2018

What Lies Beneath

Meg Wachs

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd
Part of the Fine Arts Commons

© Meg Wachs

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/5504
What Lies Beneath

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Craft & Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Meg Wachs

B.F.A. State University of New York at New Paltz, 2012
M.F.A. Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018

Director: Susie Ganch
Interim Chair and Associate Professor
Department of Craft & Material Studies

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
Acknowledgments

To my parents, who have given me more support than I could ever dream, I love you endlessly for being my strongest foundation in life. You have always supported me despite my love for a life that is always going to be less than lucrative.

To Susie, you lit a fire under my ass and helped me find what I didn't know I was looking for. Thank you for challenging me in ways that I definitely needed but probably despised at the time. You have truly changed my life in bringing me here and I couldn’t be more grateful.

To my committee, thank you for asking the hardest questions, helping me find answers, and guiding me to a better version of myself.

To my fellow grads, you have been my family and my support system these past two years and I can’t thank you enough for the community that we made out of a home away from home. No matter where I am, family always has a place to stay.

To my Crafty Witches, you’re with me for life and I have the tattoo to prove it.

To my beacons of light outside of grad school, you have kept me grounded during the craziest time of my life so far and help me stay (somewhat) sane.

To my studio wife and the baddest bitch I know. Katey, I don’t think there are words to actually thank you for all that you’ve done for me, but I’m going to do my best. You have been my harshest critic at times, my biggest cheerleader at others, my life coach and therapist most of the time. I can guarantee I wouldn’t have made it past a quarter of this if it wasn’t for you and I am a better person having known you. I love you more than Cat loves tin foil.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Perception</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lineage</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gestalt</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Portraiture</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Muse</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Physical, The Emotional, The Tangible</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Lies Beneath</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abjection</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference Material</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Eagle talons</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ostrich egg beads</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Meanings and Attachments, Maggie</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sasha</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Katey</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Screwed</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Hands Off</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Hands Off (detail)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Constrict</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ventricular Nervosi</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Trachea Stricta</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Tracy Lee Black, Solace Neckpiece, Untitled #1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Stages of Containment: Tangled, Trapped, Tamed</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Seth Papac Torn Inside Circle Pendant</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Cracked #4</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Joseph Pine, Interior #9</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Burcu Buyukunal, Terrifying Beauty</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Exposed #3 &amp; #4</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Exposed #6</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Unleashed</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

WHAT LIES BENEATH

By Meg Wachs

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018.
Major Director: Susie Ganch,

What is the very first thing you notice about a person? Appearance? What if the first thing you saw was everything that they were trying to hide? We would see every flaw but we would also see every truth. What Lies Beneath is an exploration of interior and exterior and an exposure to the dark and abject inside all of us; the parts we keep hidden and the things that build up until they have no place else to go. Rooted in an examination of the human psyche, my thesis explores the difference between the facade we project to the world and the truth within ourselves.
Chapter 1

The Perception

“All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche

What is the very first thing you notice about a person? Their eyes? Their mouth? Their hair? What about their clothes? Are they wearing any jewelry? Make-up? What does their expression say? How do they carry themselves? Regardless of your initial observation, it is almost always a part of their appearance. The appearance that we create for ourselves on a daily basis is the version of our self that we choose to project to the world.

Power or status indicated by what is worn generally starts with a social construct dictating what is powerful. Fashion writer Robin Givhan spoke about the social constructs that we follow, based on appearance, during an NPR segment hosted by Neal Conan on ‘The Will to Adorn’. Givhan says, “we are visual people — so much of our understanding of who’s in charge, what protocol is, where the power lies, we get that from the visual. We get that from clothes”. This can be applied to any of our

---

physical features; from hair dye and make-up to plastic surgery and clothing we can alter our appearance to match our desires.

