Demonstrated Sensitivity

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Demonstrated Sensitivity: Processing Trauma through Repetitive Craft Processes

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

by

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For the 3% of foster kids that graduate college, and the 97% that deserve the same opportunity.

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Abstract

Flameworking is a tedious process that demands all of your attention and focus. Making multiples of a shape in this process allows my body and mind to fall into a rhythm. During these times, it allows my anxious mind to be quieted and helps me dive into processing past memories, trauma, and grief. It is commonly suggested in Dialectical Behavioral Therapy practices to find an activity to do that is both physical and repetitive to work through grief. This stimulates the physical and mental parts of the body, both areas where the effects of grief and trauma are held. Relaxing into the process of creating glass chains has allowed me to find a practice that fits into this category of physical, yet repetitive. I am able to both work through my mental roadblocks, while simultaneously creating an object that communicates my past experiences in an ambiguous way. This has aided me in looking at my own story through a new perspective.

Glass is a material that exists with many inherent dichotomies; it is fragile yet strong, clear yet visible, soft yet sharp and hard. These same contradictions are representative of many of my experiences growing up. Chain as an object completely changes in context and function when it is made through glass processes.

Through my written thesis, I plan to explore both chain as symbol, giving representation to the complex feelings from a transient childhood, as well as how labor and tedious processes can play a key role in the healing of the past. I will discuss methods of processing and overcoming grief and trauma. Through the context of all these topics overlapping, I hope to paint a clear picture of my process & research.
Demonstrated Sensitivity:

Processing Trauma through Repetitive Craft Processes

Upbringing Bringing Me Down

My first cognizant memories are all moments of trauma: my mother’s head being thrown into the metal bar of my childhood swing set when she disagreed with my father’s idea to go camping for my birthday weekend, my sister and I hiding in the bathroom from my father who was behind the door screaming, knife in hand. The door lock was broken, as were all the other locks in the house, so we had to open the cabinet drawer to keep the door from being able to be opened. Watching my mother’s head get slammed into our refrigerator, then looking at that dent every time I opened the fridge until we got a new one many years later.

Throughout my life, I have navigated many situations and systems that not only didn’t serve me, but left me with harsh memories and lasting trauma. The first system that I endured was the foster care system, or rather avoiding the formal foster care system. From the time I was 7 until I turned 18 and aged out, I had frequent visits with case workers and court appearances, which dictated if I could live in my mother’s home or not. Because these time periods were often short and I was allowed to go back to my mother’s house when it was “safe for the time being,” I would stay with friends. My routine became to overpack for sleepovers and stay until I was far overstaying my welcome. I lived this way for 11 years, bouncing around friend’s houses and never knowing where I would be next. Some places were stable and I stayed for years, other times I slept in a different place every night of the week. When I couldn’t find anywhere to go, my car would do. It’s a very jarring experience to not know where you’ll be next or for how long.
Since I can remember, my family was filled with conflict. First, my mother and father fought daily. I watched as my father would come home and verbally and physically assault my mother. This lasted for a couple years until they ultimately divorced. Shortly after my parent’s divorce, tensions grew between my mother and sister, leading to verbal and physical altercations happening almost daily between them. I was a witness to all of this, often getting pulled into the chaos myself. Some nights that meant playing the mediator, trying to de-escalate arguments between family members and get them to stop arguing before 3 am so I could get 4 hours of sleep for elementary school. Other nights, it meant sneaking into my mother’s room to call the police from the second home phone. This proved worthless, as they would just dismiss the situation claiming that they “don’t handle domestic disputes.” Even when they arrived to see myself, my sister, and my mother bleeding or otherwise obviously physically beaten, they did nothing.

