

AN UNEXPECTED FEAST

by

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DEDICATION

To Whitney and Chelsea and Sandi and Lolly and Layla and Erin. And to my mom. I could never measure nor accurately describe the gratitude I feel for your presence in my life.

And Dad. Thanks for teaching me about snakes and volleyball.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Rebecca A. Madsen

I am interested in the conversation between austerity and excess. What do control and restraint have to offer us? What about indulgence? And extravagance? We navigate this relationship daily in our clothing, our food, our purchases, in the way we manage our emotions and our bodies. In many ways, these decisions between pleasure and reason turn into moral choices. Indictments even. If I have restrained my own desires, am I 'good'? If I have allowed myself a pleasure, have I failed?

In my work, I explore how this dialogue is manifested in my relationship to color, labor, and the body. Much of my work is a product of a strictly defined course of action. I design and execute tasks that require a kind of mechanization of the body. They are simple but prone to evidence of imperfection or lack of control. I look for the places the will or presence of the body, lumbering bear that it is, appears.

I am equally intrigued by products of abandon. In my painting practice, I work without a plan or design. Instead, giving instinct and first impulses a place to go. Color and line give me a language to express the tension I feel between the reasoned control of the mind and the expansive sensation of the body.

Ultimately, my work is an attempt at fleshing out this spectrum.

This pile.

Where can I live in it? And where does it live in me?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the connections (or disconnections) between mind and body in a Western, Judeo-Christian, Capitalist context. I will be using Cartesian Dualism as a jumping-off point from which to explore historical, sociological, and feminist writing on the roots and manifestations of the mind/body “problem”. Given that my interest in these questions is rooted in my own personal experiences as an American woman raised in a rural, mostly Christian community; I will be structuring my research to reflect this context. While there are many other traditions, religions, and cultures that have much to offer this conversation of mind and body; they are far less pertinent to my work or studio practice and therefore beyond the purview of this paper. I will then discuss my work and practice as it relates to this line of study and the ways I see other artists and works addressing this theme. I hope to deepen my studio practice through this research and offer insight to my reader (and myself) about why I make what I make.

CHAPTER ONE

PERIPHERY TO CORTEX: AN INTRODUCTION

“To men a man is but a mind. Who cares what face he carries or what form he wears? But woman’s body is the woman.”

(Ambrose Bierce)

A Bodily Ego

There is a study by psychologist Martin Grunwald that set out to examine how the sense of touch is processed in the brain. The story of this study and subsequent research is told in full in a book called *The Body Has a Mind of Its Own* by Sandra and Matthew Blakeslee. Grunwald set up an experiment that asked participants to use their fingers to trace a line that had been carved into a piece of wood. The lines were simple squiggles and the participants were blindfolded. After tracing the shapes, the participants then had to draw the shape on a piece of paper. Grunwald monitored their brain activity as they performed the task. The point was not to see if or how well people could perform such a task, but instead to observe what was happening in the brain while they did it. As the assignment was so simple, it was a foregone conclusion that every person who participated would be able to faithfully reproduce the shape of the carved line without issue. Surprisingly, there was one person who could not. A woman from the psychology department at a nearby university. Her failure at the task was complete. The drawings she created were not even vaguely related to the shapes she had just traced with her finger. In discovering this anomaly, Grunwald tried to set up an interview with the woman to find out what might be going on. She refused and wanted nothing more to do with the study. (Blakeslee and Blakeslee)

Thanks to some astute observations made by a lab assistant and a bit of detective work, Grunwald hypothesized that the woman must have been suffering from an eating disorder; specifically anorexia nervosa. He set out to understand if there was a connection between anorexia and a compromised sense of touch. He then arranged the same study with ten women who were suffering from Anorexia and all ten failed just as the woman from the previous study had. This is not a large sample size, but the decisive uniformity of the results is notable. (Blakeslee and Blakeslee)

Since Grunwald's experiment, the connection between altered or diminished sensory input in people with Anorexia Nervosa (AN) has received more attention from researchers. Though modest, the data seem to support what Grunwald suggested. In a 2014 review of neuropsychological studies looking at nonvisual multisensory impairment in people with anorexia nervosa, researchers wrote, "The review suggests an altered capacity of AN patients in processing and integration of bodily signals: body parts are experienced as dissociated from their holistic and perceptive dimensions." (Santino Gaudio et al.) One of the studies reviewed developed two terms that I find particularly useful: top-down and bottom-up. The researchers wrote, "Perceptually-based disturbances in body image, or body size distortions, have been posited to occur in anorexia nervosa (AN). Perception does not result from a simple flow of sensory information from periphery to cortex ("bottom-up" processing), but involves the selection of inputs most likely to be relevant in light of an individual's experience and expectations ("top-down" processing)." (J Epstein et al.)

Worth noting I think, Freud seems to have said something very similar to what was proposed in the study above. He wrote "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego" (Sigmund Freud 26) Kathleen Lennon in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* interpreted this statement to mean "[...]that our sense of self is a sense of a body, and involves an awareness of that body as having a

certain shape or form. *Significantly, the shape or form we experience our body as having is not dictated simply by anatomy, but by the affective and sensory significance with which different parts are invested.*” (Kathleen Lennon)

The italics are mine. As human beings, our understanding of our most essential selves is rooted in the body above all else. But this does not mean that we simply receive unbiased, “pure” information from our senses to inform our constructions of subjectivity and self. It is, instead, a much more collaborative process wherein our *ideas about* our body filter, edit, and alter this information from the senses to reflect our expectations and cognitive and emotional regard toward our own bodies.

While eating disorders may be severe cases of mind/body disconnection, I don’t believe they are isolated or aberrant in terms of our Western Culture at large. In a 2018 review of the literature on eating disorders (published in English or French), researchers found that the prevalence of eating disorder diagnoses more than doubled from 3.5% between 2000-2006 to 7.8% between 2013-2018. It was also markedly more prevalent in women. (Marie Galmiche et al.) Because of my experiences with eating disorders in my own life and in the lives of my family and friends, these numbers concern me greatly, though they don’t shock me.

Eating disorders may be at the far end of the spectrum, but it *is* a spectrum. How can the extremes illuminate the more moderate, but still insidious incarnations of this separation of mind and body? What can these pathologies tell us about our values and feelings when it comes to the sense experience of the body and the power of the mind? And while my research and studio practice are less concerned with the beneficiaries of these pathologies, I do think it is important to consider the people, structures, industries, and hierarchies that profit from an understanding of subjectivity that conceives of the body as a separate object.

CHAPTER TWO

BODY & MIND: THE FOUNDATIONS OF MY PRACTICE

*“But O alas, so long, so far,
Our bodies why do we forbear?
They are ours, though they are not we; we are
The intelligences, they the spheres.”*

The Ecstasy (John Donne 45)

This chapter will be devoted to an in-depth account of my research practice and the conclusions and connections I have made thus far. I discuss three main areas of interest: Cartesian Dualism, Western Judeo-Christian values, and the body under Capitalism. I hope this primer will provide a deeper understanding of my studio practice and artwork discussed in the chapters that follow.

Split

I would argue that for many Descartes’ infamous line, “Cogito ergo sum” (most often translated as: I think therefore I am) is the only tangible connection they may have to Western philosophy. (Though Socrates’ “unexamined life” might be able to give it a run for its money.) The phrase is ubiquitous, but its true meaning is less so. On its face, the phrase might be interpreted to mean: my ideas are my identity or what I think, I am or maybe the primary evidence of my existence is my thought. However these words are interpreted, Cogito, over the years since Descartes wrote it, has been implicated in not only a separation of mind and body but in the *superiority* of mind *over* body.

It may be useful, here, to tease out Descartes' actual arguments from the ways his work shapes our Western Culture some 380 years later. The text that Cartesianism or Cartesian Dualism was born out of, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, is first and foremost an earnest attempt to nail down what we, as human beings, can say we *know*. To this end, Descartes began by defining the capabilities and characteristics of the mind and body. They are fundamentally different substances, he asserts. The body has "extension" or dimensionality. The mind is immaterial with no "extension". (Brennan)

Descartes felt that the body's senses are easily deceived. We've all seen the mirage of a puddle in the road on a hot day. Our eyes tell us there is shimmering water there, but they are wrong. There is much to be said of the limitations of our human senses and the extent to which they can be fooled. The 1999 movie *The Matrix* certainly explored this question with great success. How do we know we are not in a dream? How do we know our senses are not being fooled by some malevolent demon, or aliens, or robots, or alien robots?! Descartes was sure that we could not. (Brennan) I tend to agree--though I have some reservations. A dream will always feel real when we are in it and only turns to absurdity when we wake up.