In the garment industry, the power suit was generally regarded as a masculine item of clothing which was designed to exude confidence and success. The heavily shoulder-padded “powersuit” was largely adapted by women in the workforce during the 1980s to exude power equal to men in the same position. Professor and author of Fashion Talks: Undressing the Power of Style, Shira Tarrant says, “Wearing a pantsuit was the expectation at the time if you were to be taken seriously as a business woman, but women were still criticized for trying to emulate men, because it was a derivative of menswear.”

Across time and geography, clothing, adornment, and ornamentation has operated as a method for communication. We dictate our outward appearance based on how we want to be perceived. The perceptions of professionalism, power, or status are dictated by the clothing we wear and the ornamentation we add to it.

---

"Jewelry and pins have been worn throughout history as symbols of power, sending messages. Interestingly enough, it was mostly men who wore the jewelry in various times, and obviously crowns were part of signals that were being sent throughout history by people of rank."
— Madeleine Albright

Humankind has been adorning the body since before the Homo Sapiens evolved. In 2013 eagle talons were found in Karpina, Croatia that were examined and determined to be the result of being worn as jewelry due to the cut marks found on their surface. When they were dated to 135,000 years ago, it was made clear the even our earliest ancestors decorated themselves. Archeologists across the globe have found this evidence of adornment. Beads made out of ostrich eggs were found at a site in Kenya that were cut and drilled and dated to 40,000 years ago. The remains from a necropolis in eastern Bulgaria date back as early as 4560-4450 BC and show how important metallurgy was to their culture. History shows a lineage of women and men.

---


4 ibid.

adorning themselves to dictate their power, status, and achievements. Egyptian pharaohs, Roman emperors, and medieval kings heavily decorated themselves because jewels denoted wealth and power.

The jewelry worn today by those who choose to adorn themselves is a key to understanding style, personality, and the projected self. Jewelry can also serve as an identifier, act as ornamentation, or offer protection to its wearer.

Suzanne Ramljak points out in her book On Body and Soul, “It is conceivable that all jewelry has amulet origins. Jewelry’s portability, tactility, and close proximity to the body gives it a unique potency in regard to our sense of well-being.” Her book begins with a history in talismans and amulets and encompasses the history of amulets, the distinctions between various forms of protection (both offensive and defensive), and the contemporary interpretations of these as seen in jewelry. The meaning and power imprinted into personal jewelry is assigned by the wearer in most circumstances.

Fig 1: Eagle talons discovered in Croatia

Fig 2: Ostrich egg beads discovered in

---


focused on this during the execution of my candidacy exhibition and it became a recurring theme in my larger body of work.

Mah Rana, an artist, curator, and writer of contemporary jewelry considers human relationships, narratives, and experiential processes essential to her practice. A Klimt02 interview discusses her project and website, *Meanings and Attachments*. The project examines the jewelry and adornment that people wear on a daily basis and why they wear it. A series of candid photographs and responses capture a variety of significance. From a treasured family heirloom to a loved item from a partner, each piece was unique in history and important to the owner for reasons that would make no difference to another person. Attachment in these possessions that we encounter on a daily basis seems menial at first, but they are building blocks in who we are as people and represent what we find important. Rana states, “in respect to the jewellery that people are wearing in the photographs – yes, the majority of it is different to what is regarded as art jewellery, but — I don’t think that this should be seen as a situation that negates the value or purpose of making art jewellery”.

Benjamin Lignel attempts to define the art jewelry that Rana is referring to is a specific type of practice and specific type of object in a 2006 issue of *Metalsmith*

---


9 Ibid.
Magazine. He offers that the term contemporary jewelry means little to anyone outside of the profession but attempts to explain that it is both “the contemporary offspring of a craft-based design activity” and “poised between high-street jewellery and art”\textsuperscript{10}. The former distinction being that contemporary jewelry is not made in a factory but in a studio workshop and by human hands. The latter distinction is then clarified stating the jewelry being made is the glorified version of production jewelry and the lower relative of fine art.\textsuperscript{11} Art jewelry and contemporary jewelry form a counter to the precious materials used in conventional production jewelry by challenging what materials are defined as precious and how to elevate seemingly lower materials; it underlines the importance of individuality and craftsmanship as opposed to marketability. Despite the differences in execution for the two branches of jewelry, the interview with Man Rana emphasizes that the two can coexist and hold equal meaning in their own ways, and that “the role of jewellery can differ at an individual level and at a social and cultural level.”\textsuperscript{12} They coexist in the same way that different facets of a personality coexist; different but simultaneously.