It was during this early time of my life that I learned that the easiest thing to do is to stay quiet and check out of reality. Instead of processing the difficult situations that were happening, I would get lost in my head and leave my body. The less space I could take up in the lives of those around me, the less trouble would come to me. I learned to ask for nothing and make myself as small as possible. In hindsight, this was probably not a healthy mentality for a 5-year-old to have. My bad habits and mental illnesses can be traced back to my childhood abuse. I’ve always believed in trusting what got you here, but for me that truly isn’t much, or at least not much that’s worth it. Stealing, lying, running away, etc. These are all habits that no longer serve me, and I have left behind. However, that doesn’t stop my body from inherently feeling like it’s still in survival mode and instinctively trying to fall back on these bad habits.
My body grew up in survival mode, and I still have not fully grown out of it. My instincts are still to not finish a whole meal; save at least half, because you never know where your next one will come from. Fight through pain and don’t take medicine because if you become reliant on it, you may not be able to afford it. Steal at least half of your groceries, you can’t afford to feed yourself otherwise. I find myself fighting the voice in my head every day telling me to follow these habits and the rules I created for myself that once served me. I seek to process the pain that caused me to do these things, accept that they no longer serve me, and work towards a sense of peace with these memories.

Finding a Medium

When I was 18 and going into college, I quickly began to understand that how I had grown up was not normal and that it would be something that I needed to overcome and heal from. At the time I was a graphic design major and I decided to take a glass class because it was something I had always wanted to try. Quickly, I found that I felt a connection to glass that I had never felt with another material. I fell in love with the way that glassblowing demands all your senses, truly allowing you to get lost in the process.

“A great many of us have a desire to return to something basic, authentic, and to find peace, to experience a small, quiet alternative to the din. There’s something slow and sustainable about such pursuits, something meditative. The possibilities of being interrupted when you’re brewing beer in your basement, or when knitting, are hopefully minimal, allowing you to relish the task at hand. Simply knowing that I am not going to be interrupted, and for once having an explanation for why I wish to be alone with my task is a wonderful luxury.” (Kagge, pages 29-30)
The aspect of the materiality of glass that captured my attention was all the dichotomies inherent to it's properties. It was strong, yet fragile. Transparent, yet visible. Soft, yet hard. It's state of being as an amorphous solid. I felt connected to all of these properties as someone who has always felt like I had many dichotomies present in my character as well. I immediately latched onto the process of glassmaking and never looked back.

While I was new to glass, I tried my hand at all of the processes: the hot shop, kiln casting, fusing, stained glass. Although I enjoyed those all immensely and respected different aspects about each, nothing ever just made sense until I tried flameworking. I sat down at the torch and got lost for hours, melting, bending, and shaping the glass. I felt the most at peace within making that I have ever felt, my mind could float wherever it needed to and my hands could just make. Over time, it has become second nature.

Self-Understanding Through Craft: Undoing Disassociation

Through my work in the past, I have explored my memories and worked to gain a better understanding of myself. The four common trauma responses are fight, flight, freeze, and fawn. When your body goes into one of these survival modes, it alters your body's and mind's response. In Psychology Today, the trauma responses are explained, specifically focusing on fawn— a response often seen in people who suffered from trauma and abuse in their childhood, such as myself. Sherry Gaba, a licensed social worker, states

*The most well-known responses to trauma are the fight, flight, or freeze responses.

However, there is a fourth possible response, the so-called fawn response. Flight includes running or fleeing the situation, fight is to become aggressive, and freeze is to literally become incapable of moving or making a choice.
The fawn response involves immediately moving to try to please a person to avoid any conflict. This is often a response developed in childhood trauma, where a parent or a significant authority figure is the abuser. Children go into a fawn-like response to attempt to avoid the abuse, which may be verbal, physical, or sexual, by being a pleaser. In other words, they preemptively attempt to appease the abuser by agreeing, answering what they know the parent wants to hear, or by ignoring their personal feelings and desires and do anything and everything to prevent the abuse." (Gaba)

Living nearly my entire adolescence in a constant state of survival mode resulted in my memories of the first 18 years of my life being indistinct. Through therapy and digesting the past, distorted memories would arise about a certain situation or period of my life. To both regain a sense of what happened and find a sense of peace through the difficult trauma, I turned to creating work about my upbringing. Doing so helped in finding a sense of silence with myself and being able to reach a meditative state while creating my work.

