the outside, its extremities are the only way to try to guess what it might have been. But, there is no way in. A thought which sublimed into physical pain, like a gas into a mineral, I wake up and my mind is heavy. I need machines to break the weight down. The toughness of the material makes us consider measures that would have to be taken to move, remove, destroy it. This work is a pertinent example of how we can try to think of trauma memories in terms of material or substance.

The rigidity of the cast made from the house speaks to an existence which may have been created against a frame too rigid. Once the frame is no longer present, the ways are set in stone and we are left with the burden of catering for them. The idea of being the wall particularly struck me as it reinforced my thinking of identity as a border, and brought me to try and define how the walls of my own identity existed. To represent the coming in and out of myself, the porosity of my mental space and sense of self, and the lack of clear boundaries between the inside and the outside.

Paper Sink tested the readability of the fragility of the material used to make the sink. (Fig. 9) I sought to invest in the absurdity of making a sink out of toilet paper that was simultaneously beautiful and fragile. Aiming to explore stillness and floating, I thought the use of an infinite background behind the sink would have erased the spatial discomfort which comes through this work. This work itself was a photograph of one of the first paper casts I made. Although it was powerful, I decided that the melting and staining of the paper in space was closer to this sense of stillness I found in Whiteread's works, all the while evolving with time.

To make the paper sink, I placed multiple layers of toilet paper on a sink and used water to make a cast of it. This process made me realise the labour of laying thin sheets of toilet paper atop each other. Soaking them with water and pressing them against the shape of the sink was also evocative of the labour involved in trying to build your own set of boundaries and sense of identity. The toilet paper had a way of drying into this very crisp texture which was incredibly fragile. I loved that it could also easily be disintegrated and soiled by water and other fluids, and that it had the potential to be reused.

In the photograph, the floating sink feels eerie, a quality that Mark Fisher defines:

The eerie, by contrast, (to the weird) is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or if there is nothing present when there should be something. (...) There must also be a sense of alterity, a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie beyond common experience (2016, pp. 61-62).

Reflecting upon this definition, I wonder if the works that came after *Paper Sink* felt like they needed to be inscribed in space to avoid the metaphorical dangers of the eerie. Although a tempting tool to represent depression, the eerie sets depression in disconnection from its environment and situates it as ungraspable, unconceivable. Through the use of the eerie, depression is situated in another reality, set in a realm defined by a set of rules that is “beyond” our understanding. It doesn’t though. Depression is rooted in its environment even though the roots may seem imperceptible. The absence of literal ties between the sink and the rest in *Paper Sink* results from an act of erasure of the ties holding the sink above the floor through photoshop manipulation. And so maybe we could conceive of the disconnection between depression and its context as resulting from an act of erasure, and we may ask now, what is being erased and how? Could it be hidden rather than erased? Covered up?

In order to explain further my decision to use toilet paper in my projects, we need to look at the notion of gaslighting as defined by Paige L. Sweet in “The Sociology of Gaslighting”: “a type of psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel “crazy,” creating a “surreal” interpersonal environment.” (Sweet, 2019, p. 1)

Growing up in an environment where my reality was often denied brought me to eventually doubt my own sense of perception. Having grown to distrust my emotions, it became easier to override my own experience of a situation with other people’s perception of it. I learned to read everything, even down to very subtle signs, in order to anticipate others’ behaviours, because if I could anticipate them, then I could avoid conflict. Being unable to trust my own memory of events meant I couldn’t trust my perception of them and stand for myself. I developed an approach of social interactions based more on contingency than on development.



Figure 9. *Paper Sink*, Severine Costa, Massey University, Wellington, 2020.

She always has that rich kid way of moving. I can see the confidence in her eyes, in the way she stands, and moves. She walks and it is like she knows she isn't ever going to fall. She advances like there is no danger, talks like she knows what she is saying, who she is, how to be herself around just about anyone. Like she has some tools I don't, a map, maybe a book of rules which all make sense. She has something I don't, and I know I must look for it somewhere. There seems to be this energetic field around her, protecting her. A structure she moves within, and it is strong. I want something like it. I ask her how she does it but she shrugs. She's not aware she has it.

I don't know how to move like this. Stillness is where I will be. The calculating, analysing, blurry, authentic mess of me. The animal strategizing survival. The place I have not become a negative of you yet.

VII

The Blue Print



Figure 10. Do Ho Suh, *348 West End 22nd Street*, touring exhibition, c. 2011-2015. Photograph Christian Liboiron, 2012. "Bathroom - Do-Ho Suh" by Liboiron is licensed with CC BY-NC-ND 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>

If this exegesis has established the bathroom as a site of internalized societal oppression, can this be turned around? Could we sit within this oneiric, political and ultimately mental performative space and look at how it could be used as a site to reclaim a non-capitalistic understanding of self-care or explore better ways to connect to our community? How could this space be represented as what it is, a template for moral conduct? And how could it be used to talk about mental health?

After having used bathroom settings in my work as an allegorical tool to investigate societal issues around mental health promotion, I decided to focus my research on developing this allegory around my own personal experience of it. How did this space shape my own identity?

In “The Bathroom,” an essay in *Feel Free*, Zadie Smith’s bathroom is loaded with status, amongst other things. Having a bathroom and a second room with only a toilet was a sign that the family had moved up the social ladder: a new bathroom brought a sense of pride and excitement (Smith, 2018, pp.354-365). The bathroom also became the place where her parents exposed their impossible wants: her mother by excessively planting it and making it feel like a “jungle”, which the artist sees as her mother’s longing for the Jamaica she had left behind. It also was the place where her father developed his photographs, mainly of his children, a remnant of his prior ambition to be a photography artist, which he had had to give up because of having to work to feed the family. In this essay about class and gentrification, the bathroom becomes a space embodying social status as well as a room where grief and memory are acted out by Smith’s parents. Whether these bathroom activities can be reduced down to aesthetic choices or simply expressions of pragmatism (one can imagine it would be much easier to turn a bathroom than any other room into a darkroom for photography), I am interested in how Smith situates the small bathroom as a place where her parents melancholy is acted out, activated, but also a place where their unspoken grief is able to be let out and contained at once.

Do Ho Suh’s *Seoul home/ L.A. Home: Bathroom* is a silk replica of the artist’s Seoul home bathroom. (1999) As opposed to his other polyester works, this bathroom doesn’t keep its shape due to the nature of silk. It looks more like an empty skin of a bathroom, hanging from the ceiling of the gallery. The colour appears as a ghostly turquoise because of the transparency of the fabric, a faded shade of a once vibrant colour. This piece is a meticulous memory of a bathroom which we can imagine the artist longing for. It can be folded and transported, hung and visited. It is a recollection of space, never quite able to provide but a blurred sense of the bathroom it represents, through the monochromatic aspect and floppiness of the fabric. The monochromatic aspect of the work is reminiscent of renditions of architectural plans, or so called blueprints. The seams are darker from the juxtaposition of layers of fabric one onto another, just as the lines defining the space would be if they were drawn on paper. Do Ho Suh’s *Bathroom* sits somewhere between a prototype, a drawing, and a memory, its monochromatic aspect inviting us to calm and contemplation.

We can imagine the froufrou of the fabric, like the sound of a fuzzy memory, when we close our eyes and visualise a scene but stand in near silence, alone with the sounds of our blood pumping near our ears.

Do Ho Suh’s portable bathroom seems like an efficient way to bring a template of “how to feel good” once you leave the familial home. If I can carry a representation of a bathroom that worked for me and bring it everywhere I go in my suitcase, then I can use it as a template and recreate it or seek bathrooms with similar features. It is like a healthy, reassuring tool to have around to move forward. In a sense, an efficient emotional education becomes a template on which to rely on, a map to follow when lost. In terms of growing in an unstable environment, this template might not form really well, and a person may have to keep trying and testing to form a new, stronger one.

Do Ho Suh's practice resonates with me also because I myself have left home and I have had to adapt to a new "world" when I arrived in Aotearoa, a place that I will soon leave to go to another where I will have to adapt again. In this continuous process, I keep encountering my own blueprint and what I have to do to adapt to this new environment.

Do Ho Suh's work makes beautiful use of textiles' ability to trace a memory. This work also made me realise textiles are too strong, too solid to represent the nature of a person's thoughts and memories when their reality has been denied over a long period of time. This is another reason I was drawn to use toilet paper in my work. I decided to try and recreate a memory, and to give a ghostly feel to my work through the use of lighting and colour. This work guided me into researching the urge to remember and recreate a bathroom in terms of what it represents poetically and emotionally. After I had touched on these aspects with *Paper Sink*, I wanted to develop a project which emulated this stillness but also inscribed the ephemeral aspect of memories into time.



Figure 11. Mark Rothko - *Untitled (Green on Maroon)*, 1961, photograph G. Starke. "Mark Rothko - *Untitled (Green on Maroon)*, 1961" by G. Starke is licensed with CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>

In *The Painting Techniques of Mark Rothko*, D'Augustine (2010) talks about the experience of viewing Rothko's paintings as "lacking resolution" and describes a painting that "never has a finality to it" (2010). This experience of getting lost in contemplation was an element I wanted to emulate in my work. To clarify the use of installation in order to do this in my work, we can come back to Juhani Pallasmaa's writing:

The architectural context gives my experience of being its unique structure and meaning through projecting specific frames and horizons for my perception and understanding of my own existential situation. The poetic experience brings me to a borderline — the boundary of my perception and understanding of self — and this encounter projects a sense of existential meaningfulness (Robertson and Pallasmaa, 2015, p.56).

With *The Blue Print*, the final work for this MFA journey, I want to suggest a work engaged in a slow war with itself. My intention is to make the destruction slow enough for it to be subtle, in order to slow down time and bring the viewer into a contemplation. In this work I will use similar processes as used in *Fixing the Template* (Fig. 5) by layering toilet paper onto bathroom walls to make "skins", and by organising them on galvanised iron pipes. The pipes will be set up to slowly leak rusty water onto the skins, but instead of being installed on the wall, they will be arranged to form a self-standing structure. We will not be standing within the memory of a space; we will have to actively recreate a notional space, asked to redesign it, re-assemble it, from the collection of skin bits we are presented with.

The final work does not intend to be a sum of all of the other works I have made throughout the MFA. Rather, it will reflect a mental inventory which evolved organically from experiments along the way. It will speak to where I am currently, mentally, on my healing journey. It will be contemplative, accepting, negotiating and materialising my own blueprint. It will be the frame I work within, imperfect. I expect I will always work about identity, and I am hoping to slowly get myself and my practice more and more open to the exterior as I grow. Some remnants of the things I have tried will last longer than others, and some will go and take the shape of new spaces and objects. But here I am, learning to sit within and let go of the urge to control and to fix things inside and outside of myself.

Talking about depression shouldn't have to be difficult. Through a semiotic, semantic, oneiric and architectural exploration of water and water management systems, I developed an allegorical installation practice in order to speak to my own experience of depression and anxiety. I embarked on a journey to learn to communicate about this difficult topic in a way which is aiming to be respectful of myself and others, and to provide a way into the conversation.

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