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Klimt02, Mah Rana: Meanings and Attachments
Chapter 3

The Gestalt

“The whole is other than the sum of its parts”
- Kurt Koffke

This quote, often misattributed to Aristotle — and misquoted as greater instead of other — comes from the idea that there are two perceived ways of examining one’s perceptions. Gestalt is defined as an organized whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts. This does not mean that one holds more value, just that the two are perceived differently. We experience the world from the perspective of an individual with various understandings and simultaneously from many perspectives within an individual. With a defined interest in understanding other people, I spent my first year of graduate school examining others and their perceptions of the world. More narrowly, I built a body of work that explored the artistic practices of my fellow graduate students.

In his book Why We Make Things and Why it Matters, Peter Korn writes about the how the brain collects memories and experiences that become our filter for understanding everything around us.

“Every person on the planet navigates his life according to a singular, fluid, highly complex mental map that determines his goals, strategies, and tactics, his ideas...
of selfhood and truth, and his normative and aberrational behaviors — not his drives, necessarily, but how he interprets and chooses to act upon them”

Our individual perspectives of every single experience, environment, relationship, or interaction occurs because we have completely different interpretations of situations and lenses through which take in information. Each of these interactions with another person are then perceived through their own complex mental map. This can be applied to a viewer’s understanding of art, and then determine that the maker of a piece of art can be the only one who truly understands their work through the filter of their own mental mapping.

---

Chapter 4
The Portraiture

“In a portrait, you have room to have a point of view and to be conceptual with a picture. The image may not be literally what's going on, but it's representative.”
— Annie Leibovitz

My candidacy exhibition consisted of a series of necklaces and brooches that captured a facet of someone's personality. This body of work was prompted by observing, interviewing and characterizing the people that surrounded me. Using the information I gathered, I made pieces that showed an understanding of their personality, their physical traits, their studio practice, how they might make a piece, or how I saw my relationship to that person. The first piece in the series titled Sasha drew inspiration from textile practices used by my peer, Sasha. The necklace had a scrap of her hand-dyed fabric placed into a setting that was modeled after an embroidery hoop. As a bespoke piece of jewelry, I was dedicated to creating a piece that she would want to wear. I took liberties in style, leaving the frayed edge of the tapestry scrap (something Sasha would never do in her own work) and incorporated it into the design to emulate her wild and beautiful hair.

Each piece in this series jewelry was accompanied by writing, adding a secondary layer of information about the person the piece was made for and about.
Fig 4: Sasha, 2017
sterling silver, weaving scrap

Fig 5: Katey, 2017
gold-plated brass, resin, acrylic rhinestones
writings were not about the objects in front of the viewer, but about the person the object was made for. The writing that accompanied Katey read, “Dark and dirty badass chick on the outside, with pink, glitter, and glam on the inside. She reminds me of a geode in that way; and I got to see the inside.” My first several interactions with Katey were about her obsession with watching *The Bachelor* every week and her proclivity to use pink and glitter in her work despite an all-black wardrobe. This piece of writing ended up sounding like a dating ad because the side of Katey that I got to know best was a boy-crazy, girly-girl.

Both of these works were inspired by peers within my graduate school social circle but in order to include people and places from different facets of my life, I expanded my focus to include my family, my first metalsmithing instructor, and even a place (my hometown). Instead of taking a material from their occupation, I used material or motif that I associated with the relationship I had to the person. I worked with a coffee stain motif that my undergraduate mentor, Arthur Hash, had been working with at the time that I was accepted to the metals program at the State University of New York in New Paltz. I created my own stains and layered them in metal as opposed to Arthur’s laser-cutting method. *Arthur* was accompanied in the exhibition by his

Fig 6: *Arthur*, 2017
copper, steel
rudimentary instructions on how to use a jeweler’s saw and how he compared the tool to a cat.