In therapeutic theory, there is a practice to work through grief and bereavement that involves repetitive movement. Your body holds stress and trauma in ways that can be detrimental to your physical health if not resolved. Dance or exercise is commonly used as an activity for these purposes. The symptoms of anxiety can mirror that of cardiovascular problems or allergic reactions, both of which I have experienced personally. I explore the ways in which glassblowing processes can fulfill these criteria and become a tool for me to heal my trauma. The glass process of flameworking has become a key part of improving my mental health and processing trauma. Flameworking, unlike working with soft glass in the hot shop, is done by only one person and uses a torch with a flame composed of propane and oxygen. Using rods and tubes of borosilicate glass, you heat the glass up in the flame and sculpt and/or blow them into the desired shape. It is
a repetitive process through which you can make small-scale parts that become part of a larger piece. Through repetition and working in isolation, I can reach a meditative state that allows my body to relax into the process. By utilizing this process to create work that speaks to my past experiences, I find a sense of peace within myself and work towards resolving my mental blocks.

For my thesis exhibition work, I implement this therapeutic practice of repetitious, physical movement into my artistic practice. The objects created through this process are long glass chains. These chains speak to the number of hours I spent creating them, each link more time processing the past and working towards coming to terms with my past. The more time I spend processing, the further I can bring myself from past unhealthy mindsets, and simultaneously, the longer the chain grows. The sizes vary and change in a smooth gradient. When my mother had recently passed away, a co-worker at the time sent me a piece of writing which circulated the internet that described the grief of loss as coming in waves. It has always stuck with me since reading it, both to describe the grief I was feeling due to all the sudden life changes I was facing, as well as the mental illnesses I've had to navigate that have resulted from my past experiences. Sometimes, the weight of all these things bearing down on me is heavy, almost unmanageable. Other times, they are nearly imperceivable, just something that exists in the back of my head. Though these burdens are never completely gone, at times they are almost invisible, but remain connected to the times that come before and will come after. The writing shared with me reads:

"As for grief, you'll find it comes in waves. When the ship is first wrecked, you're drowning, with wreckage all around you. Everything floating around you reminds you of the beauty and the magnificence of the ship that was, and is no more. And all you can do is float. You find some piece of the wreckage and you hang on for a while. Maybe it's some
physical thing. Maybe it’s a happy memory or a photograph. Maybe it’s a person who is also floating. For a while, all you can do is float. Stay alive.

In the beginning, the waves are 100 feet tall and crash over you without mercy. They come 10 seconds apart and don’t even give you time to catch your breath. All you can do is hang on and float. After a while, maybe weeks, maybe months, you’ll find the waves are still 100 feet tall, but they come further apart. When they come, they still crash all over you and wipe you out. But in between, you can breathe, you can function. You never know what’s going to trigger the grief. It might be a song, a picture, a street intersection, the smell of a cup of coffee. It can be just about anything…and the wave comes crashing. But in between waves, there is life.

Somewhere down the line, and it’s different for everybody, you find that the waves are only 80 feet tall. Or 50 feet tall. And while they still come, they come further apart. You can see them coming. An anniversary, a birthday, or Christmas, or landing at O’Hare. You can see it coming, for the most part, and prepare yourself. And when it washes over you, you know that somehow you will, again, come out the other side. Soaking wet, sputtering, still hanging on to some tiny piece of the wreckage, but you’ll come out.

Take it from an old guy. The waves never stop coming, and somehow you don’t really want them to. But you learn that you’ll survive them. And other waves will come. And you’ll survive them too. If you’re lucky, you’ll have lots of scars from lots of loves. And lots of shipwrecks.” (Reddit)
Mental Blocks & Detours

My work, or more specifically the process of creating my work, has always been a detour for me to get my mind unstuck. When my mind continuously gets caught on a memory or time in my life, I try to make it out through the fog by processing it through the language that I am most fluent in, glass. Using this process allows me to better understand my inner framework and gain clarity of my memories.

