EMBODYING PAIN

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Contents

Introduction

"Es una compañía ineludible e inasible, concreta que me cubre como coraza…
Desde que llegó no he vuelto a estar sola."[1]

[It is an unavoidable and elusive companion, a solid which covers me like armor…
Since its arrival I have not returned to being alone.]

María Luisa Puga describes pain using the quote above in her posthumous autobiographical novel, Díario del dolor [Diary of Pain]. Pain is unavoidable for me too; a frequent companion at my side through day and night. This is what it means to live with chronic pain.

Pain has come to me in many forms throughout my life. The usual surplus of stubbed toes, scraped knees and dental visits are there, but accompanying them are those persistent headaches that had me dry swallowing ibuprofen at age ten. The debilitating cramps that came to me monthly left me clutching my abdomen, trying not to throw up and once had me passed out on the floor from the pain. And then that stiff-jointed and aching pain of carpal tunnel that came upon me when I was still a teen. There are moments of pain that I remember sharply, acute appendicitis in the emergency room, my father trying to distract me when the pain overwhelmed my consciousness, or the feeling of that stick carving through the meat of my leg. And there are sensations of pain that persist indefinitely.

I struggle to understand that others may not be in constant pain, that my experience isn't universal. Surely, we all have that tight band around our heads? Yet it is similarly hard for me to imagine that everyone is silently suffering in the way I am. Are you too sitting on aching hands trying to smother that constant feeling? This struggle to understand my pain in relation to others drives my art practice.

It is impossible to compare the experience of one's pain to another, and this is where I must turn to art. Art attempts to bridge an implicit gap in communication, to explain a unique experience and share it with others. It is a Sisyphean task; without living each other's exact experiences, we cannot fully understand their details.[2] But the attempt matters, every time we push that boulder up to the top of the hill we come closer to a sublime moment. Truly understanding one another's experience. Sharing something otherwise indescribable.

1 Puga, María Luisa. Diario del dolor. (1. ed. Colección Primero sueño. México, D.F: Alfaguara : Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juna : CONACULTA-INBA, 2004.) 1

2 Homer. "The Odyssey." (Perseus Digital Library. Accessed October 8, 2024. https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0136:book=11:card=567.)

When it comes to pain in art I am only the latest in a long line of artists to attempt to share and understand the individual experience of it. Virginia Woolf wrote her essay On Being Ill, to contemplate traditions around writing about pain. Frida Kahlo made a name for herself documenting her own pain and medical interventions to it in her painting. Leo Tolstoy's novel The Death of Ivan Illyich focuses on the way incurable pain is able to destroy identity and consciousness.[3]

Art provides a unique ability to attempt to communicate the experience of pain to others.
I am compelled to study pain in order to understand myself, others, and the world at large. I am compelled to create art on the subject of pain to share this understanding with others.

My art practice has several elements. I create figural sculptures of bodies in pain made out of clay stoneware and glaze or treat them with iron oxide. These figures are then arranged in environments with lightly rusted steel box frame structures, cotton cord, and wood. Sometimes the sculptural assemblages cast large elongated shadows made from sumi ink or charcoal.

3 Moscoso, Javier. Pain: A Cultural History. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Qualities of Pain

Pain is a simple term used to summarize a broad reach of sensations. We qualify pain as a physical sensation that is unpleasant.

How Does Pain Feel?

I have the phantom taste of iron in my mouth
Red flag
This is a different pain than normal
radiating through my right leg
No
Not radiating
Shooting from my knee and
throbbing in my shin
Pulling at my thigh muscles and
aching in my hip
There is no respite
and the flesh of my knee flares and
swells angrily
I grit my teeth
My whole body hurts with tension that has nowhere to go
Is there a non pain actuality?
A moment, a limb, a finger where I don't feel this?
What can I be that isn't in pain?
it tastes like blood and nausea
My right leg cannot take my weight
Structural collapse imminent

Journal Excerpt, Somn Martin.

Pain as a sensation is a form of qualia. In philosophy, the term qualia describes the indescribable, unique feelings and senses that escape definition. How does one describe the quintessential qualities of redness?[1] You can describe the materiality of it, the exact wavelength, the neural synaptic response to seeing it. You could choose to describe the connections it triggers: blood, passion, love, or luck. But equally there is information missing in both descriptions. How then can we possibly communicate these ideas to each other, confirm their sameness or difference? How can we know that my red and your red are the same?
How can I make you understand the severity and quality of my pain? How can I understand yours?

Pain is impossible to exactly communicate. If I say my pain is stabbing or burning,
I am using a metaphor. You cannot truly know the experience I am describing because it is merely 'like' the term I use. This is the struggle those with pain face in medical settings; we must attempt through metaphor or other linguistic tricks to come close to explaining something impossible.

Intense pain reduces your world to nothing but pain, eliminating your ability to communicate.
The language-destroying nature of pain complicates our ability to communicate its nature to others. "
[A]s the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject."[2]

It would be easy to take the inaccessibility of others' pain experiences and deem their communication unnecessary or too individualized to help on a larger scale, but pain is not just a medical condition or something easily solved. The history of medical research into pain is one that follows a path from generalization to specificity. Coping with pain necessitates the exploration of pain as each person feels it.

Even medically pain is understood as an individual phenomena. A series of studies compiled by John A. Encandela show that pain varies based on culture, social setting, environment, and a multitude of other factors.[3]

In the 1990's, philosopher Drew Leder undertook the task of describing the universal qualities of pain. He terms these qualities "episodic structure," "affective call," and "sensory intensification."[4]

What Leder terms "episodic structure" is the particular temporality of pain.[5] Pain differs from most stimuli in that it does not fade from perception. One might become used to the buzzing of a fridge, or the warmth of sitting next to a heater, and eventually these sensory experiences fade from conscious thought. Pain is constantly reasserting itself. A long-lasting pain is not one sensation over time but rather that sensation repeated over and over and over. For those with chronic pain, one might imagine familiarity leading to integration, that one gets habituated to it. The opposite is true; the recursive triggering of pain receptors increases sensitivity.[6] "Pain is not your friend, even if it's sitting there with you all day."[7]

"Affective call" is the qualitative feeling of pain which compels one to act in some way.[8]

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1 I use redness as an example, but qualia can range from the mundane sensation of sweetness to the more abstract example of joy.
2 Scarry, Elaine. The Body in Pain : The Making and Unmaking of the World.
(New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 35.
3 Encandela, John A. "Social Science and the Study of Pain since Zborowski: A Need for a New Agenda." Social Science & Medicine 36, no. 6 (March 1993): 783–91. doi:10.1016/0277-9536(93)90039-7
4 Leder, Drew. The Absent Body. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 71-73.
5 Ibid.
6 Latremoliere, Alban, and Clifford J. Woolf. "Synaptic Plasticity and Central Sensitization: Author Reply." The Journal of Pain 11, no. 8 (August 2010): 801–3. doi:10.1016/j.jpain.2010.06.006.
7 Brown, Connie. "Mind. Body. Action. The Ceramics of Virginia Leonard." Art New Zealand, January 2022.
8 Leder, The Absent Body. 71-73

The affective call is an instinct that can be dismissed or overcome if a person does not feel motivated to end the pain immediately. Leder's research does its best to describe the qualities of pain, but falls short of describing its effects.