Descartes felt that while the body and its senses could be fooled, could even be imagined away into nonexistence by the mind; our thinking selves could never be imagined away as there must still be an entity doing the imagining. For Descartes, our ability to doubt; to observe our world and ourselves from an outside perspective and make judgments upon them proved that *we are*. That we could not be a product of the malevolent demon's creation. But in fact and with certainty, the thinking self can be shown to exist in its own right. (Brennan)

And so, for Descartes, it was settled. The mind can be proven to exist with the application of logic and reason. But the body? No. We cannot *know*, according to Descartes, that our bodies actually exist. (Brennan) So far as I can tell, this is not a value judgment or an assertion that the mind

is necessarily above the body, so much as it is a scientist's answer to the question: what can we really say we know? And how do we know it? The reason Descartes must be addressed in this paper is not so much concerned with his search for knowledge through reason, but how this "Father of Modern Philosophy's" ideas were interpreted and promulgated throughout Western thought and values over time. How Cogito came to synonymize mind and self. The very formation of this distortion reflects our already deep-seated hierarchy of mind over body. So, while Cartesian Dualism is more of a symptom than a cause, it does provide a useful lightning rod for exploring our Western culture's understanding of the body/mind relationship.

In his 1995 biography of Descartes, Stephen Gaukroger condemns the understanding of Cogito where the phrase casts the mind as Master and the body as Beast. He calls it a "caricature." (Stephen Gaukroger 418) He goes on to dispute criticisms (specifically feminist ones) of Descartes and Cartesian Dualism based on an interpretation of his words that is not faithful to his true arguments. Gaukroger submits, however, that, "it is a caricature that has been current since the seventeenth century." (Stephen Gaukroger 418) This is not lost on The Feminists doing the critiquing. Indeed, according to philosopher Susan Bordo, it is a fundamental feature of the critique. She writes, "...it is the dominant cultural and historical renderings of Cartesianism, not Descartes 'himself,' that are the object of our criticisms." (Bordo, *Feminist Interpretations of Rene Descartes* 2)

What I see in this interpretation, this "caricature" of Cogito, I also see in the manic expressions of Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia, 'bigorexia', orthorexia, and binge eating disorder (among others). (Stephen Gaukroger 418) The mind is the source of knowing. The body cannot be trusted. The mind is in control. The body is the *object* of control. Referencing Descartes and historical concepts of the body in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo writes, "That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God: that

which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization.” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 5) A few fields of study over, sociologist Deborah Lupton echoes this sentiment while discussing Plato, “[...] the ‘follies’ of the body ‘contaminate’ the pure search for truth and knowledge. Hence the philosopher’s soul must stringently try to ignore the body, ‘becom[ing] as far as possible independent, avoiding all physical contacts and associations as much as it can in its search for reality.” (Lupton 2) A bleak prospect if one agrees with Freud that the “ego is first and foremost a bodily ego.” (Sigmund Freud 26) How does one become “as far as possible independent,” from one’s own self?

Self-realization and the search for reality itself have both been designated as pursuits purely of the mind. Though Plato predates Descartes and Cogito by nearly 2,000 years, I submit that this only serves to show how deep the tap root that is mind *over* body goes. It may also offer an explanation as to why Descartes’ cogito ended up a caricature of itself in the first place. In this model, the body is not an integrated part of our Selves, but instead, a site apart wherein we might perform socially defined identities and principles. Our purity, our intelligence, our will, our morality, our *right* values. Where we might construct our very subjectivity.

Abstain

In her book *Food, the Body, and the Self*, Deborah Lupton (whom I quoted above on Plato), expands from the realm of Western philosophy to connect our impulse to master our body (and its desires) to practices of spirituality and religion in a Judeo-Christian tradition. She writes, “Control of the diet, particularly involving paring it down to the bare essentials, [...] are typical ascetic practices indulged in by religious devotees anxious to prove their ability to override the temptations of the flesh, [...]. To overcome appetite was to demonstrate one’s commitment to Christ [...].” (Lupton

131) (Delightful use of the word “indulge” here, Ms. Lupton.) She goes on to acknowledge that while these “traditional religious beliefs” are not the central cultural force they once were, the belief (conscious or unconscious) that austerity and self-denial will result in reward is still quite common. (Lupton 137) We need only consider Kate Moss’ oft-quoted comment, “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels” (“Kate Moss”) or the phrase, “A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips.” (aptly labeled a “Proverb” on Wiktionary.org) (“Lips”) for examples of the austerity equals reward ethos.

Lupton describes historical incidences of what she calls “self-starvation” within the practice of Christianity; building off the work of Rudolph Bell’s 1985 book *Holy Anorexia*. (Lupton 133–34) The book examines the cases of Italian women recognized by the Catholic Church for their commitment to God between 1200 and the 1600s. Significantly, “[...] most early Christian writings warned against excessive abstinence from food, for it could lead to vainglory [...]” When told to end their fasts, these women that Bell writes about “claimed they were unable to do so.” (Lupton 134) While their eating behaviors were a performance of spiritual commitment, they were also a demonstration of personal will and autonomy. At a time and in a spiritual tradition that denied women any control over their own lives or *bodies*, this practice of self-starvation gave the Holy Anorexics a chance at self-determination. In effect, these women were rebelling.

This assertion of control is a defining feature of Anorexia Nervosa. Though today’s expressions of the disease are far more secular, the core motivation remains the same. To my mind, it often feels more like a kind of morbid, desperate performance art. Upon realizing the rules that govern one’s life are cruel and inhumane, the “artist” follows those rules to their most logical and extreme end. It is self-defeating but it makes painfully perfect sense. Those Catholic women were using the framework and value system fed to them by the Church as a tool in the construction of their own subjectivity. Their modern-day counterparts do the same, though the Church appears in a

much more subtle, implicit way. Offering the structure that assures us our suffering will be rewarded without all that Jesus stuff.

Watch

If the history of Western Philosophy and the deep tradition of Judeo-Christian values in America weren't enough, it seems our beloved Capitalism is here to hammer the last proverbial nail into the coffin of Mind/Body connection. Because a capitalist economy necessitates capable and "docile" bodies through which it might build and make and produce and produce and produce, it is not shocking that we (especially as Americans) see our physical selves through this lens. (Michele Foucault 135) As machines that might be optimized for maximum efficiency in the name of production and financial gain.

Silvia Federici, in her books *Caliban and the Witch* and *Witches, Witch-hunting, and Women*, lays the systematic oppression of and misogynist violence against women directly at the feet of the formation of Capitalism. The Church and State are certainly accomplices and benefactors in this equation, but it is the necessary subjugation of the body (and for Federici the *feminine* body) that makes it such an effective force in glorifying the power of the mind and its directive to manage the body as a separate asset.

Federici ties the "enclosure" of land in 16th century Europe to the gradual, but violent transition women experienced from independent, autonomous human beings to insulated, domestic servants and caregivers. (Silvia Federici, *Caliban* 9) As land ownership and a capitalist economy grew, Europeans became more and more removed from the connection they had with the land, animals, and ecosystems around them. They moved from being a part of the land to having dominion over it. This same trajectory could also be used to describe the change in dynamics between men and

women. Over time, women's work was devalued and their reproductive capabilities co-opted by the capitalist agenda. Women's bodies were now a means of reproducing the labor force; a tool for the capitalist project much like the land. The control they once had over their sexual, social, and financial lives was suppressed and those foolish enough to resist were labeled witches and often killed. (Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*)

This was not a peaceful transition, but a brutally violent one. Federici calls the 16th century bourgeoisie grasp at power through punishment, a "true regime of terror." (Silvia Federici, *Caliban* 136) The violence, torture, and murder this regime implemented were in service of a process Foucault called the "disciplining of the body." (Silvia Federici, *Caliban* 133) These bodies, after being disciplined, would be amenable to and even enthusiastic about providing their energies and labor in the creation of wealth for the ruling class (though necessarily ignorant of having done so). These bodies would have owner/operators that had trained them to wake up and follow the schedule most convenient for their work, and indeed take pride in the ways they were able to demonstrate their mechanized, optimized utility. They would be, "temperate, prudent, responsible, proud to possess a watch (Thompson 1964), and capable of looking upon the imposed conditions of the capitalist mode of production as "self-evident laws of nature" (Marx 1909, Vol. I:809)" (Silvia Federici, *Caliban* 135) Notice how the capitalist project hides itself.

