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Wound-Dwelling: Empowerment through Masochistic Experiences

By Nizlyn



Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts
Lesley University College of Art and Design
Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA
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- I. Title Page
 - II. **Abstract:** The psychoanalytic concept of the Skin Ego Theory describes the skin as a passage for pain and pleasure to travel through. Remnants of external experiences as well as internal struggles affect the penetrable barrier of the somatic wrapping and leave inscriptions on the flesh. Through my work, I have been exploring the skin's ability to protect, envelope, and inscribe meaning through my papercuts, oil paintings, and clay sculptures. I procure the marks on my body through kink and BDSM, which then influence the work. Though my bruises may fade with time, my skin becomes tougher. By recontextualizing Skin Ego Theory to fit my studio practice, I have been able to rationalize consensual pain as a way of giving me back my agency when I feel a lack of control over medically-induced pain. The skin contains a living memory - an echo of past experiences. These masochistic means of both play and process drive my artmaking practice and my understanding of the body.
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(Figure 1), Nizlyn, *Bruise on Thigh: Reference Picture*, 2017



(Figure 2) Nizlyn, *Elephant Thigh*, 2019, oil paint on panel

I. Skin Ego, a Psychoanalytic Theory

Soothing, seething, our skin is a pervious barrier, capable of letting the exterior world affect our interiors. Over the course of this project, I have been exploring the skin's ability to protect, envelope, and inscribe meaning through my papercutting, oil painting, and clay sculpting. I procure the marks on my body through kink and BDSM¹ (Fig 1), which then influence the work (Fig 2). Though my bruises and hickies may fade with time, my skin becomes tougher in those areas. The skin contains a living memory - an echo of past experiences. These masochistic means of both play and process drive my artmaking practice and my understanding of the body. It lets in the hurt, the pain, the intimate gestures, the embraces, and all the challenges of living. These remnants stay with us and are absorbed into our skin and psyche. Our calluses show our endurance; bruises show the body's ability to heal. A hickey captures the memory of an embrace or intimate night. Some of these marks and inflictions on the skin are more permanent than others, yet their memories still remain.

In post-Freudian psychoanalysis, the Skin Ego Theory defines the flesh as a somatic wrapping, enveloping the body and inner Self. It is described as a flexible and adaptable contact-barrier, serving as protection from the exterior world. Both pain and pleasure seep through this penetrable cover, affecting the Self and leaving fleeting inscriptions on the skin.² This theory, originally created by French psychoanalyst

¹ BDSM is an overarching term for kink that stands for Bondage, Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism. Though many consider themselves kinky, not everyone practices all aspects of BDSM. I myself use masochism and rope (bondage) play to explore bodily mark-making. BDSM is grounded by the principles of trust and open communication.

² Anzieu, Didier. *The Skin-Ego: A New Translation by Naomi Segal*. Routledge, 2016.

Didier Anzieu, was subsequently advanced to serve the feminine form by his wife and fellow psychoanalyst, Annie Anzieu. *Skin Ego*, relayed from a woman's perspective, focuses on women as unfinished envelopes.³ A woman is described as the “chimera of having” - she has her period, she has kids, she gives birth, she has milk for the child - everything in her life dictated by herself as found in bodily products.⁴ Her interior and exterior are forever changing, marked by the stages of her life and what she can give. Her psychosomatic wrapping of skin also follows a linear path of transformations as she develops breasts or goes into menopause. It is also of interest to note that Annie Anzieu's skin theory for women revolves around an investment in “holes”, or rather, the openings of the female body.⁵ In this way, the female skin ego is not only permeable, but consists of entrances for either pain or pleasure to be experienced.⁶



(Figure 3) Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1993



(Figure 4) Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994

Just like Annie Anizeu's theories on the feminine body, Catherine Opie's art shows the pervasive nature of female pain. She combines sadomasochism with the pain of the exclusion of queer groups from mainstream American culture. Though much of her work focuses on portrayals of lesbian domesticity, queerness, and portraits of others, her two self portraits are confrontational, visual portrayals of Skin Ego Theory. In both photos, Opie's trauma takes a somatic turn. Opie explored scarification in her 1993 work, *Self Portrait/ Cutting* (Fig 3) in which she cuts a rudimentary child's drawing of a lesbian couple and house into her back.⁷ This piece was made following an intense breakup and highlights her fears of never getting

³ Anzieu, Annie. *La Femme sans qualité: Esquisse Psychanalytique de la féminité*. Dunod, 1989.

⁴ Anzieu, Annie. "Propos Sur La Féminité." *Revue Française De Psychanalyse*, vol. 69, 2005, pp. 1103–1116., doi:<https://doi.org/10.3917/rfp.694.1103>.

⁵ Anzieu, Annie. *La Femme sans qualité: Esquisse Psychanalytique de la féminité*. Dunod, 1989.