When I first came to graduate school at VCU, I was still just starting to reconcile with the passing of my biological mother. She passed in December of 2020, from liver cirrhosis due to alcohol consumption. Although her liver failing is what ultimately killed her, it wouldn’t be a far cry to call her death a prolonged and drawn out suicide. She had been unwell, both mentally and physically since her mother and two brothers passed away within the two years prior. She was diagnosed with depression, as well as physical ailments and given treatment for them. However, she stopped taking her medicine, barely ate, and consumed alcohol for months. In the months leading up to her hospitalization, she would speak about feeling guilty for still being here while her family members were gone. She would also bring up her will every time we spoke and urge me to tell her if I wanted anything in her home, or remind me to take care of any medical procedures I needed done before I didn’t have insurance. Regrettably, I didn’t understand the seriousness of the situation. To my knowledge, she was taking her medicine and getting treatment for her illnesses. She was in therapy for the first time in her life, something she had been needing to do since I was a child. She hid how bad things were, and due to the pandemic, I didn’t see her much in fear of getting her more sick. She fell extremely ill extremely fast, and from the start of her hospitalization, her doctors said that she would need to wholeheartedly want to get better for any improvement to happen. I knew from the moment they said this that she would not recover,
because she simply didn’t want to. The things she went through in life had caught up to her, and she could no longer bear the weight. Her death hit me very hard, as I felt like I should have seen it coming. I think we always feel some sense of responsibility for loved one’s deaths, but I hid in that feeling of responsibility and failed to process my feelings about her death for months after.

Shortly after she passed, I was cleaning out my mother’s house and sorting through her belongings. I found a spiral-bound notebook that belonged to my grandmother, filled with poetry and letters. She had written a poem for her own mother, after she had passed away in the 1960’s. She spoke about visiting her grave, but feeling as if she wasn’t really there, and grappled with her feelings about how to remember her. I identified so heavily with these feelings of not knowing how to process my mother’s passing, and didn’t quite have my own words yet on how I was feeling about it all. I didn’t know my grandmother very well, since I didn’t see her much when I was younger. As a way to both process my grief from my own mother’s passing and bridge a relationship that could not exist any longer with my grandmother, I wrote out her letter, replicating her handwriting in my own medium of glass. Writing in someone’s handwriting felt like a deeply intimate act, and through this labor intensive process, I was able to get to the bottom of some of my grief and move past my mother’s death in a way I had not been able to prior.

For the installation of this piece, I placed the words on top of a mirror, which sat on the floor. The edging of the mirror acted as a basin to hold liquid. I poured mineral oil on top of the mirror, which has the same visual properties of glass making the glass words nearly impossible to see. To see the words, you must crouch next to the piece, much like you would at a gravesite. The words are cast as shadows onto the walls. Although you cannot make out what they read from the shadows, they point at the fact that there is more on this mirror than you may initially see.
This piece was influenced by Lee Mingwei’s *The Letter Writing Project*. In this piece, he creates private rooms for viewers to write their own letters to loved ones, passed or otherwise absent, and he provides a desk and writing materials to allow for this. They can choose to seal and address their letters, which the museum will send out, or leave them unsealed for other visitors to read. In describing his reasons for making this piece, Mingwei says “When my maternal grandmother passed away, I still had many things to say to her but it was too late. For the next year and a half I wrote many letters to her, as if she were still alive, in order to share my thoughts and feelings with her.” (Perrotin) Though I did not feel ready at the time to write my own feelings, I felt the pressing burden that I needed to process this grief.
For my candidacy work, I was influenced by Tanja Hollander and her piece Are You Really My Friend?. For this project, she set out to meet all of her 626 Facebook friends, to determine what truly made someone a friend. She photographed all of her virtual friends in their home environments and formed real life connections with these people that some of whom she previously only knew online. She also asked the visitors to the exhibit to define what they thought made someone a real friend and displayed their answers on post-its in the space. Researching this piece made me think about the friendships in my own life and think deeply about my connections with those around me.
In my first year as a graduate student, I was trying to get to the root of what home meant to me. However, I wanted to hear what it meant to other people, as well as their associations with it. Since I couldn’t solidify my own understanding of home, I was hoping to find answers within other’s meaning. Because of this, I decided to ask those around me, similar to Tanja Hollander. I installed wall text asking questions and provided markers and post-it notes for visitors to respond. Although I got many interesting answers and learned more about those around me, this project was done anonymously. With the opportunity for conversations removed, which left me craving those missed connections. Because of this, I wasn’t able to ask follow up questions or make a real connection with the people sharing their thoughts with me, which I wish I had accounted for. I
put a lot of consideration into how to incorporate that missing connection and allow it to be part of a future project.