The brooch inspired by my relationship with my father was the most emotional to make. I was motivated to make a piece memorializing the car accident that almost took his life and launched my journey with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and anxiety. After the accident, I collected his belongings from the totaled car, most of which were covered in windshield glass. I collected a small pile of the window shards and fused them together in a kiln. Melting the pieces back together to make a new whole, I created a setting to hold the glass in place inspired by the shape of the titanium plates bolting my father’s broken ribs together.

Each examination of a small feature in someone’s person was a recognition of the whole while highlighting of one of the parts; it was my way of examining gestalt in an individual.
This physical feeling
It can't be anxiety
It can't
Or can it?
Can it in fact be the mind controlling the body?
Yeah, of course
I'm so in control of my mind and my body
But I'm subconsciously forcing myself into a state
Of self bondage entangled by the ropes of my own mind

- Logic “anxiety”

This journey with PTSD and anxiety that I started to confront in Rob was one that I continued on and became the foundation of my current artistic practice. My anxiety is one of the effects of PTSD that resulted from a car crash in 2015. While I have worked past the trauma and depression with the help of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, my anxiety has and will stay with me for life. EMDR was developed to treat patients with PTSD, anxiety, and severe phobias\(^\text{14}\). The treatment requires a bilateral stimulation (BTS) while having the patient focus on the emotional trauma. The stimulation can be visual by the therapist controlling the patient's eye movement, auditory by playing tones in a rhythm, or tactile by holding a small paddle in

each hand that gently vibrates in a pattern\textsuperscript{15}. While recalling the events of trauma, the BTS is repeated to allow the brain to desensitize to the events by recognizing them as past instead of present. The patient visualizes the traumatic event in their mind until the brain no longer registers it as a threat to the body. Before entering therapy, I suffered from shortness of breath, constriction of the throat, nausea, and an emotional breakdown any time I had a flashback or unintentionally recreated the conditions of my trauma. This usually meant driving over the railroad tracks that caused the accident on my way to and from work each day. After being treated with EMDR, I suffered these effects much less frequently and have learned to manage my emotions enough to recognize and curb an anxiety attack.

The anxiety that I live with on a day-to-day basis is the result of my PTSD which can alter the chemistry of the brain by shrinking the hippocampus. The hippocampus is the control center of feeling and reacting and releases serotonin to the central nervous system, producing the feeling of happiness\textsuperscript{16}. As a result of this chemical and physical change, my brain is less likely to produce serotonin, therefor making me more prone to anxiety and depression even though I no longer struggle with PTSD.

This anxiety was with me prior to the accident, the difference being it was only in rational circumstances. Humans all experience anxiety as “state anxiety”, a temporary emotion in response to a perceived threat and this evolutionary response has kept our species alive\textsuperscript{17}. What changed was that “state anxiety” evolved into “trait anxiety” which is similar but more intensified and describes a personality trait as opposed to a fleeting

\textsuperscript{15} “Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy.” American Psychological Association.


emotion. Trait anxiety is unchecked and unassociated with rational fear\(^\text{18}\). It is a stable disposition with the individual judging a wide variety of environmental factors as potentially threatening.\(^\text{19}\) Pulling at this thread was something that I discovered brought out my most emotional and powerful work. In an effort to embrace my anxiety, my work became a process of cathartic release; a channeling of my mental instability into the objects I created.