⁶ I plan on launching into a new, but similar series of work investigating Annie Anzieu's ideas more fully post-graduation.

⁷ "Self-Portrait/Pervert." *The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, www.guggenheim.org/artwork/12201.

to experience having her own family and meaningful relationship. The pain in this piece is not only witnessed, but felt by both the artist and the viewer. The photographs of cut skin offer a kind of somatic sympathy - the viewer may find it easier to experience Opie's physical pain than her emotional pain. Opie turns the abstract into the physical - making her internal response to trauma tangible by cutting it into the skin.⁸

In *Self-portrait/Pervert* (1994) (Fig 4), Opie sits facing the camera with 46 needles in her arms, a gimp mask⁹ on, and the word "Pervert" carved calligraphically across her chest. Her use of scarification and piercing is unapologetic, and her body language communicates openness even though her gaze is absent. Is the lack of gaze a way for Opie to protect herself from criticism, or can it be a way for the artist to keep some sense of anonymity in these extremely vulnerable photos? Womens' bodies have been topics of discourse throughout history, but Opie brings the conversation to a queer woman's viewpoint. She still presents herself with a sense of "otherness,"¹⁰ of still feeling alone and marginalized by the queer community for being a "leatherdyke."¹¹ While *Self Portrait/ Cutting* seems to aim for a sympathetic response, *Self-portrait/Pervert* is unapologetic in its use of sadomasochism. In it, she seems to have embraced her sexuality and the pain associated with her kinks. Within these two photographs, her skin becomes the grounds of both pain and pleasure, thus entering into Skin Ego theory through masochistic means of representation. In one of her more recent self portraits, Opie provides her viewers with a sense of hope. In *Self Portrait/ Nursing* (2004) (Fig 5) the years have passed and Opie finally has a son of her own. Their pose resembles a Madonna and child, but with no effort to cover her face or scars. "Pervert" can still be seen in fine white lines as a healed scar on her chest.¹² Her body has absorbed her past traumas and healed with time, not abandoning the memory, but moving towards a more positive future.

⁸ Mondin, Alessandra. "Fighting Pain with Pain: Bob Flanagan/Sheree Rose and Catherine Opie." *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, vol. 12, no. 1, Feb. 2016, pp. 40–65.

⁹ A gimp mask is a leather bondage mask used in some forms of BDSM.

¹⁰ Mondin, Alessandra. "Fighting Pain with Pain: Bob Flanagan/Sheree Rose and Catherine Opie." *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, vol. 12, no. 1, Feb. 2016, pp. 40–65.

¹¹ "Leatherdyke" is a lesbian with an interest in BDSM. Named after their common affinity for leather fetishism. Saketopoulou, Avgi. "Catherine Opie: American Photographer, American Pervert." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2013, pp. 245–252., doi:10.1080/15240657.2013.818873.

¹² "Self-Portrait/Cutting." *The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, www.guggenheim.org/artwork/30354.



(Figure 5) Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004



(Figure 6) Nizlyn, *Distortion*, 2020, cut paper, embroidery, and glue

Similar to these psychoanalytic theories and practices, my work also approaches the skin as the carrier of memories, a protective wrapping, and the site of pleasure and pain. Within the framework of my own kinks, nothing permanent is left visible on the body, hence my need to document it artistically. All that remains is the memory of intimacy, of touch, and the body's inner reverberations - essentially all interior and intangible. Taking these exterior excitations burned into the inner consciousness, I extract them by drawing them once again to the skin's surface. Amorous desires are clothed by flesh, paper, and rope. Within my older work, such as *Elephant Thigh (2019)* (Fig 2), I remain dedicated to the accurate depiction of bruises on my skin and their surrounding context. Over time, this idea of masochism-inspired skin ego developed into a need to act upon the materials themselves by way of an x-acto knife. Like the rich history of *écorché*, my work also uses a knife to cut the body.¹³ Through papercutting, I am able to achieve the desired action of cutting the flesh of the paper myself.¹⁴ I pierce it, scratch it - creating inscriptions by embossing and indenting rope marks into the previously unblemished surface, such as in *Distortion (2020)* (Fig 6). My knife becomes the exterior acting upon the wrapping of materials. I become both the aggressor and the victim. The paper I use is fragile, yet strong, calling to mind the strength of the skin itself.

¹³ In my case, the body-substitute is thankfully made out of paper and not human cadavers like traditional, anatomical *écorché* models.

¹⁴ Didier Anzieu describes this relationship saying the "skin peels away as easy as paper" (pg 22). This has inspired my use of paper as a flesh-substitute.
Anzieu, Didier. *The Skin-Ego: A New Translation by Naomi Segal*. Routledge, 2016.