"Sensory intensification" is the sudden and vivid awareness of the region in which you sense pain.[9] We are rarely conscious of our own movements or bodily functions. But we become conscious of the body when we experience pain. For the majority of our day to day life, we ignore the sensory existence of our bodies. Our "bodies are only marginally present, giving us the freedom to be and to act."[10] When living our daily lives, we rarely stop to engage with the material reality of our bodies. One doesn't imagine each muscle stretched taught just to hold a pencil. "Our bodies, in short, are[…] in a state of (continual) disappearance."[11] Without conscious awareness of our bodies one does not have to ponder the sensory experience of breathing or walking.

"This in turn suggests that bodies, at the most general level, become most conscious of themselves when they encounter 'resistance' or 'difficulties' of various kinds" — "it is particularly true of sick and painful bodies."[12] Pain makes awareness of the body unavoidable and urgent.

A study from 2010 shows that repeatedly triggering pain receptors makes your body more sensitive to pain, meaning that pain gets worse the more you feel it.[13] For individuals like me who suffer from chronic pain, pain comes more easily each time you experience it.

The ever-present and oppressive presence of pain is what makes it such a central part of life for those with chronic pain. When pain occupies a significant portion of your conscious time and reasserts itself constantly, your world begins to consist primarily of pain.

More than anything this constant presence of pain makes its communication via art all the more important. My sculptures like the many other people with chronic pain are perpetual in their suffering. By firing clay, by freezing it in time, I am able to show this temporality and affectiveness of pain.

> When my whole world is pain, there are times I sink my teeth around my wrist, holding it like a well-trained dog. Firm enough for the sensation to overwhelm the pain radiating from within, loose enough that I won't draw blood. Sometimes the only thing that can distract you from pain is new and different pain, so I leave indentations of teeth on the impressionable surface of my skin. It holds there for a while remembering the shape of it. Other times, I think of the image of the animal caught in a trap, gnawing off its own limb to escape. Chronic pain is the trap and it becomes tempting to bite a little deeper to escape it. Vrancken once described this urge, "Pain makes us believe that we can cut ourself off from the body."[14]
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> Journal Excerpt, Somn Martin.

9 Leder, The Absent Body. 71-73.
10 Bendelow, Gillian A., and Simon J. Williams. The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues. (0 ed. Routledge, 2002.) doi:10.4324/9780203025680
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Latremoliere and Woolf, "Synaptic Plasticity and Central Sensitization."
14 Vrancken, Mariet A.E. "Schools of Thought on Pain." Social Science & Medicine 29, no. 3 (January 1989): 435–44. doi:10.1016/0277-9536(89)90292-X.

Figure 1. Somn Martin, Dogtooth. 2023. Handbuilt stoneware, glaze.

Figure 2. Somn Martin, process documentation. 2024. Steel, clay, cotton cord, wood, ink.

Pain is Unseen

Occasionally, I draw shadows cast by my sculptures. Always extended long as if the sun is low on the horizon. Darkness tells us about its presence by the lack of photons of light sent to our eyes. Absolute darkness is a complete visual lack of information about our surroundings. We learn about the object casting a shadow from the absence it creates in light, thus the shadow is our failure to perceive the thing itself. The human mind imagines darkness as a thing which hides other things. To me, the thing which is hidden is pain.

I project cast shadows bigger than their origin, extending the space which they obscure, or in which things can be hidden. Pain within the body often feels larger than the body itself, all consuming and drowning out all other senses. I suggest the size of pain's impact by casting extended shadows larger than the sculptures themselves. The shadows communicate the nature of the forms which cast the shadows. When our brains interpret photons beamed into our eye, our vision does not understand a truth about an object so much as a perception. As in Plato's allegory of the cave we do not see an object, but rather interpret it.[15] We infer the object through its shadow. Here, the nature of the absence provides some understanding of the nature of the object.

15 Plato. The Republic. Trans. Henry Desmond Pritchard Lee. 2nd ed. (Penguin Classics. London ; New York: Penguin Books, 2003.) Plato's cave is that often referenced allegory, humans in a cave see shadows cast by the outside world and interpret them to imagine the outside world. The shadows are representative but not absolute, in the way our perception of the world is merely representative and not absolute.

Shadows exist within the body as well, medical x-ray images portray the body in shadow and light. There are dark cavities within our bodies. Much like how shadows are produced by the absence of light particles, x-rays map the absences created when radiation passes through the body. Where the radiation is obstructed by solidity in the body, the x-ray shows that shadow in negative. By looking for absence we find the breakage and injury to bone.

Pain is something similarly unseen to those who are not experiencing it. The body itself becomes the shadow which conceals pain. The interior of the body is submerged at all times in darkness, so there is a lack of information passed to the exterior. By externalizing pain in artform and shadow I am able to bring the invisible to light.

Does Pain Have Meaning?

The word 'pain' derives from the Latin poena, which is the precursor of, and translatable as, penalty and punishment.[16] Thus, the English conceptual understanding of the word pain is intrinsically linked to the idea of pain as being both causal and deserved. This belief appears in Christianity wherein pain and suffering are divinely imparted. From the idea of Jesus's penance on the cross to the belief that pain in childbirth was divine punishment inflicted as consequence for original sin, Christian philosophy assigns meaning to pain. Having been raised in Western Society this christian influence permeates my world. I have spent a long time learning to view my own pain not as a consequence to a mistake I made or as a cross which in bearing marks me as more noble. Similarly in the medical field, pain has traditionally been interpreted as the result of trauma. In this view, the only valid causes of pain are those which can be solved or found via medical intervention.