These bodies would eventually not even need the threat of physical punishment to commit themselves to their labor. As Foucault suggests with the term "biopower," discipline would move from its external site of church and state to an internal site held within the individual. And in so doing displace the deep bodily wisdom and knowledge that might have contradicted the dictums of the capitalist system. (Jen Pylypa) Within this system, the prime directive of efficiency at any cost infects and informs our understanding of our Selves and our bodies. We are no longer an integrated

mind/body system, but instead a kind of authority of mind over body. We *have* a body, just as a carpenter *has* a tool

In neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's book *The Feeling of What Happens*, Damasio argues that the mind is inextricably rooted in and, indeed, *emerged from* the body. He claims that the mind evolved as a mechanism by which the body is able to protect itself; maintaining its internal homeostasis and external boundaries. (Damasio) The mind, according to Damasio's model, is more a servant to the body than the body is a servant to the mind. It is my feeling that the incredible powers of the mind (logic, reason, etc.) have grown so central to our constructions of subjectivity and identity, so integral to even our understanding of the nature of humanity, that we in the West are not even able to recognize the extent to which we have been separated from our own bodies.

In a culture informed and dominated by the echoes of Cartesian Dualism, Judeo-Christian values, and capitalist endeavors; the body is separated from the self and becomes the place where one *performs* the self. Those that are able to control their appetites, push their bodies through pain and exhaustion in their work, maintain slim and fit bodies; communicate the power of their will and completeness of their control. (Whether that is their intention or not.) To quote Deborah Lupton once more, "...the outward appearance of the body is understood as demonstrating the inner worthiness and personality of its owner..." (Lupton 137)

CHAPTER THREE

KNOWING THE BODY

“Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.”

(Descartes 16)

“I finally found the answer.”

(Slimfast 90s Commercial (1999))

In the following chapter, I will discuss my work as it concerns knowing and understanding the body. I will include references to artists and artwork that relate to my work materially, formally, and/or conceptually.

Figure

I empathize with Descartes’ earnest attempt to really *know* something. It *is* such a comfort. But what does it mean to know the body? While it may be true that our minds are powerful enough to imagine away our bodies, they remain a foundational element in the creation of identity--for ourselves and our communities. What scars do you bear? What ‘color’ are you? What can you *do*? Or not do? How clean are you? Do you have all your hair? How tall are you? How *big* are you? Are you big in a fat way or in a muscle way? Whether we like it or not, our bodies mark us. They give away our socioeconomic standing, our physical fitness (complete with moral judgments), our injuries and abuses, recent vacations, or sustained periods of stillness indoors, and so on. To discount the power of the body in the creation of identity is to ignore its most fundamental element.

In an attempt to know my body, its dimensions, its weight, its size; I have done a great many pointless and absurd things. And in so doing, I have gained all kinds of information. Numbers, pictures, accomplishments, lists, diagrams, CAT scans, and MRI images (To be clear, I did not seek out the CAT scan or MRI. Those were foisted upon me.) The information I have is extensive in quality and quantity. But it never seems to be enough to satisfy. I am the proud owner of a mental disorder called Body Dysmorphia (the echo of its predecessor Anorexia Nervosa). I do not think myself special in this. It is my pet belief that everyone has it at least a little bit. This is not an exclusive club. Come on in.

An interesting manifestation of this disorder for me has been compulsive video-taking. In an effort to figure out what I look like, specifically what my body looks like, I document. I take photos and videos of myself. Obsessively. I set up my telephone and record myself walking this way, walking that, standing, turning around. It's deeply embarrassing, of course. I would love to be uninterested and aloof. Alas, I am painfully earnest. I watch these videos. I look and I look and I look at the screen. Examining what I see like some kind of fiendish Greenberg Formalist. What's there is there. What's there? What's there?!

It is no surprise then that I have a particular interest in the conceptual and abstract nature of looking at one's body. The glances we take at ourselves in shop windows, the zooming in on ourselves in group photos, the awkward over-the-shoulder peering we do in dressing rooms, "what even does my butt look like?" As someone who draws, I have a deep love and respect for the power to truly *see* something. It is as Frederick Franck says,

"Drawing is the discipline by which I constantly rediscover the world. I have learned that what I have not drawn, I have never really seen, and that when I start drawing an ordinary thing, I realize how extraordinary it is, sheer miracle." (Southern and Maslen, Mick 44)

Is it possible to rediscover the body by drawing it? If I draw from these “documents” recording my body, will I have seen myself?

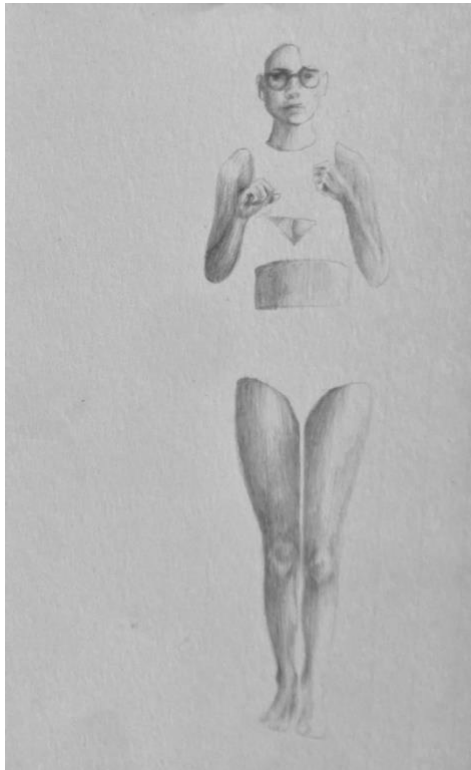


Figure 1. Untitled (Figure 3), pencil on 3x5 index card.

Surely there is an element of fear. Terror. What if what I see is ‘bad’? What if it is imperfect? Wrong? But my need to see myself outweighs (pardon the pun) my anxieties. Like looking at the sun during an eclipse. You can only see through a device. A kind of filter. You get the general shape but the real seeing is lost. You’re not looking at the sun. You’re looking at the shape of the sun. Its translation only. In this way, I am not seeing myself. I am seeing lit pixels on a small screen. They hold the shape and general colors—quite well actually. We must admit technology is impressive. But the lighted image is not the thing it describes even if we often accept it as such.

Why is it so important to know what I look like? I don't think it seems that important to one who can see themselves. Who is able to conceptualize the shape and dimensions of their own physical selves. But if you cannot. It can be maddening. It is a simple thing, but profound. It seems unimportant until you don't have it. Like when you have a cold and your nose is completely blocked. You've never valued free breathing more than in that moment. But not a week later you won't even give it a second thought.

Drawing the stills from videos I've taken feels like a closing of the loop. I may watch the video, but no matter how many times I see it, it is never enough. I never feel like I've seen myself. But a drawing is a quiet thing. It is slow and methodical. Each tiny bit is accounted for and rendered. And when all the pieces have been seen and recorded, it is finished. It is a way I can approach seeing myself. It is at once a way to connect to my body and a profound disconnection from it. Addressing myself as a formal object to be rendered, but also--an extraordinary thing. A sheer miracle.