(Figure 7) Nizlyn, *Unraveling the Flesh*, 2021, cut paper, oil paint, and glue

II. Tied Up: A Process

Find the bight (center) of the rope. Wrap it around twice, then cross over, creating tension. Leave a gap two fingers wide for circulation. Have scissors nearby for safety. Make a loop with the working end of the rope and slide the bight underneath. Use a single column tie so it's easy to undo. Know the nerve and circulatory danger zones. Know your own limits, and if tying with a partner, make sure they know them as well.

Within the confines of kink and BDSM, I feel liberated in my exploration of bodily mark making. The act of getting tied up (or tying oneself up), is a tedious process - one defined by heightened bodily awareness and attention to detail.¹⁵ Trust is the key component that makes these ties possible.¹⁶ When being tied, my body feels secure and safe. Afterwards, I am left with patterns of rope imprints snaking across my skin. In the studio, I return to these carefully manipulated rope knots and ties, and I depict them in

¹⁵ In *Rope Bondage and Affective Embodiments: A Rhizomatic Analysis*, it is said, "Affect is felt through embodied sensations. Rope bondage practitioners affectively orient themselves towards both rope and bodies - their own bodies, and the bodies of other practitioners tying, being tied, switching, or self-tying."

I believe this explains my interest in rope as a part of my practice. It offers a focus inwards towards myself and my body - as well as its physical limitations.

Carmina Ordean, Iris, and Heath Pennington. "Rope Bondage and Affective Embodiments: A Rhizomatic Analysis." *Corpo Grafias Estudios Criticos De y Desde Los Cuerpos*, vol. 6, no. 6, 2 Jan. 2019, pp. 63-78., doi:10.14483/25909398.14228.

¹⁶ One of the mantras of BDSM and its practitioners is "safe, sane, consensual" (S.S.C.) and these are the guiding factors in all one's actions. The other acronym is R.A.C.K. which stands for "Risk Aware Consensual Kink."

flattened patterns through my use of papercutting. In my collective piece *Unraveling the Flesh* (2021) the act of drawing is used as a translation of the ties, representing the knots of bondage (Fig 1). In my early papercut works, my practice was reserved solely for accurate illustrations of lace wrapped around the body. These intricate pieces called to mind the permeability of the skin's somatic wrapping. My thesis work continues to depict body wrapping, developing a focus onto the intricate entanglement of bondage ropes and translating the ties into cut paper.

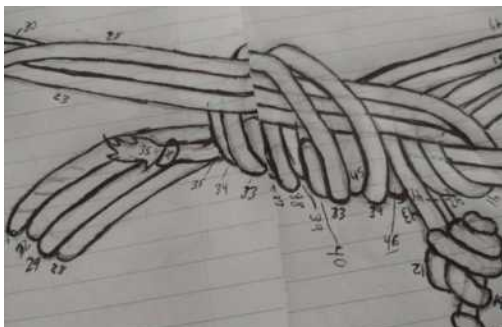
Despite the sexual associations one might call to mind when thinking about intimacy or kink, my artmaking approach to this work remains analytical and laborious. There is a deliberate incongruence between my subject matter and my process. While the theme is sexually charged and passionate, the work is distanced, obsessive, cold, and in some ways even clinical.¹⁷ Foucault argues that sex throughout the last few centuries has become more discursive, more codified.¹⁸ The stifling of sex from both the state and the arrival of religious guilt were brought about by a multiplication of dialogues surrounding sex.¹⁹ Everything was analyzed, obsessed over. How I act is not that different from my obsessive nature as a whole. Rope bondage itself is also an obsessive process. It's not tumultuous, passionate, or instantaneous. It's slow and deliberate. Each knot has to be perfectly placed with the precise tension and tightness. A rigger²⁰ must know the pressure points of the body, circulatory danger zones, and a submissive's personal preferences. It's an art - whether tying independently or with another person. I am dissecting, codifying, and rebuilding remnants of an experience. In my own work, I codify masochistic events into analytical processes marked by numbers, and dissect them into fragmented pieces of paper rope. Each memory is classified in this laborious way - sketched, broken up, numbered, cut in the angular direction of the rope notches, painted, and then reassembled to form the original tie (Fig 8-11).

¹⁷ It is more controlled, putting myself in a position of power over my body.