What is Home?, 2021

After giving thought to what I should have accounted for in What is Home? and taking time to reflect on what I wanted to do differently in a future project, I began working on my candidacy work. For this piece, I knew I wanted to incorporate connecting with the people around me and gain some perspective into their lives. Although my artistic practice has allowed me to look very deep within myself, I have never used it as a pathway to allow me that same view into the lives of others. With this in mind, I began to think deeper about why I was craving human connection so much at that moment. What I realized was deep and meaningful connections with the people
around me are essentially how I had survived up to that point. The friends I had growing up took me in and became family. What I lacked in stability and a "normal" upbringing, I definitely made up for with the people who rallied around me and got me through it. Up until I moved away for graduate school, I had always been close to my friends and chosen family, and they were what filled my days with joy, laughter, conversation, bike rides, and plenty of days spent in parks.

After moving to Richmond I felt out of place and up until this point, I couldn't exactly put my finger on why. When I had a moment of clarity that it was closeness I was missing, I started thinking of ways to have deeper conversations and make connections with those around me. I decided to ask them what they felt they were missing or needed and had them write their answers down. From their answers, I was able to ask myself if I needed the same things as well. I recreated each answer in glass and displayed them all together. In the installation, the shadows were more prominent than the words themselves, alluding to the space between the word shown, the actual conversation that took place, and what the person was missing. I came to view the shadows as the participant’s handwriting coming back into the space. Each word was a souvenir from a conversation had between the participant and myself, with either someone new in my life in Richmond, or someone who I wanted to reconnect with, now geographically far away. I also went back to the process of writing in another’s handwriting, as I feel that I can truly empathize better with someone when working in this intimate way. Through this project, I became much closer with those around me, got the human connection that I was seeking, and dove deeper into my needs by empathizing with other’s needs. After the exhibition came down, each person who participated got their word that I sculpted back, as well as a handwritten card from me thanking them for their conversation.
Only Way Out is Through

Trauma is a complicated feeling for your body and mind to hold and be present in. When you are traumatized, each new event or trigger becomes part of all that came before it, and will remain a part of what will come after it. When something triggers that memory, trauma pulls your body out of the present and brings it back to the moment of the traumatic event. Though you are physically safe and separated from the traumatic event via space and time, your body can no longer tell the difference and will experience the same physical and cognitive symptoms that you originally experienced. Your mind races, your hands start sweating, your heart feels like it may beat out of your chest. Your body is begging for safety, and it can be hard to assure it that you are in a safe space once these symptoms are onset.
Trauma inhabits your body and settles deep into every corner of your being. It clears out the cobwebs, finds a nook between two of your rib bones, and makes a home there. In "The Body Keeps the Score," the way trauma is held in the body is described as the following:

“We have also begun to understand how overwhelming experiences affect our innermost sensations and our relationship to our physical reality- the core of who we are. We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present. Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It's changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think. We have discovered that helping victims of trauma find the words to describe what has happened to them is profoundly meaningful, but usually it is not enough. The act of telling the story doesn't necessarily alter the automatic physical and hormonal responses of bodies that remain hypervigilant, prepared to be assaulted or violated at any time. For real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present. Our search to understand trauma has led us to think differently not only about the structure of the mind but also about the processes by which it heals." (van der Kolk, page 21)

My body often reacts to my surroundings separately from my mind. I have experienced dissociation for as long as I can remember, feeling distant from my memories, my body, my own life. When my surroundings become overwhelming, my mind simply shuts off and leaves my body to its own defenses. I enter survival mode and I often don’t remember anything once my body returns to its baseline level of stress. Living in this state is extremely disorienting, leaving your body
and mind often operating on different planes. In describing this mental condition, The Body Keeps the Score states,

“Dissociation is the essence of trauma. The overwhelming experience is split off and fragmented, so that the emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations related to the trauma take on a life of their own. The sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived. As long as the trauma is not resolved, the stress hormones that the body secretes to protect itself keep circulating, and the defense movements and emotional responses keep getting replayed. (van der Kolk, page 66)

Through re-finding myself in my body, I am actively working to re-situate both my body and my mind in the present, and have them work in unison. By learning to feel present and safe in my own body, my mind slows down and realigns with reality, rather than always chasing either the past or the future.