\(^\text{18}\) Freeman, Daniel, and Jason Freeman. Anxiety: a Very Short Introduction. pg 6

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid. pg 7-8
“It's our challenges and obstacles that give us layers of depth and make us interesting. Are they fun when they happen? No. But they are what make us unique”
- Ellen Degeneres

Once I knew what I wanted to focus on and had the emotional fuel for new work, I began to research how anxiety affects the body. The sensory experience of my body reacting to my greatest fears had my throat constricting and my stomach rolling over; but what did that look like? Could I make someone else feel what I felt? Could I make it beautiful? Would a viewer understand the feeling without wearing it?

My work up to this point had been a meandering path examining the human experience. From attempting to elicit tactile interactions through the use of silicone for *Titillating* and *Screwed*, to attaching myself to a fragment of another person's...

Fig 8: *Screwed*, 2016
silicone, acrylic pigment, sterling silver, steel
personality, to my attempts of embedding a material with emotion in Hands Off, my aim was always to connect with either the wearer or the viewer through engaging an empathetic response. This attempted connection through empathy was an

Fig 9-10: Hands Off, 2017
nylon fabric, silicone, acrylic pigment, porcelain, sterling silver
understanding of someone else’s feelings and emotions, as opposed to sympathy which is compassion or pity for another person’s circumstances. I strived for my work to evoke in someone the physical feelings and emotions that I had experienced in a way that was understanding, not pitying.

*Disquiet Beauty* was developed through examining the physiology of anxiety as it manifests in the body. I needed to see what was happening to me in order to understand how to address it. By creating the tangible representation of the knots in my stomach and the tightening of my throat, I was able to actively process a reaction that I couldn’t understand. My anxiety was something I could neither comprehend or control, but in my role as a maker I began to confront my own demons by creating a physical stand-in for a sensory experience. Using my hands to actualize emotion as a tangible object became its own catharsis. This physical processing became my post-therapy version of the EMDR treatment I experienced.

I thought about what materials suited the emotions I was aiming to evoke with my work in order to generate a sensory understanding from the viewer through appearance or tangibility. What personalities or emotions did I associate with the materials that I had become familiar with? I found myself interested in silicone because of its ability to both intrigue and disgust viewers. It is slick, viscous, and unnerving to the touch in a way that makes me think about trying to move through mud; similar to trying to wade through my mental struggles. In producing my work for *Disquiet Beauty*, I found that by coating thread, knots, and rope with the silicone, it would permeate the fibers and solidify my forms while allowing them flexibility.
Fig 11: Constrict, 2017
copper, magnets, cotton, silicone, acrylic pigment

Fig 12: Ventricular Nervosi, 2017
copper, spray paint, cotton, silicone, acrylic pigment

Fig 13: Trachea Stricta, 2017
copper, magnets, cotton, silicone, acrylic pigment
Constrict, Ventriculous Nervosi, and Trachea Stricta were designed to demonstrate the inner workings of a victim of anxiety by portraying a physical reaction to anxiety. Each addressed difficulty breathing, knots in the stomach, and a tightness in the throat, respectively. In contrast to this body of work, I was also researching work that displayed knowledge in treating anxiety. Tracy Lee Black, a San Diego based jeweler, explored the uses of weight for its calming effects in her series of Solace Neckpieces. This series referenced weighted blankets and vests that have been used for decades as therapeutic aids to imitate Deep Pressure Touch Stimulation (DPTS)\(^{20}\). In Black’s artist statement about the body of work, the series of necklaces, made of leather weighted with steel, present jewelry as a source of physical comfort and as adornment simultaneously\(^{21}\).

Fig 14: Tracy Lee Black Solace Neckpiece: Untitled #1, 2015 leather, steel, thread


\(^{21}\) http://www.tracyleeblack.com/work
Thinking about my attempts to take control over my mental state, I developed a series of three brooches titled *Tangled, Trapped,* and *Tamed.* Each displayed a different stage of control, the thread and rope was contained within a hollow form reminiscent of the pills and medication used to treat such mental health disorders. *Tangled* consisted of a nest of threads that actively made their way out of their container. *Trapped* then displayed the threads barricaded behind metal latticework in an attempted escape. Finally, *Tamed* is a visual metaphor for how a person might begin to feel in control through the organization of a neat and decorative knot. I am drawn to necklaces and brooches because they serve as metaphors for the tension around the neck or tightness in the shoulders. They are location-specific devices that demonstrate a feeling or symbolically protect these parts of the body.