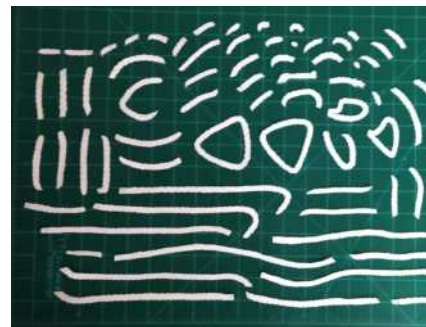
¹⁸ Foucault argues in his book *The History of Sexuality* that the Western approach to censoring sexuality was not based on repression, but rather a multiplication of discourses surrounding it. Those in authority spoke about it more, especially officials in the Church. The seventeenth century Christian pastoral not only preached that sex for the sake of pleasure was sinful, but also any unholy thoughts surrounding it were equally damning. The censorship of sex produced an ever greater quantity of discourse about it, just reframed to fit the morals of the institution. Sexuality was therefore made into objects of analysis (for population growth, birth rates, and marriages), actions punishable by the state, and tools of the government transformed into concerted economic and political behaviors. In order to mutate sex into these roles, it had to be broken down and codified. While certain terms and actions could be construed as vulgar and therefore stifled, new, more acceptable words replaced those to describe the sinful actions. Just as sex was overly analyzed and dissected in Western history, my work also reflects this codification in the analytical process in which my papercut ropes are intentionally broken down to their most basic shapes, separated, numbered, and labeled before being put back together.

¹⁹ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1, Pantheon Books, 1978.

²⁰ A person who ties rope around another person (or their own) body in bondage.



(Figure 8) Nizlyn, *Rope drawing with numbered pieces*, 2021



(Figure 9) Nizlyn, *Cutout rope pieces on cutting mat*, 2021



(Figure 10) Nizlyn, *Painted rope pieces WIP*, 2021



(Figure 11) Nizlyn, *Knotted Ropes #4*, 2021,
Oil paint and glue on oil paper

Although modern technologies could produce laser-cut paper artworks that outmatch my detailed cuts, my practice is grounded in traditional techniques that turn away from the lure of the technological. Craftsmanship is essential in the way my work is created. Though the process behind the work is extensive, I don't feel the need to share those steps with gallery viewers. There's an alignment with the craft community in the handmade nature of my work- especially the papercuts. The handcut process of papercutting feels more authentic compared to the use of laser cutting and the ability to duplicate or reproduce an identical work at will. A painter or ceramicist might not feel the same pressure to explain their use of hand over machine, yet a craft such as papercutting needs defending.²¹ To me, it all relates back to

²¹Though papercutting as an art form originated in many different cultures, it has concrete ties to folk art and women's craft. One example of this is Korea's tradition of Jeonji which is created by women using colored papers to make decorated, but functional household items. Knowing the history of these feminine handicrafts, I seek to elevate papercutting while still being mindful of its roots in the craft community.

the need for my body to be present in both the work and the process. Working with my hands allows me to have a more personal, tactile relationship with my pieces. I put value in my work because of the time I invest into them, singularly engaged in the making. Each piece is then worth a bit of my life. My time becomes my currency, of which I spend sparingly.²²



(Figure 12) Piper Shepard, *Chambers*, 2002-5,
Handcut muslin, gesso, walnut ink. steel armature



(Figure 13) Julien Feller, *Brussel's lace N°2*,
2018, Boxwood

Both Piper Shepard and Julien Feller fuel my need for intricate work with elaborate processes centered in the idea of craftsmanship. In Shepard's installations, she cuts delicate filigree patterns out of huge sheets of muslin (Fig 12). It's important for her to list on her website that everything is handcut, though it looks as refined as machine lace fabric. In her artist statement, she says: "cloth holds history and memory. It is both fragile and enduring."²³ The way she describes the nature of the cloth is extremely similar to how I think of paper as a substitute for the skin as the container of memory. The diaphanous quality of both our materials also drives our processes to be more slow and deliberate - with careful drawing and research done before we start cutting. When showing her work at the Crafts Study Centre in England and other similar craft-centered art spaces, Shepard emphasizes her process in a salon style studio wall of her sketches,

=504937150&site=eds-live&scope=site.

²² As I discuss in my next section, as someone dealing with fatigue and illness, my time is precious. There are so many times when I feel weak or sick when I am not able to work or function. Therefore, time becomes a valuable commodity with which I use to invest into my laborious works.

²³ "About." *Piper Shepard: Artist and Work*, www.pipershepard.com/about.

photographs, and cloth samples.²⁴ Besides these reminders of the artist's hand, in many spaces her art stands alone without any mention of process.

Julien Feller is another artist who aligns himself with craftsmanship in his chosen medium of carved boxwood. Like Shepard and myself, his is a subtractive process of cutting away materials. While Piper Shepard's filigree patterns are layered, but kept in flat sheets, I enjoy how Feller experiments with three-dimensional, voluminous pieces. His piece *Brussel's lace N°2 (2018)* (Fig 13) cascades the way a real piece of lace might catch in the wind. The flowy nature of the surface adds a delicateness to it even though his choice of materials is stiff and rigid.²⁵ Shepard achieves a similar sense of sensitivity in *Chambers (2002-5)* (Fig 12) where pieces of muslin, suspended by wire, are installed to move with the breezes of the space. My papercut collective piece *Unraveling the Flesh* may be more aligned to Shepard's process and layered exhibition method, but Feller's curvaceous sculptural forms are what I strive towards for future papercutting endeavors.