Figure 2. Untitled (Figure 5), pencil on 3x5 index card

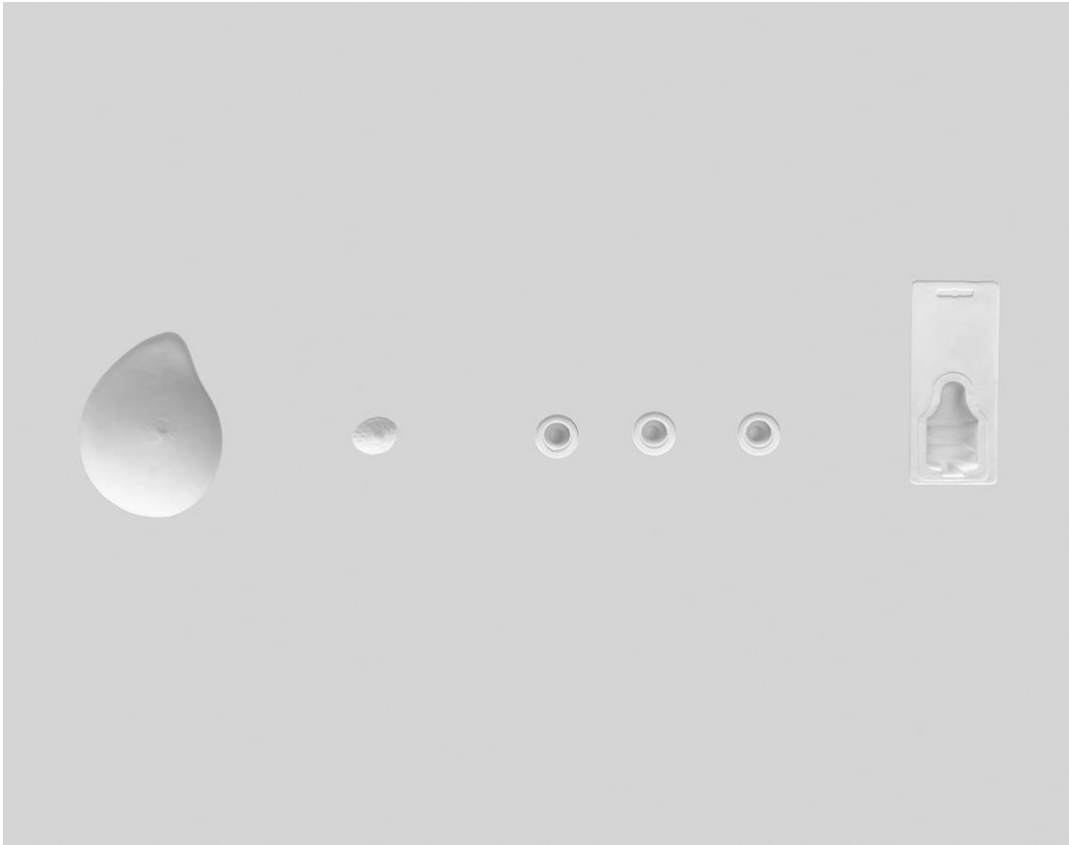
Separate

Figure 3. Janine Antoni, *Wean*, 1989/90, plaster, sheet rock. © Janine Antoni.

Work that I find helpful in approaching this idea of the body as a separate entity or object includes much of Janine Antoni's oeuvre and one work in particular by Eleanor Antin. Though there are so many artists I might discuss, these two I think will be the most germane.

Janine Antoni's work is primarily concerned with the body. She explores the daily activities of eating, bathing, beautifying, nursing, urinating, and so on. And she has a particular interest in the relationship between mother and child. One of Antoni's earlier works, called *Wean*, tracks the separation that occurs when a baby stops nursing at their mother's breast and is transitioned to the bottle. The piece is a series of shapes carved out of, or absented from the gallery wall. Reading from

left to right we see these concave shapes: a breast (Antoni's), a nipple (Antoni's), a gap, a rubber nipple, a rubber nipple, a rubber nipple, and finally the packaging in which those three imposter nipples are sold. In a talk about her work, Antoni describes *Wean* as an expression of the separation of baby from mother. But she goes on to extend the metaphor to the "[...]stages of separation we experience with our own bodies as we're weaned into the culture."

Not only must we be removed from the body that grew and birthed us, but so too must we remove our 'selves' from our own physical bodies. Removed and latched instead onto a manufactured, sterile, product. Available in a three-pack at Walmart for \$1.96 (65.3c/ea). (Walmart) Notice how the capitalist project hides itself.

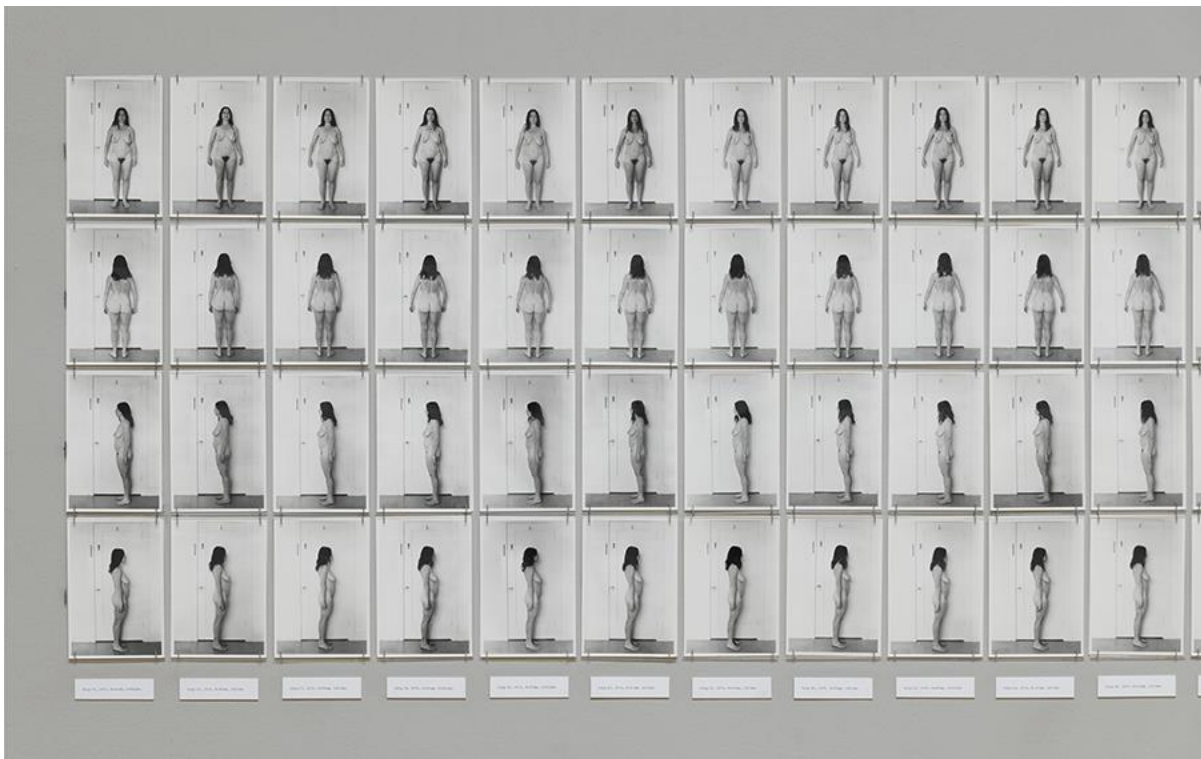


Figure 4. Eleanor Antin, *CARVING: A Traditional Sculpture* (detail), 1972, Installation view, LACMA Los Angeles. © Eleanor Antin

If we are able to remove ourselves from our physical bodies far enough, it gives us a chance to examine it. Map it. And ultimately control it. Eleanor Antin's *CARVING: A Traditional Sculpture* offers a perspective on examining, documenting, and controlling the body that has always resonated with me. The work was performed over the course of thirty-six days. Antin dieted and photographed her body from the front, the back, and the sides four times a day documenting her diminishing body. (Jayne Wark 138–39) The work was famously rejected by the selection panel of the 1970-71 Whitney Annual that was highlighting sculpture that year. Recalling this, Antin said,

“I thought about what I should give them that was a traditional sculpture: a woman going on a diet – very traditional. They sent it back and said, ‘It’s very nice, Eleanor, but it’s not sculpture: it’s conceptual art.’ I assumed it was both.” (Alice Butler)

Antin re-performed this work after the death of her husband of 56 years in 2017. She had a different body then—as anyone would 45 years later. As anyone would at the age of 82. In the documentation of this performance, Antin included photos of herself from the front, back, and sides just as she had in 1972. She added, however, another view of her body for documentation. It was intended to show the shape of her body under her breasts. In these photos, she wore a bra that lifted and restrained her breasts that naturally hung lower on her body. How complete the transformation is from human subject into human object. As if she’s a salesperson simply showing her wares. “You’ll want to see it from this angle too, of course. Allow me,” she might have said. Ever the gracious host. (Alice Butler)

It is the contradiction that exists within this work that I find most compelling. Antin is at once criticizing and mocking the objectification of women’s bodies and the active role so many of us take in the project; while also exposing the tender and vulnerable truth that she too is in earnest. Antin did not approach this project from a removed and disinterested position. She is invested. She *would* prefer to have a body that fit the prescribed understanding of fitness and beauty. Because,

honestly, who among us wouldn't? In an interview with Alice Butler for FRIEZE, Antin even admitted she waited to start photographing herself for the second *CARVING* until she had lost eleven pounds. She was "embarrassed." (Alice Butler)

It is embarrassing to put on the table the extent to which these abstract and absurd beauty standards influence and even control us. But for many people, it dictates the food we put in our bodies, the physical pain we are willing to endure, and the amount of pleasure we allow ourselves to feel. We need only look to our Lord and Savior Oprah Winfrey for an example of our cultural relationship with the sensations and delights of physical pleasure. In a 2016 Weight Watchers commercial she famously, enthusiastically stated, "This is the *joy* for me. I love bread. I *love* bread! ... I now just manage it." (*Bread 00:00:00*) Coincidentally, during her interview with Butler, Antin mentioned the remorse she felt in giving up bread as well. (Alice Butler) Our bodies and the very sensations that are essential to the human experience must be *managed*, controlled, ordered, and in the end—suppressed. As the old proverb goes, "A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips." ("Lips")