> There are times where I identify with the dog in the shock collar. Every moment in my body is a moment where I am anticipating pain. If I move my muscles there might be a pain that tells me not to. Like someone clicked a buzzer to get me to stop. Sometimes I can guess which actions, which movements will cause the collar to shock, sometimes they seem like random error. I know that pain isn't a conducive motivator. Negative reinforcement is far less effective than positive reinforcement. My body does not know that. The pain never stops me from doing the wrong thing, only punishes it. The damage is done and the pain simply lets me know I am at fault. My most frequent companion in pain is carpal tunnel syndrome, a pain that only starts when the damage is almost too far gone to stop. I can mitigate the motions and actions which cause pain, but I can't go back to a painless existence.
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> Journal Excerpt, Somn Martin.

It was explained to me as a young child that pain exists to inform us about something wrong within the body. In this rudimentary view, pain exists solely as a warning. However, pain is our interpretation of information sent by our nervous system, and sometimes our nervous systems send false positives, and other times our minds misinterpret nerve signals as pain.[17] Consequently, pain is not always the direct result of

16 Duncan, Grant. "The Meanings of 'Pain' in Historical, Social, and Political Context." The Monist 100, no. 4 (October 2017): 514–31. doi:10.1093/monist/onx026.

17 Cleveland Clinic. "Neuropathic Pain: What It Is & Ways To Manage It." Accessed October 8, 2024. https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/15833-neuropathic-pain.

something being wrong within the body, though it is sometimes a symptom. In technical terms, this pain without cause and therefore without meaning is called idiopathic. If pain can have no cause, and if we reject it as a form of punishment or penance then it stands to reason that there is no reason for the experience of pain. By reconciling the existence of idiopathic pain we are made to face the arbitrary nature of all pain.

Because of my Mexican ancestry, linguistically I turn not just to English writing and art on pain but to my second language of Spanish as well. In Spanish, the word pain translates to 'dolor.' Its proto-indo european root 'delh' means 'to split'.[18] In Spanish, pain cleaves your body. Is it then any wonder that when Latin-American authors and artists speak of pain they speak to its anguish and lasting impact?

In Spanish, María Luisa Puga describes pain as "desazón, incomodidad, posturas imposibles." [unease, discomfort, impossible postures][19] My understanding of pain is shaped by the pain of Frida Kahlo, her pain, her 'dolor' from chronic illness and intermittent surgeries shaped her understanding of her body and pain. Her surrealist approach understands pain as something phenomenological and unreal which must be communicated through visual metaphor.

In Kahlo's painting, The Broken Column, she paints her fractured spine as a greek column seen through a cavity in her chest and held straight by the bindings of a medical corset.[20] To say a spine is broken and immobilized is nothing to the visceral comparison to solid stone which when cracked is irreparable.

If pain is an arbitrary and meaningless phenomenon then my art represents it as such. The figures I create have no past to atone for through pain, and the transformations they undergo are fantastical and unreal. Like imagining horses pulling the sun across the sky, the cause of my figures pain is unreal. Roots and growths consume them, their bodies are hollowed out, and they fracture as solid objects. There is a nihilistic absurdity to their suffering that reflects my own feelings about pain.

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18 Meier-Brügger, Michael. Indo-European Linguistics. Trans. Charles Gertmenian. (Walter de Gruyter, 2013.)
19 Puga, Diario del dolor, 1.
20 Kahlo, Frida. La Columna Rota. [The Broken Column]. 1944. Oil on masonite, 39.8 cm × 30.6 cm (15.7 in × 12.0 in).

Contradictions Within Pain

Pain is a constantly contradictory phenomena. It seems to be psychological, then physical, then cultural, and then individual. It is only in viewing pain outside of these strict classifications and observing the ways it defies them that one can begin to understand how pain functions.

It is comforting to me to have pain be so contradictory. Most things in life seem to be more complex, and better understood for their contradictions. It is even embedded in my self identity. My culture is one of diaspora; I am both of the places I trace my heritage to, and not. Individuals native to Mexico or New Zealand, the places where my grandparents were raised, would categorically identify me as an outsider. Yet I maintain traditions which mark me as other in the United States, the place I was born. Being diaspora means identifying the futility of borders in land or identity. Just as I may exist outside simple categories of nationhood and ethnicity, so too must pain be understood outside of the categories so often assigned to it.

I think about the Newtonian understanding of space and object as binary, and the idea of surface as the boundary which divides the two. But heat passes through skin to create warmth, and light passes through the eye. "Life occurs not on top of surfaces but emanant and stitched into them, and surfaces are thus where 'substances are binding with the medium"[1]

The contradictory nature of pain is reflected back to me in the tension and lack of true understanding of pain. And it is this tension that I try to bring to light through contrasting features of materiality and texture in my work.

Dualism in the Body

One well-observed and discussed binary within philosophy is mind-body dualism, but the body is full of contradictory dyads. The condensed form of this problem is whether the self exists as the mind, the body, or both. Descartes insisted that because his consciousness was responsible for thought, it was the true self, whereas his body was a vessel that he inhabited and lived in conjunction with.[2] This separation between mind and body is inherently contradicted by our current understanding of how hormones and chemicals influence the brain. How can our thoughts both be intrinsic to something separate from the body and also highly affected by these traceable elements that we can manipulate by use of medication?

1 Anusas, Mike, and Cristián Simonetti, eds. Surfaces: Transformations of Body, Materials and Earth. (Routledge Studies in Anthropology. London ; New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.)

2 Descartes, René. Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies: A Latin-English Edition. (Edited by John Cottingham. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.)

Part of what makes pain such an interesting topic is the way that it reinforces binary thinking while simultaneously existing as evidence against it. If the body and the self are one, then you are the thing which is creating pain in yourself, this is anathema to our self identities. Surely if we had agency in the matter, we would simply stop causing ourselves pain? In response, we cast the body out from self-identification in order to make it the perpetrator of our pain. Pain researcher Vrancken said, "through the unpleasantness of pain, the body and 'I' instantly seem to have parted company. For the sake of the integrity of our personality we make an 'it' of the body and an abstraction of the pain."[3] Ergo, experiencing pain reinforces the view of the body as outside the self.

In some ways this division can be helpful. If the mind and body are considered separate then we can quarantine the pain to our body, and live only in our minds. It doesn't always work, some pain is so resistant and unpleasant; it's affective call so strong, that there is no room to think of anything but it. But the more minor and constant pains can be made to disappear the same way the body disappears. I can focus extremely well on certain things. As a child I would read for hours without noticing time passing, or thirst, or other proprioceptive sensations that bring awareness to the body. But in many ways this is my best pain killer. When I concentrate very very hard, I stop feeling my body. The artist Ibrahim El-Salahi speaks to this phenomenon with regards to a practice he started after developing chronic sciatica. His 'pain relief' drawings are so effective that "when [he] works [he] feels no pain at all."[4]

Similarly sculpting and carving clay brings my mind out of my body and lets it focus solely on the feeling and intent as I shape figures. I can excise my own pain by cutting into the clay. I am enacting a ritual form of trauma which alieves my own suffering. It is a relief that this work is not something pain can take away at its own whims, but rather something that offers me refuge. Still, this focus is a double edged sword.