III. Artists in Pain²⁶

May cause the following side effects, one or more:

*Acne vulgaris, moon face, and bruising,
Hair loss, muscle aches, and generalized weakness,*

*Hyperactivity, fluid retention,
Depression and higher risk of infections,*

*The thinning of skin and an increase in fat,
Osteoporosis and cataracts.*²⁷

Though the pain in my pieces may be performed in process or depiction, the pain behind them is real. Is there something inauthentic about pain performed versus pain experienced? Marina Abramović clarified the difference between performed or staged pain and inflicted pain without consent. In an interview, she described pain thusly:

²⁴ Quarini, Carol. "In Air: Cut Works by Piper Shepard." *Selvedge*, no. 58, May 2014, pp. 90–91. *EBSCOhost*, search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxys.flo.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip&db=aft&AN=96114812&site=eds-live&scope=site.

²⁵ Feller, Julien. "About: an Introduction." *Julien Feller*, www.julienfeller.com/about.

²⁶ In this section, I want to set aside the voluntary medical traumas artists choose to endure for the sake of art, like Chris Burden's *Shoot (1971)*, but rather call attention to artists living with and attempting to rationalize chronic medical conditions through their work. Many artists and people have been through worse than I have, so I am not trying to devalue their medical trauma by putting it in the same category as my own.

²⁷ All real side effects of my steroid medication, read to the tune of "These Are a Few of My Favorite Things"

"Pain is the same thing [as presence]. You see, there is so much secret knowledge being preserved, because pain is like a door. You have to enter through the pain into that other space... We are talking about consciously going through the pain, staging the pain and going through it. Every ceremony, every ritual from ancient times until now, including the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church, stage rituals that include pain. When you are sick, when it's something inflicted without your will, it's a different story. Torture is not something you want to go through. Neither is the pain of being sick. This kind of pain is another thing. When you stage the pain we are talking about how to actually understand how the mind and body work and what pain exactly is."²⁸

For the past five years, my research on the psychology of the skin has culminated in a journey of self discovery into the world of BDSM. I've been looking for ways to capture not only the ephemeral nature of marks on the skin, but the memories and actions they hold. I developed health problems while on this journey, which served as a reminder that the skin ego works both ways -- a contact-barrier to protect the inner Self and a surface onto which interior issues are projected. Microscopic colitis has affected my quality of life bringing with it fatigue, intense stomach pain, and the feeling that my body is fighting against me after every bite. I went years without knowing what was the cause of my discomfort, usually writing it off as IBS. During 2021, I finally faced my fear of doctors and got my diagnosis. In a way just giving it a name was a relief. After being told for years my stomach problems were psychological, it felt validating to hear it wasn't in my head after all. My time in graduate school has had its share of highs and lows. I have dealt with times of heightened productivity when my steroids were controlling the colitis, to weeks of lethargy and pain when coming off of the medication.²⁹ I can't fully address the Skin Ego without admitting to this condition and the traces of pain it leaves on the skin.³⁰ I haven't yet found a way to control my colitis, so I find myself turning back to pain I can control in the form of BDSM. I can escape into that, control the situation and how long the pain lasts.

²⁸ Biesenbach, Klaus. "The Fundamentals of Endurance: Marina Abramović on How She Learned to Refuse the Body's Limits and Make Immortal Art." *Artspace*, 14 Sept. 2016, www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/book_report/marina-abramovic-interview-klaus-biesenbach-54182.

²⁹ I will re-emphasize that this is what makes my time so precious to me. My illness takes away hours of my free time and engulfs me in pain. When the pain subsides, fatigue greatens my need to prioritize and give some of my projects precedence over others.

³⁰ Including an increase in bruising due to the thinning of skin, which I am still experiencing.



(Figure 14) Nizlyn, *Colon Ascending II*, 2020,
ceramics and rope



(Figure 15) Nizlyn, *Colon Ascending II*, 2020
ceramics and rope



(Figure 16) Nizlyn, *Imprints*, 2020, ceramics



(Figure 17) Nizlyn, *Rope Imprints #7*, 2020, embossed paper

I have always considered my work to be wound-dwelling, occupying the space between being allogenic and erogenous. My work involves abject organs bound tightly and hanging from the ceiling - almost like meat in a butcher's shop (Fig 14-15). There are mounds that have been gnawed on (Fig 16), papercuts that depict traces of past ties, and embossings of somatic inscriptions (Fig 7, 17). The work is both authentic in its portrayal of pain and inauthentic in its performative illustrations of bondage. Imprinted works marked with the action itself are then juxtaposed with artworks inspired by memories of experiences. It reflects the present moment and the past. They could all be considered artifacts in one way or another. Artifacts of an experience, artifacts of the art-making process, artifacts of a procedure, artifacts of pain - the traces pain leaves on the body and psyche.