Bind

*“Recalled her [Eva Hesse’s] former husband, sculptor Tom Doyle, ‘string,’ salvaged from the floor of a disused factory,
‘was really what got her going.’”*

(Anna C. Chave 28)



Figure 5. Wrapping video still I

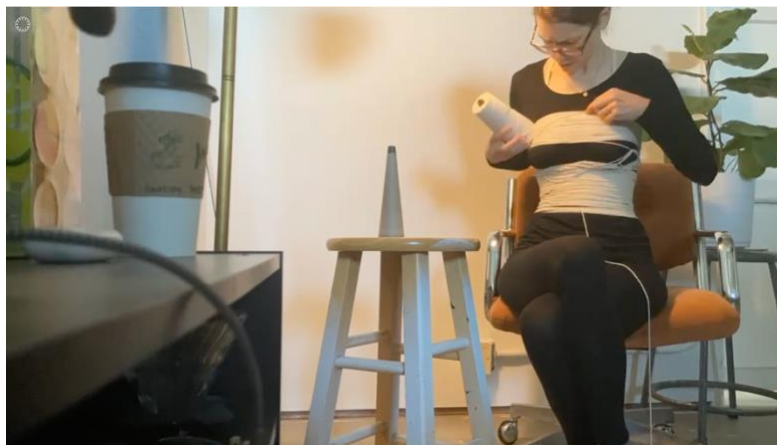


Figure 6. Wrapping video still II



Figure 7. Wrapping video still III

One of the pieces included in *An Unexpected Feast*, examines my compulsion to *know* in another way. Not the image of the body-object, but instead, the body-object itself. I first conceived of the work as a performance or possibly a video. I was interested in following an idea to its logical, but absurd conclusion. Not unlike the Holy Anorexics. Pictures, drawings, and videos of the body can only describe it from one very specific vantage point. The rendering depends on the camera used, the lighting, the angle, and on and on. How can one capture and understand the body as a three-dimensional object? As it is in real space?

Using cotton kitchen twine, I set about measuring the total circumference of my body. I documented the process over two days while I measured. I was meticulous in the task for the sake of accuracy, but accepted that the project could never be perfect. No matter how diligently I wound the string, there would be inevitable inaccuracies. Again, as with the drawings, there would be no real satisfaction. It was futile, but comforting. Productive, but pointless.

Instead of a video or performance, the work evolved into an installation piece. I use the string to draw a tight spiral on the floor. Moving out in a clockwise direction. As a part of the

installation for this work, called *Circumscribe*, I included a border of text around the outermost ring.

The words read:

“28,022 inches of 100% cotton kitchen string used to measure the entire circumference of the artist’s body. Stacked and wrapped and wound. Then slack and loose. Then winding in upon itself collapsing the space it once described. Squeezing it all out and replacing it only with itself. Round and large. The body is removed. The description/restriction is what is left. A record and receipt. When I draw with the string I lay it down with my hands. Moving in a clockwise direction. Slowly, slowly expanding and aerating what has been squeezed away. Where the string is—my body has been. Where the string is—my body has been.”

Over the course of its installation, the string changed. First, only a small part was altered when someone simply didn’t see it on the floor and walked directly over it. Then the rubber of a wheelchair and the innocent boots of children. The string was trampled and pulled and worried over by all, but its path seemed to remain intact. Like a river meeting a boulder or bank, it adjusted and just kept going.

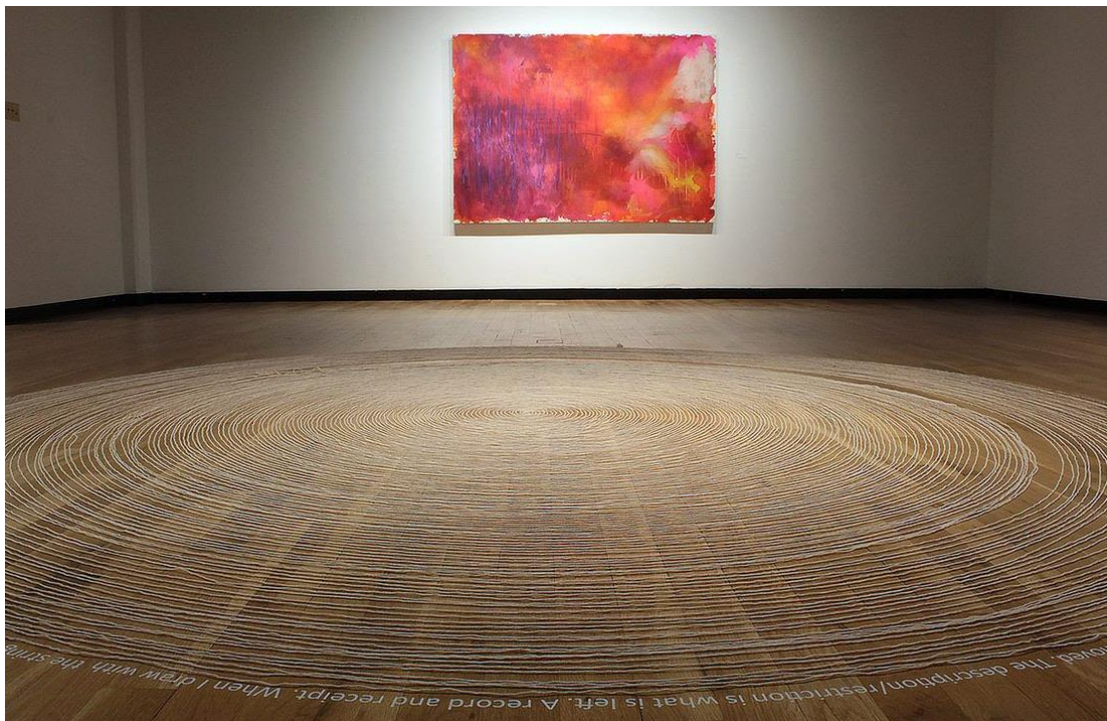


Figure 8. An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view I.



Figure 9. An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view II.



Figure 10. Eva Hesse, Ringaround Arosie Eva, 1965, pencil, acetone, varnish, enamel paint, ink, and cloth-covered electrical wire on papier-mâché. © Eva Hesse

While the similarities between *Circumference* and Eva Hesse's *Ringaround Arosie* didn't come to my attention until well after I had created the piece, I couldn't be more delighted by the comparison. Both works use a spiraling twine to reference the body, but *Ringaround Arosie* does so literally. While the two protruding forms in Hesse's are aligned vertically, the nipple-like quality is too direct to consider that they might be something else. Simply reading the list of materials for *Ringaround Arosie*, one can see Hesse's indiscriminate approach to material. It exists as successfully as a painting as it does a sculpture. Hesse famously described it as a "breast and penis" and a "breast job." (James Meyer 58) *Circumscribe* references the (my) body as it is a record of its size. But when installed, it also takes up the kind of space that creates less of a visual experience and instead a more bodily, spatial one.

I have always found inspiration in Hesse's exploration of materials and her sensitivity to their qualities and limits. The relationship is one less characterized by control and instead more by collaboration and discovery. Trained as a painter, Hesse's transition to sculpture was undoubtedly fruitful, but evidently not without frustration and failure. She had to learn how to use her new materials through trial and error or rely on the men around her to help. Anna C. Chave wrote in *American Art*, "Over time, Hesse coped with her technical shortcomings in part by hiring male assistants, in part by embracing states of material collapse as endued with their own aesthetic interest, and in part by deploying nontraditional materials that required less workshop savvy..." (Anna C. Chave 27) I resonate with this struggle. I am a novice in so many of the areas I am interested in exploring and though I believe a beginner's mindset is most often an asset, I would prefer to have a master's skills. Like Hesse, I have navigated this for the most part by using materials that require less skill. This allows for faster and easier entry into play and experimentation.

Hesse's practice of repetition and her tendency toward seriality are also sources of inspiration for me. While speaking of her work to Cindy Nemser in 1970 she said, "If something is absurd, it's much more exaggerated, more absurd if it's repeated...Repetition does enlarge or increase or exaggerate an idea or purpose in a statement." (Lucy Lippard 5) P. The Holy Anorexics would agree, I think. An act done once or twice or in moderation cannot be examined as it can in great quantity. Hesse's use of the word "absurd" here is particularly potent. Absurdity can highlight quiet, unnoticed beliefs that we aren't aware that we hold. When we encounter absurdity, something has jarred us, has violated a system or value that felt natural only to make us see that, in fact, maybe it isn't natural at all.