> In the first few years after I developed carpal tunnel syndrome, I ended up making a large sculpture from chicken wire. I would find myself in the studio for hours at a time, cutting wires and twisting them back together. It turns out, the action of cutting or pinching pliers is one of the worst for aggravating my pain. I would enter the studio and work relentlessly blotting out the subtle aches and pains in my hands until they were altogether too present for me to ignore. The sculpture was completed in the end, but I ended up in braces and unable to grip tools, draw or write for the next month. When someone describes pain as vice-like, I think of the sharp pain between my index finger and thumb as my grip fails.
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> Journal Excerpt, Somn Martin.

Beyond the conflict of the mind and body, there is also the duality of interior vs. exterior, and subject vs object, the hardness of bone vs. the malleability of flesh.

3 Vrancken, "Schools of Thought on Pain."

4 McNay, Anna. "Ibrahim El-Salahi – Interview: 'Drawing for Me Is a Kind of Meditation.'" October 8, 2024. https://www.studiointernational.com/ibrahim-el-salahi-interview-drawing-for-me-is-a-kind-of-meditation

The Abject

In order to interpret these disruptions to the dualities of mind/body and self/object, they can be examined through the lenses of the theory of liminality, and abject theory. The theory of liminality, developed by Victor Turner and Arnold Van Gennep, describes the transformation from one thing to another.[5] They describe the process of going from separation to margin to aggregation—here, the margin is defined as the point at which something is both and neither.

The abject as explained by Julia Kristeva is all those things which problematize dichotomy and more. The abject describes those things which "disturb identity, system, and order. What does not respect borders, positions, or rules," they are things we find inherently disgusting or upsetting.[6] Pain renders the body abject by confronting the dichotomy between body and mind. In order to rationalize pain we cannot accept that it comes from ourselves, but in positioning pain as an other, we position the body in that space as well. It is in the abject threshold between self and other where I make my art.

The abject is that which we recognize as part of us but reject as not being us. For example, the way fecal matter passes through the body without being recognized as being part of it challenges the idea of the body as an impermeable object coated in skin-surface. Our sweat, excreted through pores, shows that the skin is more threshold than surface. "Terrestrial organisms gather their surrounds into themselves and then, in exhaling and defecating, organisms expend part of themselves back into their environment.
Thus, to consider surfaces as zones of growing over and becoming is not only a conceptual perspective but a metabolic condition."[7] The failure of the duality of interior/exterior of an object in space, or more specifically human skin as the boundary of the body links with the psychological duality of subject/object and its failures as represented by the abject theory of Julia Kristeva.

Even this view of the human body as a singular entity separate from the world fails at closer inspection. Reducing our bodies to organisms illustrates a failure to even maintain our identities as singular consciousnesses. Our gut biome contains a multitude of bacteria each their own separate and self-sustaining organism living in symbiosis with our bodies. On average "[t]here are roughly 40 trillion bacterial cells in your body and only 30 trillion human cells."[8] Our makeup as an organism is mostly composed of other organisms. Without them our bodies would struggle to process food, fight diseases and maintain the nutrients needed to survive. If removing the microbes causes the overall system to fail, they must be considered an integral part of the body and ourselves. Therein we are mostly composed of those things we would typically consider as other.

I identify with the abject because so much of my lived body is tied to abject modes of existence. I spend my life in the threshold spaces and grey areas of dualities because they describe my own experiences better than the restriction of binary conceptions.

To depict the abject is to attempt to describe otherness, to point out our resemblance to that which disturbs us and to ask us to consider our reaction to it.

5 Turner, Victor W. The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. Symbol, Myth, and Ritual Series. (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1977.)
6 Kristeva, Julia. Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. European Perspectives. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024.
7 Anusas and Simonetti, Surfaces.
8 Greshko, Michael. "How Many Cells Are in the Human Body—And How Many Microbes?" Science, January 13, 2016. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/160111-microbiome-estimate-count-ratio-human-health-science.

In art, the body and the abject often come up in the context of the grotesque. From the metamorphic sculpture of greek and roman grottos where the word gains its source, to the exaggeration of features in caricature, the grotesque is itself an art form about transformation or transgression.[9] The grotesque depicts exaggerated bodies or transformations between human and other.

My art also engages in this anatomical excess by exaggeration. I pull the viewer's eyes to the sharp edge of muscle under skin, the protrusion of bone or tooth through soft flesh.

I depict bodies mid-transformation, caught between being human and other in the way that pain challenges the link between the self and the body.

Figure 3. Somn Martin, Fossil. 2024. Handbuilt stoneware, glaze.

This grotesque transformation between forms harkens back to fairy tales and magical realism. In stories, social or physical transgressions are a form of magic, enacted to break rules and disrupt order. "Magic has always, in one way or another, been associated with otherness. The supernatural elements inherent in magic, whether held to be genuinely present or the effects of trickery, are different, secret, frightening and uncanny: this is the essence of magic. The otherness of magic accounts for both its attraction and its repulsion, for there is power in being able to access realms beyond our immediate reality."[10]

9 Connelly, Frances S., ed. Modern Art and the Grotesque. (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.) 1-11
10 Warnes, Christopher, and Kim Anderson Sasser, eds. Magical Realism and Literature. (1st ed. Cambridge University Press, 2020.) doi:10.1017/9781108551601.

Pain as the Marvelous Real

Magical realism is a fascination with the innate mystery of the world and a blending between the phenomenological experience and the empirical 'reality'. For latin american writers it has long represented a 'mestizaje' or blending of knowledge systems. 'Mestizo' is the word used for those descendants of mixed heritage, born to both indigenous native americans and the hispanic colonizers who had come to the continent and so greatly changed it. The Latin American tradition of magical realism works by recognizing the tension of the contradicting knowledge systems provided by both cultures, it "allows for antithetical aspects of lived experience to appear together (spatially and temporally)."[11]

"In a text where categories between the real and the magical have already been broken down, allowing for more than one version of truth to be proposed, the use of such storytelling techniques which assume that there are multiple versions of a story, emphasizes the possibility of expressing multiple perspectives in the text."[12]

A work of magical realism understands reality as a constantly shifting thing, affected by an individual's experience. It depicts an individual reality by using fantastical elements and exaggeration and introducing them as normal facets of their world. In this way, depicting the experience of embodied pain is a form of magical realism. I seek to make external the internal reality.