I recently discussed trauma in relation to movement with Dr. Jeraca Gayle, who studied clinical psychology and has worked extensively with traumatized individuals. They explained that when both sides of your body are being stimulated, both sides of your brain are stimulated as well, resulting in bilateral stimulation. This allows your brain to be activated in a different way than talk therapy does, reprocessing traumatic memories with both hemispheres of the brain present. Reprocessing can help lessen the psychological effects that these memories have on your mind and body. They stated

“You’re processing it in a much safer way than when we’re talking about something because then you have something to focus on. Your brain might even go to more vulnerable or deeper parts of the trauma and you are providing yourself a sense of safety in
walking, knitting, or crocheting... It really gives a lot of folks with anxiety something to do with their hands, which kind of tricks the brain." (Dr. Jeraca Gayle) They explained how tricking the brain in this way can lead to you having more of a sense of control over your safety. Activities such as crocheting, walking, or glassblowing require a safe place, which sends signals to your brain that you are safe physically, despite the trauma you are processing attempting to hijack your body's response system. From a safe place, you can access unsafe memories.

Glassworking is by its very nature a physical activity. It stimulates all of your senses, and takes over all of your attention. Because of this, it allows your thoughts to drift off. Other organizations have utilized glass processes as a form of art therapy, such as Hilltop Artists and Project FIRE. Hilltop Artists describes their mission as "Using glass art to connect young people from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds to better futures." (Hilltop Artists) Project FIRE is described on their website as "a glassblowing and trauma recovery program for youth injured by gun violence in Chicago. In addition to healing through glassblowing, Project FIRE is an employment and mentoring program that provides trauma informed support groups, case management, and medical treatment." (Project FIRE) These organizations have pioneered using glasswork as a therapeutic practice and as a tool to heal trauma. However, they mostly focus on the process of hot glassblowing. This type of glass can be intense and adrenaline-driven, forcing it to be the only thing you focus on. For me personally, this allows me to ignore the past and future and occupy my body in the present, but not digest and process my thoughts. When I am done a day of working in the hotshop, I feel as if I have just run a race, my body relaxing back into its regular pace. Meanwhile, a full day of flameworking feels more like an embodied yoga practice. My
body and mind are working in unison and I feel lighter after. My body has found a home within this process that allows it to slow down and shut the world out to hear my own mind at work.

Spending hours existing securely in my physical and mental self becomes an exposure therapy. Flameworking is the means for which I am able to endure this practice, keeping my thoughts floating while my hands stay busy. Over time, this will feel increasingly normal and become part of the fabric of daily life. A friend once told me that she remembers every detail of the past, including the song that was playing when we first interacted. The realization that it’s not normal to forget things and to just go through life in autopilot struck me upon hearing her experience. I frequently have the experience of someone telling me something that I did, or we did together. Only after they share a few details will I begin to have a faint recollection of this memory. Though it remains clear in their minds, and may have only happened the week before, my mind does not recall places it has not been. This is the root of the issue with my dissociation- my body may be in a space physically, but my mind is almost always elsewhere. Just like myself in childhood, it avoids the home that it has come to know as unstable and unreliable.

“Our sense of agency, how much we feel in control, is defined by our relationship with our bodies and its rhythms: Our waking and sleeping and how we eat, sit, and walk define the contours of our days. In order to find our voice, we have to be in our bodies- able to breathe fully and able to access our inner sensations. This is the opposite of dissociation, of being ‘out of body’ and making yourself disappear.” (van der Kolk, page 333)

Linking Past, Present, Future

_Demonstrated Sensitivity _explores the ways that trauma is held physically in your body and mind, as well as the intersections of multiple traumas being held simultaneously. The Anderson Gallery acts as a surrogate body and lengths of glass chain enacts and holds different moments
of tension throughout it. Though fragmented, they connect visually, alluding to both the seen and the unseen aspects of healing and the work that must be done to overcome trauma and grief. As a whole, these fragmented sections of chain explore the sensations felt by mind and body of a traumatized person. It is as if the chains are connected through the walls, containing secret sections which are integral, yet not physically present. The chains interact with the architecture of the building, disrupting the very make up of it.