(Figure 18) Nizlyn, *Restrained*, 2020, oil paint on cut paper



(Figure 19) Nizlyn, *Restrained (Detail)*, 2020, oil paint on cut paper

What does it mean to be wound-dwelling - to constantly create in a space of physical pain and thinking about past pain? What pain am I even depicting or showing my viewers? There are so many different types of pain - from emotional to trauma, to consensual, to medical, to physical. Pain can also refer to a specific focus or attentiveness someone possesses - as in "I take great pains to make sure my papercuts are precise" (Fig 18-19). It calls to mind the same sense of flow and concentration as other parts of my artmaking process.³¹ Inattentiveness is one of the antonyms of pain, therefore pain demands and commands one's attention.³²

³¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow requires absorption in a singular, goal-related activity in order to achieve an optimal flow of creativity. This state of concentration on solely the present situation also lends itself well to the idea of subspace in BDSM culture. One study in the dispositional mindfulness of BDSM practitioners verified this, stating that findings showed BDSM could lead to a "pleasurable altered states of consciousness" that allows participants to experience the present moment in greater focus and acknowledgement of physical sensations.

Carmina Ordean, Iris, and Heath Pennington. "Rope Bondage and Affective Embodiments: A Rhizomatic Analysis." *Corpo Grafias Estudios Críticos De y Desde Los Cuerpos*, vol. 6, no. 6, 2 Jan. 2019, pp. 63–78., doi:10.14483/25909398.14228.

³² With the support of "Rope Bondage and Affective Embodiments: A Rhizomatic Analysis," I hypothesize that Csikszentmihalyi's flow state of creativity is comparable to the heightened state of awareness and bodily focus of subspace (a headspace known in BDSM to affect submissives during play). From this connection, I can then argue that consensual pain is the thing that gets me into this creative headspace.

Carmina Ordean, Iris, and Heath Pennington. "Rope Bondage and Affective Embodiments: A Rhizomatic Analysis." *Corpo Grafias Estudios Críticos De y Desde Los Cuerpos*, vol. 6, no. 6, 2 Jan. 2019, pp. 63–78., doi:10.14483/25909398.14228.

Though the work is about pain, the viewer does not necessarily need to experience or understand it. I see no need to make others feel my personal pain, especially since my work reflects the cathartic process of artmaking that makes my own pain bearable and memorable. I create my own equilibrium through making. How other people process their pain is their business, not the aim of the work itself. I make my themes palatable. I don't add to others' pain but show them mine through the lens of kink, intricate rope ties, and meticulous papercuts. In the same vein, I do not categorize my work as solely depicting performative aspects of pain. Though I take inspiration from body artists, like Marina Abramović, who physically use themselves as their canvas, I prefer not to have myself in the public eye. Performance is certainly an avenue one can take when dealing with masochistic themes, however it doesn't fit with my personality. My work is about materiality and processes instead of public performance. My performances are then transformed into private processes.

As I burnish and form my ceramic colons, I cannot help but think of their connection to horror and the grotesque. Exploring Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, this idea of object-ness and the blurring of boundaries relates back to the abject. Kristeva states abjection "does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger".³³ Therefore the ceramic colons, though static, reside in a state of anxious, uncomfortable anticipation - mindful of gravity and their delicate balance within their rope ties. The ambiguity of the "I/Other" and "Inside/Outside," as described by Kristeva create a blurred boundary between the inner self and exterior world.³⁴ In *Colons Ascending*, the internal organs in bondage makes it a challenge for the viewer to "secure differentiation between subject and object," thus the subject/object stays in a state of uncomfortability.³⁵ The colon both represents myself and my sickness.

³³ Roudiez, Leon S, translator. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, by Julia Kristeva, Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 7–13.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.



(Figure 20) Bob Flanagan, Poster from *Sick*, 1997



(Figure 21) Bob Flanagan, *The Wall of Pain*, 1982

The chaotic dynamic of an ailing body penetrated by both pleasure and pain, from the inside out resonates with the work of Bob Flanagan. An artist, submissive, activist, and a person affected by cystic fibrosis, Bob Flanagan embodied this complex relationship between pleasure and pain (Fig 20). To combat his chronic pain, he participated in increasingly more extreme masochistic acts with his partner, Sheree Rose. In *The Wall of Pain* (1982), Rose documented Flanagan's reaction every time she whipped or hit him with a variety of objects (Fig 21).³⁶ One can see a mixture of pain and ecstasy on Flanagan's face, signifying the dualistic qualities of masochism. Flanagan's work continues to astound me in the honest way he embraced life's pains. His legacy makes my attempts at healing through kink seem slightly more acceptable.