I use this absurdity and repetition in my work often. I find it can cut to the core of an idea more effectively than most other tactics. *Circumscribe* is certainly an exploration of repetition with the winding and unwinding and spiraling and winding again. But the project that most closely examines absurdity and repetition is my line drawing. This too reflects the body and may act as a record just as the string does, but takes a less direct route.

CHAPTER FOUR

LINE

“For Aristotle, the repository of thought in art was line. The rest was ornament, or worse.”

(Batchelor 29)

Account



Figure 11. Untitled (Line drawing), pencil on 3x5 index card.

These drawings (of which there are 13) are created on the backs of index cards. Small notes, testaments to bodily labor and time. Each of these drawings begins with my attempt to draw a perfectly straight line. I try to be perfect. Mechanical. Each subsequent line is drawn as close to the previous as possible without touching it. They are each a copy of the line that came before them and a copy of the first line that came before them all. I continue this process over the entire page. Like a game of telephone, the original message is distorted by slight misunderstandings that build on each other and yield something quite different at the other end.

In addition to these, is a much larger line drawing at 22" by 30".



Figure 12. Heart on Hands on -or- Rigorous Governing Logics (detail), pencil on paper.



Figure 13. An Unexpected Feast. Heart on Hands on -or- Rigorous Governing Logics installation view with gallery-goer. Photo credit: Jason Sheppard

The large incarnation took around 200 hours to complete. In many ways, it represents only the passage of time as experienced by the tip of an HB pencil as it collided with, and became a part of, the paper's surface. (Though the body attached to that pencil may argue for inclusion here.) It is measurable. Finite. But its minuteness can feel overwhelming and uncountable. I used to teach English as a Foreign Language and one of my favorite English Language oddities are countable and uncountable nouns. Not surprisingly, the nouns that name something that cannot be counted (sugar, water, grass, etc.) are 'uncountable nouns'. While those like pencil, pumpkin, and couch are able to be counted so—we call them countable nouns. I have thought about this little linguistic idiosyncrasy often while drawing these lines. Maybe the lines on this paper are uncountable—though I have accounted for each and every one at some point in the process. Maybe they cease to be lines and

instead must simply be called: line. There are not so ‘many lines’ but instead so ‘much line’. Its repetition has made the lines and the act of drawing them less of a collection and more of a unit.

My drawing is at times a question about the value of my time. The value of my labor. The worth of a task performed by my body that is not linked with use-value/intellectual value/narratives/ideas/stories/thoughts. Are the hours and hours of drawing put into the large-scale line drawing ‘worth’ it? And why or why not? In the end-is it meaningful to me? Does it hold anything more than my time and my labor? Does it hold anything more for anyone else? Can labor and time take the place of imbued meaning/intention/statement. Or rather. Are labor and time enough?

I am not convinced.

There is something cheeky about the drawing. Something irreverent for me, absurd. And stupid. And yet, despite myself, I find it unimpeachable in a way. Even if it did not carry deep thought or emotion (though it does)-it is still a feat of will. And that can make up for a great number of sins, I’m told. And so my body is a site for the performance of my will. And this unit of line is its documentation.

I think a lot about my body and its abilities and its labor within my studio practice. American that I am, I am interested in the product of the labor that my body performs and the relevance or value of that product. In what ways does the amount of labor correlate to the value of a product? Does more equal more? The line drawings I create in my practice explore these questions (among others).

Dissect

It is no mistake that the ‘father’ (or at least oft-credited father) of conceptual art, Sol LeWitt, is most known for his lines. (Artsy Editorial) Those idiosyncratic marks of the mind. Line is the residue of a thought. Born in the brain, relayed from neuron to neuron, down the neck, around the curve of the shoulder, straight through the arm, and into a dexterous spider of tendons and phalanges. Line requires intention. Line requires control. A line is an idea. A thought. The ideal vehicle for concept.

Starting in 1968, Sol Lewitt began a series of line/wall drawings that would continue through the rest of his life and result in 105 works. For each piece, he created a list of commands that played with the direction, movement, color, and proximity of line. Once the rules for the drawing were written, the work could be made by anyone, anywhere, anytime. While he started out executing these drawings himself, he eventually left the actual labor and act of drawing to others. In a 1971 essay *Doing Wall Drawings*, Lewitt wrote, “The draftsman and the wall enter a dialogue. The draftsman becomes bored but later through this meaningless activity finds peace or misery. The lines on the wall are the residue of this process. Each line is as important as each other line. All of the lines become one thing. The viewer of the lines can see only lines on a wall. They are meaningless. That is art.” (Julie Caniglia) I can attest that this is true.

The work did not live on the walls where it was drawn. Nor, really, did it live in the instructions themselves. The work was the idea. Captured in words. Then captured again in a drawing. But never held. The line is the language and the body is the tool. The image on the wall is a receipt.

At the other end of this ideological spectrum where idea reigns, we find Agnes Martin. A line-drawer as well, but for her idea was the enemy. (*Agnes Martin: Beneath Thought and Idea* 00:03:33) Though art historian Nancy Princenthal, who wrote *Agnes Martin; Her Life and Art*, associates

Martin's lines with thought and the "experience of language; of language running through your head" (*Nancy Princenthal: Agnes Martin, Her Life and Art 00:26:13*) she does not go so far as to associate them with concept or idea. Indeed she quotes Martin in a letter she wrote to her, "Only truth is effective. All ideas are false. They are conjecture. False because by the time you have them, they are the past and false besides!" (Nancy Princenthal 260)

There is a story of Agnes Martin explaining her work to a child which expresses her misgivings regarding 'ideas' well. The child was Marc Gilmcher's daughter Isabelle. Gilmcher is CEO of the Pace Gallery in New York City and had known Martin since his childhood.

Isabelle asked, "Agnes, what are your paintings *of*?"

In response, Martin removed one rose from a floral centerpiece at the table where they were sitting. She held it between them, presenting it to the girl, "Isabelle, is this beautiful?"

Isabelle responded, "Yes, Agnes." And Martin put the rose behind her back, out of sight.

She asked, "Isabelle, is it still beautiful?"

The girl replied, "Yes, Agnes."

Martin then gestured to the empty space between them where the rose had been, "I'm painting this." (*Agnes Martin: Beneath Thought and Idea 00:04:00-00:04:44*)

There are no words or neat concepts, thoughts, or ideas that can explain what Martin is making. No amount of writing or talking could ever pin it down. I am reminded of E.B. White's quote, and I will paraphrase, "Explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested. And the frog dies." (Teddy Wayne) The metaphor is helpful, but doesn't quite capture it. The frog that is Martin's work cannot be killed. There is no cutting it open to see its parts and label them and make 'sense' of them. The frog is a magic frog. The frog is not from this place and so it cannot be

understood using the local methods. The frog's system is a higher system. Martin's system is a higher system where ideas are merely the embarrassing product of ego.

While the intention and inspiration for LeWitt's and Martin's lines are wildly different, two of their works, LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #95* (1971) and Martin's *Untitled 2* (1992) are striking in their similarity. Both done in gentle blues, yellows, and reds. Both with thick sections of lines either running vertically or horizontally. They are nearly twins.