The cast shadows of my figures come back into play here, shadows are after all, frequent subjects in folklore. They appear as the shadow of a beast looming large or ghosts depicted as shades. More importantly, shadows frequently assert that which is fantasy or illusion and that which is not. Superstition tells one to check for reflections or cast shadows before trusting strangers. Like the story of Peter Schlemihl, whose lost shadow casts him from reality, shadows ground an object in reality.[13] Similarly, in painting, cast shadows are used to give painted objects a three dimensional illusion. "The shadow cast by an object on the ground on which it rests immediately enhances the impression of its solidity."[14] The shadows cast by my art assert that they are real, that my pain is real, and that the viewer's pain is real.

Pain turns sufferers into queer strangers. In Western culture, it is considered more polite to keep one's pain to oneself, to cry in private, or to remain at home if moving through the world is difficult or painful. Someone who suffers chronic pain is unfamiliar to most, and as such is 'not like them' but also someone they fear they could easily become. To say pain is abject, is to say those who suffer chronic pain are abject, and to be abject is to be mistrusted by society.

11 Gee, Felicity. "Magic Realism, World Cinema, and the Avant-Garde," January 1, 2021. (https://www.academia.edu/76947157/Magic_Realism_World_Cinema_and_the_Avant_Garde.) 4

12 Bowers, Maggie Ann. Magic(al) Realism. (The New Critical Idiom. London ; New York: Routledge, 2004.) 85

13 Chamisso, Adelbert von. "Peter Schlemihl." Translated by John Bowring. Project Gutenberg, 2007. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21943/21943-h/21943-h.htm.

14 Gombrich, E. H., Neil MacGregor, and Nicholas Penny. Shadows: The Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western Art. (New edition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.) 37

Figure 4. Somn Martin, The body rooted. 2023. Handbuilt stoneware, glaze, charcoal.

Embodied Experience in Art

Fig. 5 Somn Martin, Like Pulling Teeth. 2024. Handbuilt stoneware, glaze, cotton cord, steel.

I reimagine my pain as a physical object. My own experiences with carpal tunnel manifests into sharp angles and gross manipulations of the human form. I carve the hand from soft clay into a rigid tense and bodily object. Flesh to broken glass. Muscles strain as sharp joints grow out of the carved out flesh. My sculpture asks the viewer to reflect upon the nature of their own body and their own experiences with pain and discomfort in it.

Journal Excerpt, Somn Martin.

Fragility

In her essay Guts, Julia Armfield states: “To watch a horror movie is to know something bad is going to happen. To have a body is really the same thing.”

> *[A]t any moment the clay could be washed from the surface of the paper to leave nothing but a stain, clay has flaked from the images. The body is in a state of flux, balancing, falling, precarious, the images are ambiguous and in some cases almost obliterated.*[1]

Our bodies exist in a constant state of decay. Our cells hold a finite lifespan, and even the most lasting parts of our bodies that remain after our deaths decay in our lifetimes. The enamel of your teeth is being eroded, your bones can be broken, your hair is shed. Our teeth, bones, and hair might long survive us but they do not survive the trauma of life untouched. A body is composed of things which can be broken. This is a shared characteristic between the body and clay.

Clay is a precarious medium, a sculpture must not be allowed to dry out before finishing, must hold its own weight at the most fragile stages of the project, must be built hollow or risk shattering explosively in the kiln. As the clay dries it carries a memory inside itself, molecules remember the structures it once held and recent change. The clay can only be worked so hard before it must be reformed entirely. Cracks form where gravity pulls at joins, weakening structure over time. Bone dry clay is immensely fragile, easy to shatter, begging to be broken. Teetering on the brink of destruction. When fired, smooth clay resembles bone, hard and delicate. It represents a contradiction, harder and stronger for its firing, it remains a fragile breakable object.

One day, after installing a work in an exterior glass box, heavy winds seeped in through the cracks of the glass display and managed to pull the wood board backing off the wall. The board fell forward pushing two ceramic figures off their plinths and onto the concrete ground. One managed to survive with only small breaks, the other was shattered into dismembered fragments. It seemed fitting that the figures undergo trauma, and that one might not survive in its original form. I consider the fragility of clay of immense material importance to the meaning of my work, it is the constant threat of breakage which mimics the tenuous health of the human body. While I see this in my practice with the many sculptures which do not survive to make it to the kiln, it is apt that the viewer also be able to see this fragility.

For the remaining week and a half of the installation I repaired the fallen backing, repositioned the plinths and placed the mostly unharmed figure back in its place. The broken fragments of the other statue were arranged around and on the remaining plinth, appearing to have simply fractured in place and collapsed. Its shadow remained present in spite of lacking a source. I hoard these broken pieces and use them in my art as what they represent, the fragility of the body made real.

Journal Excerpt, Somn Martin.

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1 Dahn, Jo. New Directions in Ceramics: From Spectacle to Trace. (London ; New York: Bloomsbury; Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015.)

When I form bodies out of clay and they break, they never fully recover. There is no way to reattach or reform the broken clay in a way that returns it to its previous state. The molecules of the clay remember the abrupt edges of the break. Like the human body wet clay can be moved in some ways but similarly movement in more hardened states causes weakness. Like an overworked joint, movement can cause breakage.

When clay breaks I am frustrated and angry and resigned. It is never surprising. When my body is in pain I feel the same way. I have done my best to prevent this outcome but it will happen regardless of my intent. I will try over and over again, and it will never stop happening.

Captured in the middle of metamorphosis, The Body Rooted is placed on the boundary of life and death, human and inhuman, subject and object. I highlight the stillness, a petrification of mobile mutable forms. I ask the viewer to embody that feeling. The spines evoke the process of ankylosis, the fusion of bone to bone during end stage rheumatoid arthritis, as well as rigor mortis, that final cessation of motion in the body.

Figure 6. Somn Martin, The Body Rooted. 2023. Handbuilt stoneware, glaze.

Stillness is unnatural and painful for the body, but it's also inevitable.

My works ask the viewer to become conscious of the inevitable decline and loss of motion that their own body will have in death. By considering these stagnant forms in their cramped postures viewers can see bodies that are stalled to immobility. That their corpse too will exist outside themselves without reference to their interior experience, no longer able to exert its will upon the world but subject instead to the impersonal decay of time and nature. That this decay may start even while they still possess control of their body.
The slow loss of mobility inherent to rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's and other degenerative diseases so common to the human condition. The body is consumed by its fragility in this work.