IV. Surrogates: A Body of Work

What transforms an art-object from a solely symbolic representation of the body into a surrogate for the body instead? One could argue intentions are the answer. Whatever intentions the artist has imbued her creation with signify the object as a surrogate or replacement for the form - especially if it is used in a performative way as a body-substitute. In my work, ideas of representation, substitution of the form, and artifacts of experiences are used to distinguish my different series and intentions towards my pieces. From the hanging organs, to the tangles of paper ropes, my work considers relationships of the flesh and the

³⁶ "Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist." *Saatchi Gallery Magazine*, Saatchi Gallery, 29 July 2016, artmag.saatchigallery.com/sick-the-life-death-of-bob-flanagan-supermasochist/.

physicality of artmaking as personal practices of private performance. The work emerges out of that methodical approach, resulting in artifacts that I view as surrogates - or holders of my somatic memory.

Pain can be tangled in pleasure, but it also can be anxiety-inducing, especially when it pertains to my own physical vulnerability. My work both depicts pain³⁷ and causes pain in the rigidity of my process. The work is focused on the human body's ability to read and understand pain. The body's interior is represented by my series *Colons Ascending* which contains several ceramic colons bound and suspended by rope. The ceramic colons become surrogates for my own colon as I project my disease onto them. They carry with them a hope for healing and an understanding through making. They are an attempt at making the scary unknown seen, heard, and cared for- lovingly contained by ropes. Over the course of this project, my work has gravitated towards using materials as object representations to signify the body instead of depicting the actual body itself. In psychoanalysis, "fetish objects," "transitional objects," and "love objects" all place the object as a signifier for a relationship or feelings of comfort or pleasure.³⁸ As I bind up my art-objects in rope, I bind with them intentions of security and healing. Unlike my other series, the colons feel alive, ingrained with my cathexis towards my body's physical maladies.



(Figure 22) Nizlyn, *Bite Marks*, 2020, ceramics and watercolor



(Figure 23) Rona Pondick, *Little Bathers*, 1990-91, Plastic teeth casts

In an attempt at further abstraction of bodily representation, my clay series *Bite Marks* (2020) (Figure 22) focuses on topical impressions left on the skin. When biting the clay, I assume a dominant position inflicting pain onto the form, then burnish it in an act of aftercare.³⁹ In the process of making, the clay

³⁷ Both performed pain and pain due to illness

³⁸ Berner, Wolfgang, and Peer Briken. "Pleasure Seeking and the Aspect of Longing for an Object in Perversion. A Neuropsychanalytical Perspective." *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2012, pp. 129–150., doi:10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2012.66.2.129.

³⁹ An important aspect to BDSM and to the creation of my series *Ascending Colons*.

mounds become the body, bearing the brunt of the pain inflicted and then being softly caressed and smoothed. The series acts as both a surrogate for the body and a sequence of experiments on how teeth, rope, and hands can affect the form. The pieces are artifacts of a process - looking almost fossil-like in nature. They are the physical markings of the artist on their material. The ceramic series also becomes an artifact of attachment, forming a bond of skin-to-skin contact with their maker. In this way, they stray from the surrogate nature of the *Colons Ascending* series and lean more towards being artifacts, or remnants of experiments.⁴⁰ I can't help but see the similarities between my *Bite Marks* series (Fig 22) and Rona Pondick's *Little Bathers* (1990-91) (Fig 23). From candy colored, to rotting mounds, Pondick's numerous casts of her teeth represent how emotional traumas can build upon each other and weigh down the psyche. For her, the gnashing teeth represent the "hostile womb," the emotionally distant mother Pondick herself came from. Just as I use my body to express my trauma through bruises, she uses casts of her body to show this multiplication of emotional neglect. To me, her work feels less like artifacts and more like a tool for coping. In that way, I think her work acts like surrogates for the body and psyche.



(Figure 24) Louise Bourgeois, *Arch of Hysteria*, 1993, Bronze and polished patina



(Figure 25) Louise Bourgeois, *Arched Figure*, 1993, Bronze, fabric, and metal

⁴⁰ Philosopher Randall Dipert suggests that artifactuality, like surrogacy, relies on the intentions linking the artist to their creation. He argues distinct intentions and actions allow an artifact to become art. If an art-object is produced with purpose, then the viewers will be more inclined to regard it as such:

"Without a presumed social system of encoding intentions in artifacts, and of later decoding them, the interpretation of works of art (that is, the attribution of intentions to their makers) would be so unstable as to render such attributions utterly arbitrary and unconvincing?"