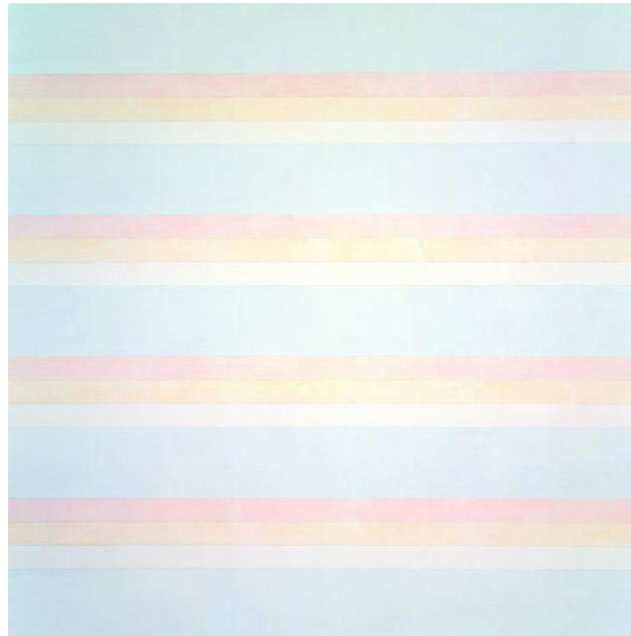


Figure 14. Agnes Martin, *Untitled #2*, 1992, acrylic and graphite on canvas. © 2015 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

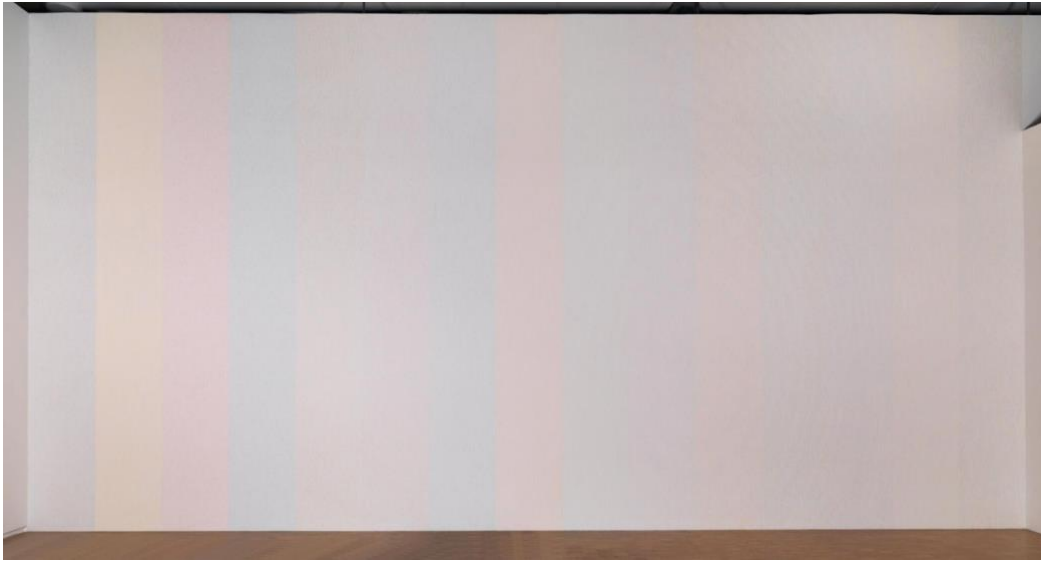


Figure 15. Sol LeWitt, Wall Drawing #95, 1971, red, yellow, blue, and black colored pencils on wall. At the Centre Pompidou in Paris, France

Of course, as artists, we are keen to make grand, bold statements about things like ideas and lines and art. And I hope we never stop. But the practical reality here, that Lewitt and Martin have put themselves at either end of, is of course somewhere in the middle. Both are right and neither is right and there is no real resolution to be had if you want one. But to my mind, this is a feature, not a bug. Within this model, I can behave like a kind of Schrodinger's Artist, occupying multiple perspectives at once. Like Antin in *CARVING*, I criticize but also embody. My practice then becomes an investigation rather than a statement. More akin to Descartes' doubt than Cogito's misassigned certainty.

CHAPTER FIVE

COLOR

“In painting, sculpture, and in all the formative arts...delineation is the essential thing. [...] The colors which light up the sketch belong to the charm: they may indeed enliven the object for sensation, but they cannot make it worthy of contemplation and beauty.”

Immanuel Kant (James Fox 152)

“A little bit of freedom goes a long way.”

(Crystal Light 2001 TV Ad Commercial 00:00:13)



Figure 16. In-progress painting (detail).

The cultural and historical narratives around color are vast and deeply rooted. While the scope of this paper begs that I be brief, it is important to note some of the more foundational elements that inform the ways we see and interpret color today in the West. In the following chapter, I will discuss how these elements relate to my painting practice and use of color. I will also explore one example of how this can play out in art criticism.

Other

I find much of the Judeo-Christian rhetoric around austerity, the body, and its appetites to be echoed in common attitudes about color. When describing something particularly colorful, we often reach for words like luscious, decadent, vibrant, and even wild. Description can turn to judgment quickly with words like gaudy, garish, or loud. Like a bust that bulges out over a neckline or a second helping of an indulgent desert; there is a line drawn somewhere in the sand that divides the *right* amount and *too much*. We seem to fear our own appetites. We vigilantly guard ourselves against temptation.

In David Batchelor's 2000 book *Chromophobia*, he quotes French art critic, and known Stick in the Mud, Charles Blanc saying, "The union of design and colour is necessary to beget painting just as is the union of man and woman to beget mankind, but design must maintain its preponderance over colour. Otherwise, painting speeds to its ruin: it will fall through colour just as mankind fell through Eve." (Batchelor 23) Blanc has aligned color with the "other," the earthly, the feminine, the sensual, and the bodily. And at its opposite is design. Line. The masculine, reasoned, and pure.

Color is pleasure. Line is restraint. Color is Madonna. Line is Muzak.

This dynamic could be characterized as a mere "symptom" of the Western Judeo-Christian perspective that somehow worked its way into aesthetics, but I would argue it is in fact a tool used

to separate and dominate. In her article *Why is the West Afraid of Color*, Ishani Nath writes, “When the British needed to invent the rationale for subjugating various parts of the globe, they created binary oppositions, such as between the strong and weak, male and female, pure and impure, civilized and savage, and white and colored.” (Ishani Nath) This assertion seems to be borne out by many of Batchelor’s arguments as well as any passing glance at neoclassical sculpture. What might be mistaken for innocuous personal taste in many ways can be directly tied to a patriarchal, capitalist, colonial agenda. So very serious for something as seemingly superficial as color.

I delight in this hidden power that color has. You only really notice it when it is pushed to an extreme, but once there it can feel overwhelming and vulnerable. My painting practice is a test of this threshold. It is also a release of control. I use highly pigmented paint on raw canvas. I go in with my pastels and scrawl and scribble and mark and count. I layer these large, uncontrolled paint pours with something akin to writing. I paint on the floor. I “write” on the wall. The paint moves as it will. The pastel moves as I direct it. I bounce between these modes of authorship, one removed and collaborative, the other active and controlled; looking for that line in the sand.



Figure 17. Untitled (Blue Boy) (detail), acrylic paint, soft pastel, and oil pastel on raw canvas.

In a recent studio visit with artist Pam Longobardi, she said this of my paintings, “You need the lines to ground you. To call you back. Or you might fall in.” She is right. As far as I like to push the color, there is always a point at which it becomes *too much* and line must be introduced. The interesting bit, to my surprise, isn’t the complete surrender to color, but the relationship it has to the presence of line. Of control.



Figure 18. Cy Twombly, Untitled, 1961, oil, oil-based paint, wax crayon and pencil on canvas. Daros Collection, Switzerland. © Cy Twombly Foundation



Figure 19. Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1967, oil and crayon on canvas. © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

While there are myriad examples I might call upon to illustrate how our fear of color and love of control is manifested in the larger art world. I like this story in particular. In an article titled *Your Kid Could Not Do This, and Other Reflections on Cy Twombly*, Kirk Varnedoe describes the critical reception to Twombly's blackboard paintings. The paintings were a departure from Twombly's previous work, which was more colorful, the mark-making more exuberant and less methodical. He writes, "They were especially well-received by American critics, who saw them as acts of a kind of penitential self-discipline in which the artist renounced the "artier" splash of his earlier European

color paintings in order to submit to analytic cerebration and systematic devotion to labor.” (Kirk Varnedoe 22) The contempt that Varnedoe describes for uncontrolled, emotional color is palpable. In just this one quote we can see all three branches of my research: Christian penance, submission to the power of the mind, and the zeal for labor under capitalism. Color, like the body, carries meaning. Color, like the body, should be subdued, controlled, and ultimately appreciated for its utility rather than its joy. It is a tool, not an experience. For me, color and the body are connected in deep, foundational ways that I often struggle to articulate. But maybe this question is just the type of frog that resists dissection. Maybe it’s not from here.