Tension

Pain and tension come hand in hand. The two are inescapably cyclical, chasing each other's tails. Often, I wake up finding I have cut the interior of my cheeks on my teeth and my jaw muscles have tightened over night. Or maybe my jaw muscles have tightened overnight causing me to bite my cheek. The two are so intertwined the causality is unclear.

Pain and tension have become synonymous to me. As I ache from tension headaches, the pain of muscles straining, and the tightening of muscles in response to pain, the two are so intertwined as to become the same. When I make my sculptures with firm edges, defined muscular protrusions I am recalling this tension. These bodies are tensed in response to pain. These bodies are in pain from their tensed muscles.

Tension is an interior experience. When we describe it, we describe that which is below our skin, moving with our will and without. To feel tension is to become aware of the complex interior of our bodies, the feelings which happen under skin only visible in their effects on our skin. We can know the interior of our body in theory through anatomical diagrams, surgical photos, and corpses. There is a dissonance between the body and its abstract depiction; they are abject examples of what lies inside us. Most people don't see their own interiors, if you see your own bone and muscle something has gone horribly wrong. As is, most people imagine their own interior when experiencing interior sensation. There is something fantastical and imaginary beneath our skins which creates these feelings. Sometimes it feels as though there is something foreign and unwelcome acting below the surface. Pain inhabits an interior and imaginary space that more closely resembles a fairytale monster in the shadows than the truth of bodily dysfunction.

But, my work is not just the sculptural figures, it is also their interaction with space, nature and structure around them. A body is not unaffected by its environment, its place within a space can relieve or aggravate pain. Gravity, and the way it presses our bodies down against a surface is a cause of musculo-skeletal pain. My figures are pressed against surfaces, this weight of gravity is an important element to creating tension in my work.

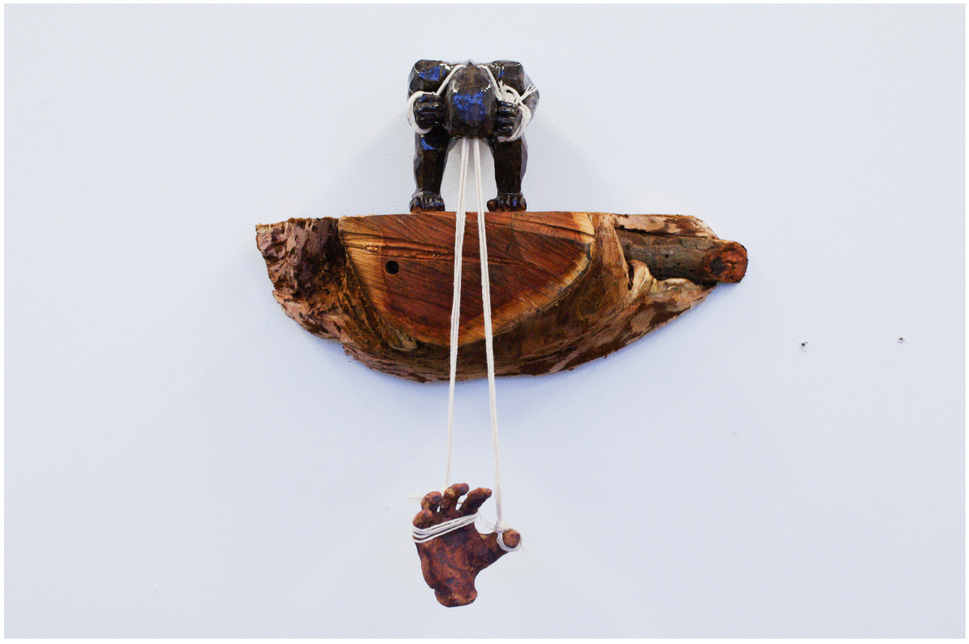

Fig. 7 Somn Martin. Grip and Tension. 2024. Handbuilt stoneware, glaze, iron oxide, wood, cotton.

Materiality

I burnt paper, wood and clay, in a metal drum in the rain. I watched the paper shrink and crumple, cringing into itself. The wood hidden below smoldered, flame licked black marks into its flesh. In the end, not fully burnt to ash, the wood had hidden fire inside itself, warm to the touch and liable to combust anew. I gently immersed those embers into puddles of water, freezing it in its process of decay. The clay is unharmed by fire, but not unmarked or unchanged. Smoke curls into the surface of red/orange clay leaving sooty marks.

This is how it is to have a body. To have muscles cramp and tense, turning your body into a small many-edged thing. To have flesh marred by experience, sun, and time, and to have pain fester invisible inside you.

Journal Excerpt, Somn Martin.

Clay is Emblematic of the Body

It's important that the materials I use are mutable. I can change the shape of wet clay by pressing my fingers into it or by carving out shapes. The metal I use is cut, grinded, and welded into new shapes, the wood is carved, burnt, and chiseled, the cord is twined and knotted and pulled taut. Like these materials, the human body is in constant motion. Our blood is circulating, our heart muscles pulsating and our lungs expanding and contracting. We decay from the day of our birth to long after our death, shedding skin and hair. Our bodies create new cells constantly, our nails, hair and height grow over time. By processing materials with heat and pressure, by sculpting and carving them I can mimic the lived experience of our bodies weathered by time and experience.

Fig. 7. Somn Martin. Detail of Untitled Work. 2024. Handbuilt stoneware, glaze, steel.

Heat is an expression of change and energy, it is entropy made real. Heat is the process by which most of my materials change. It is not gentle or soft, it is liable to break or melt clay or metal, but it metamorphosizes the stagnant or inert material into something which has lived.

One of the most important qualities I look for in material is malleability accompanied by hard and soft dynamics under different conditions. In this way clay and metal have the ability at certain temperatures to become fluid and malleable. These materials, like the body, are mutable to a point; if pushed too far, if exposed to certain temperatures, they will break.

Like the artists Louise Bourgeois and Eduardo Chillida, I find the hard qualities of metal compelling. I let my metal structures rust, dangerous to the flesh, subject to the weathering of nature. I use metal, as a living thing that changes with oxidation, as something sharp and dangerous, as a cold contrast to living flesh. There is tension between the soft body and the sharp, cold metal which causes pain.

Wood and cotton stand out among the materials I use as the only truly organic materials, but the plant matter I use is no longer alive. I am using its imbued power to give my figures qualities of life and growth.

I am able to transfer this quality of 'once alive now dead' so that viewers can comprehend the inert clay as also having once lived.