Dipert, Randall R. "Art, Artifacts, and Regarded Intentions." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 4, Oct. 1986, pp. 401–407., doi:www.jstor.org/stable/20014165.

The dialog surrounding surrogacy, or body-substitutes, in art is exponentially expanded on by the works of Louise Bourgeois. No other artist embodies Freudian psychoanalysis more entirely. Her massive body of work explores numerous themes, but gravitates towards the idea of physically manifesting anxieties in drawings and sculptures in order to work through them.⁴¹ When describing her work, Bourgeois has stated:

“Since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body. For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.”⁴²

I consider this to be an exemplary model of what the Skin Ego could look like in the eyes of an artist.

Through the early 90’s, Bourgeois kept a thematic series of arched bodies alive in preliminary sketches and multiple iterations of sculptures including *Arch of Hysteria* (1993) (Fig 24) and *Arched Figure* (1993) (Fig 25).⁴³ This “arch of hysteria” can represent both excruciating pain or sexual ecstasy depending on how the figure is viewed.⁴⁴ This arch was also documented by the psychoanalysts that Bourgeois studied as a physical manifestation of emotional trauma and repression.⁴⁵ In a similar manner, Bourgeois’ work reflects her inner psychological turmoil and insecurities. It is also of interest to note how the suspended, arched form of *Arch of Hysteria* repeats in an earlier work, *Janus Fleuri* (1968/92) (Fig 26), which combines male and female genitalia in an abject, hanging, bronze sculpture.⁴⁶ *Janus Fleuri*, named after the Roman god of openings, is abstract, yet bodily in its folds and drooping mounds.⁴⁷ Though more phallic than my own work, *Janus Fleuri* emulates the type of corporeal sculpture I strive to achieve. Something that takes more than one passing to understand. A form that is not solely abject for the sake of shock-horror, but which contains its maker’s innermost anxieties as a cathartic response to trauma.

⁴¹ “Louise Bourgeois.” *Hauser & Wirth*, Hauser & Wirth, www.hauserwirth.com/artists/2777-louise-bourgeois.

⁴² Huber, Cécile. “Polymorph: Female Embodiment in Louise Bourgeois’s Sculptures.” *The Journal of International Women’s Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, Mar. 2021, pp. 49–61.

⁴³ “Arched Figure No. 1.” *ICA Boston*, Institute of Contemporary Art / Boston, 2014, www.icaboston.org/art/louise-bourgeois/arched-figure-no-1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Gorovoy, Jerry. “Louise Bourgeois: Arch of Hysteria.” *MOMA*, The Museum of Modern Art, 2017, www.moma.org/audio/playlist/42/681.

⁴⁶ Dick, Leslie. “Louise Bourgeois: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA.” X-Tra: *Contemporary Art Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 3, Apr. 2009, pp. 32–38. *EBSCOhost*, search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxyles.flo.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie.ip&db=aft&AN=505413455&site=eds-live&scope=site.

⁴⁷ “Janus Fleuri.” *ICA Boston*, Institute of Contemporary Art / Boston, 2014, www.icaboston.org/art/louise-bourgeois/janus-fleuri.



(Figure 26) Louise Bourgeois, *Janus Fleuri*, 1968/92, Bronze and gold patina

V. Conclusion

On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you describe your level of pain? Is it a sharp, stabbing pain or a dull ache that just doesn't go away? Is it the pain of a broken heart or the burden of responsibility? Is it the pain of loss? Of grief? Of a sore body that has endured something? My work is an amalgamation of those influences. I have been exploring the skin's ability to protect, envelope, and inscribe meaning through my papercutting, oil painting, and clay sculpting. I procure the marks on my body through kink and BDSM, which then influences the work. Before starting this project, I never knew how big of a role pain would play in my understanding of the Skin Ego and my own desires. Now I can see that pain is an integral part of living, of experiencing the world, and overcoming struggles. Though this research does largely focus on illness, I hope the pleasure in my work can also be perceived. My past mentor, Riikka Hyvönen, refers to her roller derby bruise paintings as badges of honor. I hope that a similar pride can be found in my own artmaking practice.

Throughout this project, I have had so many ongoing self-doubts about my ability to see it through. What if my relationship ends? Does the bondage artwork end with it? That was a fear of mine until I discovered the sense of security self-tying could bring. If my health issues resolve, will I have the same intense relationship to pain? Will I still feel the drive to make work enveloped in the body? My health journey is far from over, but even if the physical pain subsides, the Skin Ego has a plethora of information to inspire future work. I especially look forward to researching Annie Anzieu's female Skin Ego more in depth as I age and go through the physical transformations she talks about. I am eager to continue this series beyond the bounds of graduate school. The ability of my body to heal from its bruises and carry its scars with pride gives me hope - hope for healing and hope for the strength to endure and overcome.

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