Ravel

Having the opportunity to dig into the philosophical, spiritual, and economic contexts of the mind/body connection has grown my practice in immeasurable ways. It has also opened new paths for further research and material studies. Specifically, I would like to explore ideas of use-value, labor, and time as I move on from the program. Additionally, I am interested in gaining more experience and skill working with natural dyes and textiles as they have such strong formal and conceptual ties to my interests. What I appreciate the most, however, is the affinity I have developed for uncertainty and tension within my practice and research. The translation that comes with time may have done a disservice to Descartes and Cogito, but I think he had the right of it. In the end, it is doubt that I find to be one of the defining features of my work and my practice. It is doubt that asserts my presence, my existence (bodily or psychically). It is doubt that allows me to navigate tenuous assertions and quiet assumptions without the crushing need for certainty. For knowing. For control.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

EDIBLE

Edible

We want it all: potatoes pulled up
from under their poison foliage,
the artichoke's heart, scraped clean,
the tender bodies of crustaceans, broken
from their calcified shells, saffron stamens,
plucked from the crocus's center. Bark
of cinnamon trees, slow sugar tapped
from the maple. The golden vomit of bees,
pried from its waxen vaults. Even,
for some, the delicate crunch of crickets,
or hind legs of lamb, still tinged with blood.
The world is such an unexpected feast.
I think of my friend, Christopher,
who, when he found himself dying,
early one spring, kept telling us
how this was the best part—
the letting go. As if, in his hunger,
he'd somehow broken into death's core,
torn off the husk, the brittle shell,
found, inside, the succulent heart,
and savored it.

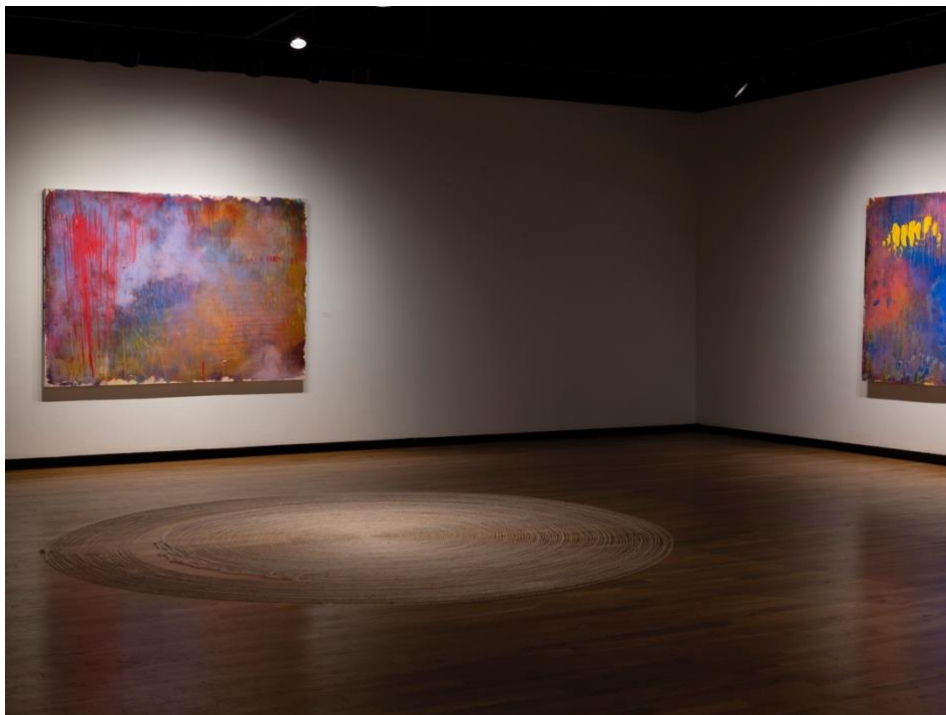
(Danusha Laméris)

APPENDIX B

SHOW DOCUMENTATION



An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view I. Photo credit: Ryan Parker



An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view II. Photo credit: Ryan Parker.



An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view III. Circumscribe detail. Photo credit: Ryan Parker.



An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view IV. Circumscribe detail. Photo credit: Ryan Parker.



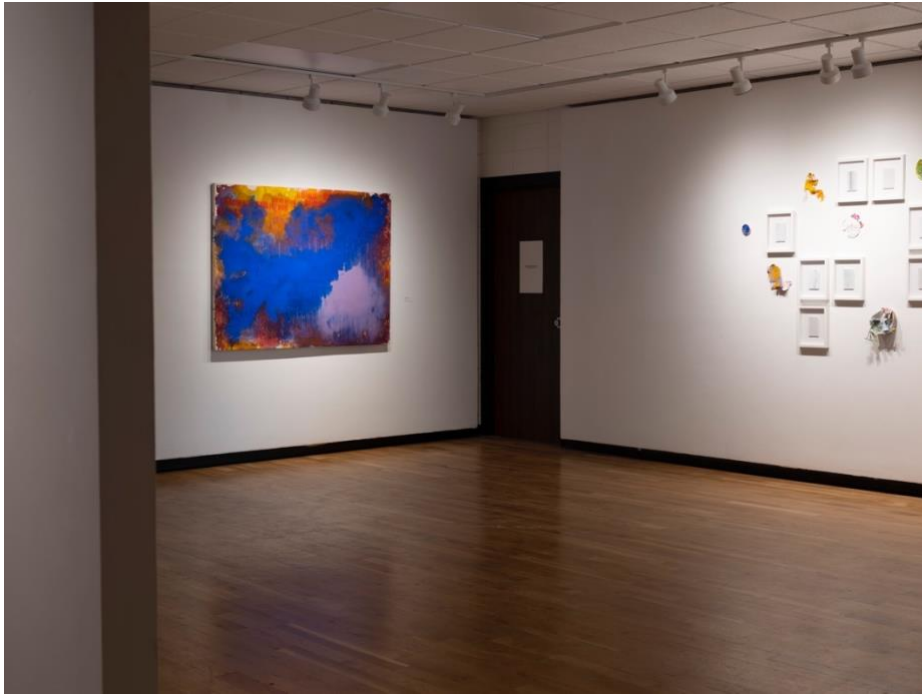
An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view V. Photo credit: Ryan Parker.



An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view VI. Figures, line drawings, and paint peelings installation. Photo credit: Ryan Parker.

A photograph of a white wall covered with various framed and unframed artworks, including drawings, photographs, and small objects, illustrating the artist's diverse media.

An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view VIII. Figures, line drawings, and paint peelings installation. Photo credit: Ryan Parker.



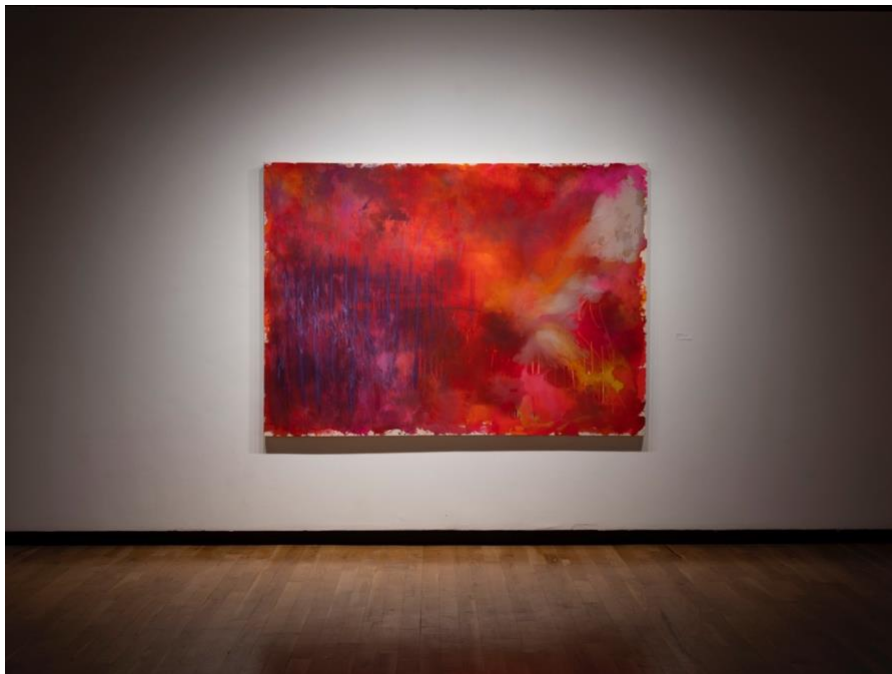
An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view IX. Photo credit: Ryan Parker.



An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view X. Untitled Acrylic, soft pastel, and oil pastel on raw canvas. 47"x 63" Photo credit: Ryan Parker.



An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view XI. Untitled (Blue Boy) Acrylic, soft pastel, and oil pastel on raw canvas. 60" x 84" x 3" Photo credit: Ryan Parker.



An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view XII. Untitled (Red Boy) Acrylic, soft pastel, and oil pastel on raw canvas. 60" x 84" x 3" Photo credit: Ryan Parker.



An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view XIII. Untitled (Purple Girl) Acrylic, soft pastel, and oil pastel on raw canvas. 60" x 84" x 3" Photo credit: Ryan Parker.



An Unexpected Feast. Gallery view XIV. Photo credit: Ryan Parker.

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