The materials I use are either found in nature or shaped by individual human hands, their surfaces absorbing human touch and changing in reaction to it. Similarly my body changes in reaction to these materials. My fingerprints are captured in clay, my fingers cut by the too sharp tools I use to cut. When I pull the string taught it aches in my finger joints, I have stained my hands with rust and oxide more times than I can count. The lines become blurred between my body and the materials, the thing causing pain and the thing experiencing it.

Fig. 8. Isamu Noguchi, From Mud Mountain, 1967. Basalt. 10 5/8 x 33 1/2 x 20 in. (27 x 85.1 x 50.8 cm) Collection of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00636. Photo: Kevin Noble. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society [ARS]

My work references the sculptures of Isamu Noguchi, and Constantin Brancusi. Where Brancusi and Noguchi have contemplated and problematized the plinth as a structure, I follow in their footsteps. I reject the boxy white plinth considered the norm in most galleries. My works do not float in an imagined nothingness, but rather they hold weight via their interactions with the surfaces below them. They require more height than they possess, most being less than 10 centimeters tall, and their detail warrants a closer and more intimate look than may be had by simply placing them on the floor. I bring them closer to eye level with careful consideration. Metal structures like tables copy the way gravity pulls the body through its points of contact with a surface. They rest on taught wrapped string or cracked wood. Where string wraps around the rectangular surface of these structures, they resemble cots or bandages gently holding these bodies in place with the tension imbued in their strands.

Art creates memetic echoes of creation which a viewer uses to create meaning. The movement and violence of a brushstroke, the drip of ink, the flash capturing traces of light. When I touch a piece of clay I leave an imprint in it, the molecules remember my touch. In between clay and hand is the threshold where I create meaning, like some old god forming creatures out of earth. I echo the myths of Enki, Prometheus, Knüm and Nüwa.[2] The way humans have traced a kinship to clay and linked it to the idea of the creation of life.

The first organic traces of life formed on lattice structures of clay, the in-between of clay and the right molecules pressed together to form the first trace of RNA. Some of the oldest traces of human touch are fingerprints pressed into bodies of clay. Clay can act as a medium through which time and touch are recorded. Shaping clay is life-giving. Someone new feeling the arches and curves of my work can feel my touch as well. Beyond that, they can feel my pain.

> When I cut through wet clay the cut glides open. The clay welcomes the knife. This clay is so malleable so impressionable I can only shape it loosely. I cut a block into a body. I loosely trace the shape of a rib cage and a pelvic bone. And then the clay sits and shrinks for a day or so with cling wrap tucked carefully around it to slow its drying. And then I start again refining cuts and edges so the shape gains a humanoid form. I am looking to capture a moment between realism and shape where the viewer feels the curves and bumps of muscle and bone under flesh. The hip bone does not jut out so strongly but the haptic sensation of movement, the feeling of my fingertips on my own hip bone feel brought to life by its exaggeration. Drier and drier the body solidifies until I can only scrape the surface of its skin. Then, it is ready to be fired.
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> Journal Excerpt, Somn Martin.

2 Lambert, W. G., ed. Babylonian Creation Myths. Mesopotamian Civilizations 16. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013.; Martin, Richard. Classical Mythology: The Basics. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2022. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003221241.; Pinch, Geraldine. Egyptian Myth: A Very Short Introduction. Very Short Introduction 106. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.; Tian, Zhaoyuan, Shuxian Ye, and Hang Qian. Myths of the Creation of Chinese. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5928-0.;

Psychologist Betty-Marie Jaroch observes this phenomena when studying the relationship between artists and clay, “It has been suggested that if sensations that preserve memories are recaptured, they have the power to embody the self that lived them… this archetypal, alchemical process, which turns experience into objects and objects into experience.”[3] I seek to utilize this connection in my work as it has been utilized in the work of countless ceramic artists before me. “It is often said that when we handle ancient ceramics… the experience connects us to past makers and users. On a fundamental level, when we touch what others have touched across the centuries we feel a particular sense of continuity, as if the artefact itself embodies and conveys a haptic memory.”[4] If my clay captures my sensory memory of making, can it also capture the pain I feel?

“Working with clay… It integrates the self, creating awareness of a limiting skin membrane and of a limitless relationship with the surrounding world.”[5] The haptic feedback of handling clay renders ones touch visible and tactile. Pushing a finger into wet clay makes you aware of the feeling of clay on skin, the weight of your push, the give of the clay. When I work with clay, my body and I are unified.

Both ceramics and the human body share a contrasting sense of mutability and fragility. Wet clay resembles flesh, it can be pushed and pulled to a breaking point, it is heavy and soft, and it heals from small wounds. It depicts the same flesh that makes it.

Clay has a point of no return. Once fired it can never be brought back. You can reuse it, give fresh clay a grittier texture and stronger base by incorporating fine granules. But it hits a point of irreconcilability at a certain temperature.

My work is made of stoneware, a word for clay that has been fired and hardened at high temperatures, my work gestures towards petrification and fossilized wood.

The Body Latine

I grew up Latin American, I grew up with terracotta and stone bodies, and I grew up with a Mexican understanding of the body shaped by history and art. I understand embodied pain through this cultural lens.

My bodies are bodies in pain and I have always connected the depiction of suffering bodies to the artwork of Frida Kahlo. Her surrealist works emphasize metaphoric images that correlate bodily pain to the world at large. Her pain becomes our discomfort, even if we can’t understand her specific experience we can empathize with the wounds she imagines across her body as sources for her pain.

In her work The Broken Column she paints her fractured spine as a greek column seen through a cavity in her chest and held straight by the bindings of a medical corset. To say a spine is broken and immobilized is nothing to the visceral comparison to solid stone which when cracked is irreparable.

3 Jaroch, Betty-Marie. “The Dialogue between the Artist and the Clay: A Heuristic Study of Self -Transformation.” Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, 2009. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/dialogue-between-artist-clay-heuristic-study-self/docview/305102087/se-2.

4 Dahn, New Directions in Ceramics.

5 Jaroch, “The Dialogue between the Artist and the Clay: A Heuristic Study of Self -Transformation.”

Similar to Kahlo, I seek an uncomfortable comparison. How do I make clear the severity of my pain to an audience? I draw lines between the things we imagine as soft(the body in its flesh) and the things we imagine as painful (sharp lines, tension, growths).