The first piece of glass chain that you encounter is over 50 feet of chain hanging through the entire 4-story stairway of the building. If the building were a body, the stairway would be the spine. When the very thing that holds your body upright and is at the center holds such a heavy tension, it cannot go unnoticed. From the end of this chain, it is impossible to see the other side. While trying to heal from trauma, it can also be a challenge to know where the end is, or if there is an end at all. Only once you go through it, are you able to understand where it began, and finally ends, though it will always remain a work in progress. While walking up the staircase, you see the chain in varying distances, getting closer and further as you move throughout the staircase. It carries a heavy presence within the space and becomes an anchor, as well as a path through the building. As you move throughout the Anderson, you come and go to different rooms, but must always come back to the chain within the stairway to both enter and exit the building.

I had a therapist once who swore by somatic processing practices. She frequently encouraged me to “look inside of your body and then down,” noticing any physical sensations and giving a physical description to what I was feeling. I always had trouble with this, as I was never truly occupying my body. Through this project, I have been able to give physicality to my bodily discomfort. Some have a larger presence than others, some are barely there at all. However,
these small moments of disruption to my body’s space are always present and effect the way that I move throughout my daily life.

Once you arrive at the top floor of the building, a fragment of chain leads you into the gallery space. Upon first entering the gallery space through the open doorway, it may appear empty. As you look around, you’ll find fragments of chain throughout the room, each carrying its own amount of weight and tension. The first chain you’ll encounter is hung vertically in the middle of the space, less than a millimeter thin at the very bottom, drifting around in the space as you move throughout it, responding to your body’s presence. You become aware of your body within the space immediately, which effects how you continue to move throughout it. This chain provides a moment of rest, not carrying a burdensome weight.
As you continue through the room, you begin to see the other chains occupying the space, each in varying sizes. One chain is taught in the corner between two walls, creating a shadow that occupies space in a much different manner than the object itself. With a multiplicity of shadows, it speaks to the fading and confusing memory discussed previously that is such an inherent part of trauma. Like a few of the other sections of chain, it interacts with the corner of the room. In speaking to the properties of the corner in his book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard states "The point of departure of my reflections is the following: every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say it is the germ of a room, or of a house." (Bachelard, page 155) With the glass a continuous line firmly anchored in both walls and the shadow being fragmented and kinked, they tell opposing narratives of the same reality.
The chains in the room are all in conversation with each other, anchored to the room with half links. Are they all connected through the walls? Are you seeing the whole story, or only certain facets of it? Some chains are semi-relieved of their tension, with a pile on the floor, most of their weight being held and at rest. Others just barely, or almost touch the floor, leaving all the tension suspended between two points. Some you may not initially see or miss entirely, as they’re above your head. Others, you may see the shadow before the chain itself, seeing the effect before the cause. Once connected and now fragments of a whole, Demonstrated Sensitivity allows for you body to interact with these moments of tension and take a pause within them, look at them externally.
"What a call to humility the dreamer heard in his corner! For the corner denies the palace, dust denies marble, and worn objects deny splendor and luxury. The dreamer in his corner wrote off the world in a detailed daydream that destroyed, one by one, all the objects in the world. Having crossed the countless little thresholds of the disorder of things that are reduced to dust, these souvenir-objects set the past in order, associating condensed motionless with far distant voyages into a world that is no more" (Bachelard, page 162)

The first known chains were used by Ancient Egyptians sometime between 3150-332 BC, as a way to move water in a bucket elevator system. From there, it went on to be used in many industrial and functional applications throughout the world. (Leaf Chain) They served a utilitarian purpose, before later becoming a popular adornment as well on a smaller scale. Through either the application of adornment or functionality, chain implies the presence of the body. For a
utilitarian chain to perform its task, such as lifting, hoisting, containing, etc, it is activated by the human body. For a piece of jewelry chain to be properly seen, it is to be worn. Chain is only activated when in conversation with the body.