![Image of brooches titled Tangled, Trapped, and Tamed](image)

Fig 15: *Stages of Containment: Tangled, Trapped, Tamed* 2018, copper, steel, spray paint, cotton, silicone, acrylic pigment
Because my work stems from negative emotions, I find camaraderie with the work of other makers who are also addressing the less desirable parts of the mind, like Tracy Lee Black. In an exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, *Mindful: Exploring Mental Health Through Art*, fourteen contemporary artists created an opportunity to encounter, understand, and break down societal stigmas about mental health through the lens of contemporary craft. Daniel Baxter, an artist-in-residence at the Pittsburgh Center for Contemporary Craft, created dolls for visitors of the exhibition. Each individual doll was handmade onsite. They encompassed a unique set of emotions because, as Baxter said, “Everybody is one of a kind, and everybody needs something special and unique — the world is not a ready-made place and art is a vehicle for conversation.” His creation of these individual dolls circles back to our individual mental mapping and how we take in experiences of what occurs to and around us.

In a Hyperallergic press release for *Mindful*, the director of exhibitions and education at the Virginia MOCA explained the importance of this exhibition. “One in four adults lives with a mental health condition, yet this common illness often remains hidden behind a wall of secrecy and isolation.” Regardless of these high statistics, the problems of mental health are not discussed because of their stigmas. While discussions are becoming more socially acceptable, I use my art practice as a tool to

---


pull back the curtain on a common challenge that often remains unseen and misunderstood.
Chapter 7

What Lies Beneath

“You’ve got to express yourself in life and it’s better out than in. What you reveal, you heal.”
— Chris Martin

What is the very first thing you notice about a person? Appearance? What if the first thing you saw was everything that they were trying to hide? We would see every flaw but we would also see every truth. *What Lies Beneath* is an exploration of interior and exterior and an exposure to the dark and abject inside all of us; the parts we keep hidden and the things that build up until they have no place else to go. Rooted in an examination of the human psyche, my thesis body of work explores the difference between the facade we project to the world and the truth within ourselves. I want to embrace our humanity, appreciate the gestalt, and unapologetically expose the parts of myself that I do not like.

Approaching the space of installation, the viewer is first confronted with a trio of awkwardly tall and unusually long display tables. Each table has raised edges to contain material specific to each series that serves as emotional personification. Within the trough created by a barrier around edge of the table, the material is manipulated into an
imagined landscape where the brooches live. Each of the three materials represents a different facet of emotion that can no longer be contained. The metal included in each series dictates a different way that represents how the breakdown in a person’s physical or emotional facade can begin.

Anxiety-

Drawing inspiration from physical barriers that protect us, the metals forms are simplified and undecorated silhouettes of battle shields from across time and geography. In this narrative I’ve created, the shields are no longer able to withstand the pressure from behind and the cracks in them are growing. West-coast based jeweler, Seth Papac, declares “jewelry, with its intimate scale, placement on the body, and deep history as personal signifier, presents itself as an even more potent format to reveal aspects of my inner body”24. His production line of jewelry also employs the breakdown of metal as he compresses it and highlights the natural cracks that form under pressure. The cracks that I have impressed upon my metal shields are deliberate and designed based on how I think about the blows to mental health. In comparison to how shields are used to protect the body from external harm, these are used to suppress that from within. The black silicone used in the landscape is beginning to ooze out as the barrier of metal is breaking down. The silicone and cotton thread of the Cracked Series is

---

24 https://www.sethpapac.com/about-me
employed akin to *Disquiet Beauty*, as an embodiment of unease, anxiety, and depression. This series of brooches exists within a constructed landscape made of the same silicone and cotton thread; an imagined scene where the shields exist in the lowest valleys. This decision in constructed geography nods to the negativity in the “low points” of the emotional range. There are subtle moments of tension created such as the interruptions in the edge of *Cracked #1* and *Cracked #4* where the silicone begins to stretch across the break in a way similar that the sinuous purple material at the center of the *Exposed Series* brooches stretches across openings. The remainder of the brooches display a combination of layering between shields to add more protection and theoretically keep the silicone at bay; a futile task.

Abjection-

Philosopher and psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva, describes abjection as “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it. A debtor who sells you up, a friend

Fig 17: *Cracked #4*, 2018
gold-plated brass, silicone, steel
who stabs you…”25 In short, the abject is the truly grotesque and unpleasant; the kind of revulsion that makes you physically sick. Do we automatically establish a hierarchy of attraction and disgust within our minds? The study of “What Is Beautiful Is Good”26 discusses the stereotyping based on physical attributes and how the majority of people expect success more often from physically attractive individuals. Working within the boundaries of the beautiful and the grotesque can be difficult when trying to include both of these opposing ideals, but in all opposites there is a range of possibility. What one person may find comforting, another can find tooth-grindingly uncomfortable, visa versa, and anywhere in between. A balance can be found in this dichotomy; A desire to touch but a equal and opposite desire not to engage at all. Perhaps it is found in a visually pleasing object but a physically disturbing texture, or an object that is comfortable and satisfying to hold but is unpleasant to view. The self that we project is circumstantial to the environment or situation we are in.

In her body of work titled Terrifying Beauty, contemporary Turkish jeweler, Burcu Büyükünal used gold wire to distort the face, basing her designs around the idea of cosmetic plastic surgeries as a method of obtaining a beautiful look. She worked with beautiful material on a beautiful face to talk about the ugly process of a beauty treatment. In contrast, Wisconsin-based metalsmith, Joseph Pine’s undergraduate thesis exhibition was “a navigation of emptiness, reuniting positive and negative spaces and unifying the vessel’s void and walls, it’s volume fully considered”27. The Exposed

27 http://www.josephpine.com/inside.html
Series of What Lies Beneath poses a similar aesthetic to Pine’s Interior #9 in its duality of a clean and constructed exterior to a bodily interior.

In the Exposed Series, the copper shell of each piece represents that facade which we encounter on a day-to-day basis, but the various openings offer a glimpse into the bodily abjection inside. Some only allow access of the interior to the wearer such as Exposed #1 and #5, some reveal just as much from the inside as the outside as in Exposed #6, and some act as a bodily cross-section for examination like Exposed #3 and #4. Each opening is a window into the truth of the interior. The center of this series of work is made of pink insulation foam that is transformed into an organic, sinuous form through melting by chemical process. The abject quality of this tissue-like material depicts the disgust I have for what is just below my own emotional surface. I am exposing the dark and gruesome interior for the world to see. Within the narrative of this
exhibition, this series is the acceptance and gradual relinquishing of control over that which we hide. It embraces the tumultuous interior but still contains it.

Anger-

In an attempt to convey all the emotion that can come out of a breaking facade, the single brooch of *Unleashed* displays all that can come out of a single emotional burst. Porcelain in western culture is often associated with femininity and the home. The shards were accumulated through the cathartic process of shattering them throughout my final year as a graduate student. My inclusion of this material stems from an examination in how emotion not only embodies a material, but permeates it. Initially attracted to using them as a deterrent of interaction in *Hands Off* (figures 9 & 10), I
found myself fascinated by the associations of broken porcelain. Images of fights, frustration, anger and emotional catharsis inspired how to approach my material. Using an archival resin to set the smaller fragments of porcelain within the cage of *Unleashed*, I built a mass of shards increasing in size as they seemingly pour from an unseen source. The shards filling the trough are what have poured out of the brooch, seemingly damaging the cage in its release. It will continue to pour out leaving piles in its wake. It is unstoppable and there is no going back.

Fig 22: *Unleashed* 2018
sterling silver, steel, Hxtal, porcelain
“I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them.”
— Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray
Reference Materials


Vita

Meg Wachs was born on the 24th of September, 1990 in New York City and is an American citizen. She received her high school diploma from Ossining High School in 2008 and her Bachelor degree in Fine Art from the State University of New York at New Paltz in 2012. She then worked within her field until attending Virginia Commonwealth University where she received her Master of Fine Arts in 2018.

Additional Education

2015 Penland School of Crafts | "Found" with Jaydan Moore | Penland, NC
2014 Penland School of Crafts | "Multiples: Fabrication Though Multiplication" with Sarah Loertscher | Penland, NC

Awards

2018—Travel Grant to attend East Carolina University’s "Material Topics" Symposium | Virginia Commonwealth University
2017—Craft & Material Studies Graduate Merit Award | Virginia Commonwealth University

Travel Grant to attend the Radical Jewelry Makeover Symposium in Baltimore, MD | Virginia Commonwealth University
Graduate Teaching Assistantship | Virginia Commonwealth University
Travel Grant for SNAG | Virginia Commonwealth University
Travel Grant to view Touchy Feely exhibition at Baltimore Jewelry Center | Virginia Commonwealth University
Employment

2018
Adjunct Instructor for "Beginning Jewelry" | Virginia Commonwealth University | Richmond, VA

2017
Summer Workshop Instructor | Pocosin Arts School of Fine Craft | Colombia, NC
Assistant Instructor to Kathleen Kennedy | Virginia Commonwealth University | Richmond, VA
- Samples and demo preparation
- China painting with enamels demonstration

2012-16
Jewelry Instructor | Long Lake Camp for the Arts | Long Lake, NY
- Hour long group classes with students 10-16 years old
- Basic to intermediate skill instruction

2014-15
Lead Fabricator | Ayesha Studio & Gallery | Englewood, NJ

2013
Production Intern | MPR Jewelry | Brooklyn, NY

2012
Assistant Instructor to Lynn Batchelder | SUNY New Paltz | New Paltz, NY
- Samples preparation

2010-11
Residence Life Staff | New York State Summer School of the Arts | Fredonia, NY
- Extra-curricular art program organization
- Office administration and organization

Exhibitions

2018
MFA Thesis Exhibition | The Anderson Gallery | Richmond, VA
Tiny Shiny 2018 | Quirk Gallery | Richmond, VA

35
Meyer Gallery Showcase | Virginia Commonwealth University | Richmond, VA

*Ripple Effect*169 | Wellington B Grey Gallery | Greenville, NC

2017
Beijing International Jewelry Exhibition | Beijing, China
*The Sequel* | VCU Craft and Material Studies Gallery | Richmond, VA
*Critical Candidacy* Exhibition | Hohman Design | Richmond, VA
*Tiny Shiny* Jewelry Exhibition and Sale | Quirk Gallery | Richmond, VA
*Touchy Feely* | Baltimore Jewelry Center | Baltimore, MD

2016
TOAST juried auction and fundraiser | The Depot Gallery | Richmond, VA

2015
Adorned Spaces: *100 Drawings, 30 Years at SUNY New Paltz* | SNAG Boston | Boston, MA

2014
NYSSSA Alumni Art Show | Michael C Rockefeller Gallery | SUNY Fredonia | Fredonia, NY

2012
(fabric)ation | Adirondack Center for the Arts | Blue Mountain Lake, NY
Senior Thesis Group Exhibition | Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art | New Paltz, NY

2011
"Person: Place and Things" | Matthewis Person House | Kingston, NY
Staff Group Show | Michael C Rockefeller Gallery | SUNY Fredonia | Fredonia, NY

2010
Staff Group Show | Michael C Rockefeller Gallery | SUNY Fredonia | Fredonia, NY
March "Artist of the Month" solo jewelry showcase | Poeima & The Vault | North Creek, NY