I can trace the lineage of pre-hispanic ceramics in my work, the softness of bodies like clay, the hardness of carved stone. Stone figures are grounded, squared and chiseled. Clay becomes compressed, hard but with contrasting soft edges. The clay typically used in Central American ceramics is a warm light brown when fired. It resembles skin and dirt and the landscape it was made within. Clay figures are frequently depicted as unclothed, not because the subjects were not wearing clothes but because the clay is representative of the body and its skin boundary.[6] Figurines are one of the longest existing art forms. From the neolithic period to now they have shaped and been shaped by humanities cultural understanding of the body.[7]

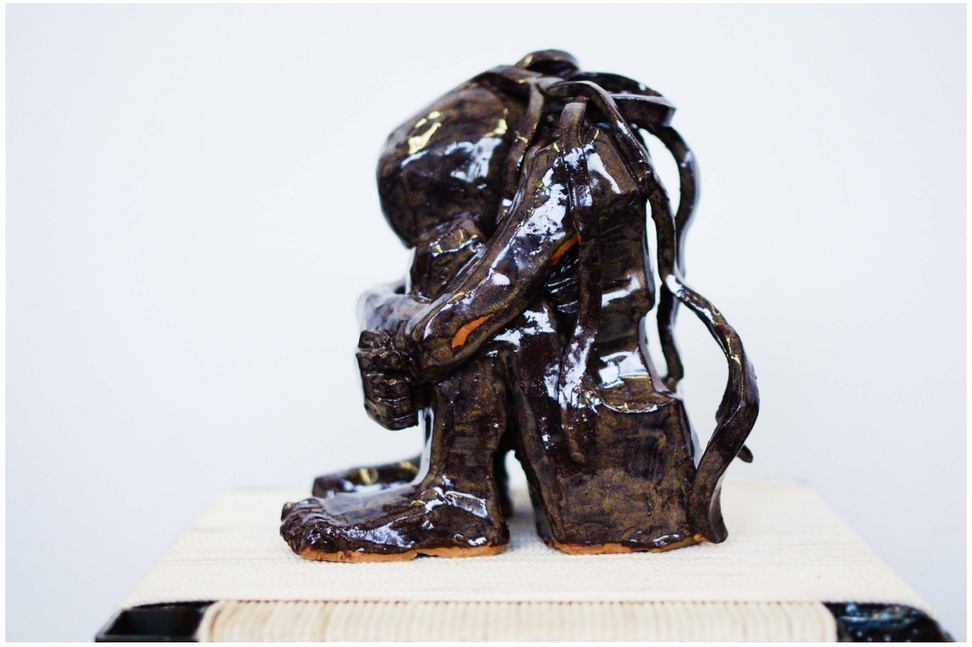

Fig. 9. Somn Martin, Enfold. 2024. Handbuilt stoneware, glaze.

6 Joyce, Rosemary A. “Performing the Body in Pre-Hispanic Central America.” Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics 33 (March 1998): 147–65. https://doi.org/10.1086/RESv33n1ms20167006.

7 Bailey, Doug. “Touch and the Cheirotic Apprehension of Prehistoric Figurines.” Sculpture and Touch, 2017, 27. https://www.academia.edu/7064494/Touch_and_the_cheirotic_apprehension_of_prehistoric_figurines_2014_.

The Body as Land

Like me, other artists with Mexican heritage have long referenced the aesthetics of pre-Hispanic art. Rufino Tamayo, who worked briefly in the Museo Nacional de antropología, and owned a collection of pre-hispanic art pieces for inspiration in his own work (now housed in his self-named museum in Oaxaca, Mexico) is undeniably influenced by pre-Columbian art. The soft red browns of the figures of his paintings and their somatic round shapes demonstrate this influence. Diego Rivera's works also seem to reference the soft rounded shapes of ceramics from that period. His bodies sit in two-dimensional space like sculptural objects, blocky and solid.

My figures reference these bodies, with strong shapes and sharp yet rounded edges.

The stress memory of clay as it is manipulated is the stress memory of my body through repeated injuries just as much as it is the stress memory of the earth being moved and changed by outside forces.

In my work, the figure becomes a stand-in for the ways the shape of the body is carved into earth. The clay I use has been excavated from the earth, carved out as a piece of the whole land. Clay constitutes around 16% of the total volume of material that makes up the earth's surface.[8] When I work with clay, I work with the understanding that I am using the surface of the land I live on. The clay which constitutes the land gave us our flesh and I return to the clay when I form ceramics. In the way that pre-hispanic artists intimate the sameness of earth and body, I present my figures; they are living bodies because they are made from the land.

I reach for these relationships between land and body, the revitalization of connection to land through ancestry that are present in the Mexicayotl movement.[9]

A body is also made of the land, this is also the belief of others like me. Diego Rivera once painted bodies carving up pieces of the earth with their hands, earth the same color as their bodies. This palette of reddish brown, so commonly used by the mexican muralists referenced the rusty volcanic soil of Mexico as easily as it did the skin tone of native people. There is a biological connection between this color and the body, as Colombian artist Delcy Morelos states, "what makes blood red is iron, and what makes the earth red is the iron that the Earth has."[10] Her work compels the viewer to understand it through the body and its senses, and beyond that to form a connection between their own body and the earth. "The importance of understanding this profound relationship we all have with the Earth, and with soil, is that there is no separation between interior and exterior. That soil is me, I am it."[11]

8 Al Ani, Thair and Sarapää, Olli, "Clay and Clay Mineralogy."

9 This movement has grown into the contemporary movement of 'mexicanidad' It's a reclamation of native tradition and a quest towards a national identity based in more than Mexico's colonial roots.

10 Collins-Fernandez, Gaby. "Delcy Morelos with Gaby Collins-Fernández | The Brooklyn Rail," July 29, 2024. https://brooklynrail.org/2024/03/art/Delcy-Morelos-with-Gaby-Collins-Fernndez/.

11 Ibid.

Coda

The task of art making for me is one of expressing the inexpressible. How do I communicate my embodied experience of pain to others? My pain is an individual phenomena, a unique sensory experience only I can truly know. With my artwork I capture some of the particular qualities of pain. I portray its unusual intensity and chronology through my frozen agonized figures, its invisible yet persistent nature through shadows, its absurd contradictions through material tensions and exaggerations. I capture the way it divides our sense of self from our own bodies through abject and fantastical imagery. By knitting together the unique qualities of pain with the material, visual, and haptic elements of my work I convey my own experience of pain.

I will never know if I have truly communicated my experience, but by attempting, I become closer to sublimating my pain. And beyond myself, the communication of my experience of pain can serve others. In doing so, my art functions as a balm to those whose pain makes them feel isolated. My art acts to affirm pain as real.

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