Through the process of making chain, I insert my own body into the process of creating it. The final pieces become ghosts of action, placeholders for emotion, for a moment, while the action has all occurred before the curtain is drawn. During their making, I fall into a series of repetitive movements and actions. My body reaches a rhythm, moving out of muscle memory and my mind floats away. In these times of being, I am able to think back to my greatest moments of grief, trauma, and fear, and reach a sense of understanding and peace with them. By keeping my body busy and in direct conversation with the material of glass, rather than the memories that my mind is recalling, I am able to process without the bodily discomfort.

The glass chains I create are a way for me to represent all the connections made throughout my life to bring me to where I am currently. Through the worst times in my life, I met some incredible people. The worst things that have happened to me, like not being able to live at home, connected me to living with beautiful people who taught me what home can be. The connections are fragile, as is the entire structure. One link breaks, one thing done differently and everything that comes after would be altered, or even cease to exist. Trauma also compounds upon itself and any new traumatic events you may experience remain connected to your past triggers. The chains are hung in fragments to allude to the fragmented nature of memory in a traumatized individual, often all connected but existing with gaps.
While constructing these chains, I both honor my past, the links that have come before, but also choose to play an active role in the links that comprise the future, choosing the things that I now connect and commit myself to. For most of my life, I have had no control over what was happening to me. Now, the control that I’ve found is to process it, heal from it, and move forward with my life in a healthier manner than I ever thought possible.
Conclusion (but also lack thereof)

Working through this project has become a therapeutic and healing practice for me. I have learned to inhabit my body in the present and see my traumatic experiences as another part of my story, rather than a place in the inner landscape of my mind that I continuously get stuck on. Being transient for so long, I became adjusted to the constant moving around, and I never truly was able to grasp the meaning of home in relation to space. After my transience came to an end and I slowed down a bit, I realized that my body was the consistent home that I had throughout it all—my one true home. However, that was also the place that I felt most uncomfortable occupying, often disassociating so much that I was not present within my own body. "I’ve started to understand why I was so fascinated as a small boy by the snail who carries his house on his back. We can also carry our houses—everything that we have—within us." (Kagge, page 125) I wholeheartedly agree with this sentiment, and envy the snail, who is content with just that. I aim to reach contentment within my place within my body, as well as my body’s place in the space around it.

Talking about my past has always felt like a futile pursuit, since my dissociation causes me to view it as disconnected from my current life. Healing my body through physical movement has been helpful in ways that I couldn’t have anticipated. Prior to learning about trauma body work and discovering that flameworking filled the requirements for this practice, I had settled into the inescapable reality that I would always possess a deep and unshakable physical discomfort. I seek to ultimately reach an inner silence and mental quiet within myself, both at peace with my
past and no longer fearful of my future. Erling Kagge, summed up what I seek through my pursuit of processing through craft in saying,

“Shutting out the world is not about turning your back on your surroundings, but rather the opposite: it is seeing the world a bit more clearly, staying a course and trying to love your life.

Silence in itself is rich. It is exclusive and luxurious. A key to unlock new ways of thinking. I don’t regard it as a reunification or something spiritual, but rather as a practical resource for living a richer life.” (Kagge, page 35)
Bibliography


"Who We Are." Hilltop Artists, June 1, 2022. https://hilltopartists.org/who-we-are/.


Influential works

Lee Mingwei, The Letter Writing Project, 1998

Tanja Hollander, Are you Really My Friend?, 2017

Interviews with

Dr. Jeraca Gayle, clinical physiologist

Photographs of the exhibition by

Madeleine Mae Morris
Vita

Kate Crankshaw was born in the Pinelands of New Jersey in 1996. Her work explores ideas of memory, longing, and relationships. Kate holds a BFA in Craft + Material Studies, with a focus in glass, from the University of the Arts (2019) and is a current MFA candidate in the Craft/Material Studies program with a focus in glass at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her work has been exhibited nationally, including at the Philadelphia International Airport, CraftNow in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington.