

Individual Studio Praxis

The Great Uterine Remedy

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FIN4012W

Theory and Practice of Art

Michaelis School of Fine Art

October 2023

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Introduction

"I am discovering how furious and resistant some pieces of me are, as well as how terrified."

(Lorde, 2017, p. 44)

The focus of my work has been Endometriosis. The illness itself and the stigma around it through the lens of my personal experience. The aim of this body of work is a way for me to work through and express my experience in addition to opening up conversations and finding solidarity with those around me. This essay will examine the ways in which my investigations into myself and the topic have taken material form. The methodology of my practice is supported in the theory of the abject, the grotesque, and radical self care. In conjunction with my work and experience, it was important to ground my work in the essay '*A Burst of Light*' by Audre Lorde - an essay rooted in personal experience, reflection, solidarity, frustration, and care. The format of Lorde's essay being a series of diary entries is more in line with the approach I have taken in my practice rather than that of dense academic language.

Artist Statement

Endometriosis is defined as "a disease in which tissue similar to the lining of the uterus grows outside the uterus" by the World Health Organisation. (WHO, 2023) The pain, isolation, and frustration of my experience of living with and being diagnosed with Endometriosis is the focus of this body of work. Therefore, it is important to establish a

medical definition. Interestingly, the definition continues to explain;

"The cause of endometriosis is unknown. There is no known way to prevent endometriosis. There is no cure, but its symptoms can be treated with medicines or, in some cases, surgery."

(WHO, 2023)

It is this that started the fire of frustration for me in experiencing and researching the disease. I could not help but question why and the simple answer is; that for a long period of time the ailments of women were not prioritised or dismissed as hysteria. My experience with doctors reaffirmed the lingering effects of this medical misogyny. What drew me to Lorde's work is her outspoken approaches to solidarity and care. This resonated with me at a time when I felt dismissed and alone. '*A Burst of Light*' is a series of journal entries written from the first person perspective as Lorde documents and examines her experience with cancer. (Lorde, 2017) While the condition is not the same, the reading of experience, the lulls, fears, and anger is what is important. To live with pain, to try and find answers, to find connection in the isolation. For the same reason that I can conjuncture Lorde included personal journal entries in an essay; is the reason I must make the work I make. To live through my experience and all that it encompasses. To shout from the rooftops even if no one is listening, in the chance that I can make one person feel less alone. That is what this essay has done for me in its raw honesty. For this reason, I lay my body and my mind open in this work or else it would eat me up inside - I already have something doing that so what is there to lose?

Materiality

Firstly, is it important to note materiality as it relates and informs my practice. As

previously mentioned, I have used materials that have worked with me and against me.

Creating a conversation between the soft and the sharp. Inherently the nature of my chosen materials evokes the abject and the grotesque. They are materials and textures that make you squirm. The use of objects such as a table speaks to the feeling of laying on a table before examination. Being reduced to an object of curiosity. A feeling I know all too well. In addition to using methods of making that are generally considered women's craft, such as felting. Needle felting provided me with a method of self care. Additionally, care is reflected in the preparing and making using wool. In order to connect with the herbal medicine alluded to in my IV bags and bottles; I made my own natural dyes for the wool. The process of making the dye, dying the wool, rinsing it, drying it and brushing it out provided moments of injecting care into the making of my work. As well as moments of quiet reflection. However, I have yet to speak on the objects in my work. All the identifiable objects seen in my work are inherited from my grandmother. It was important for me to give a place to things that had none. A process that has developed from previous years of practice. These objects serve as a conduit to talk about the every day, inherited illness, and history. The process of breaking down and building up again reflects my search for answers all around me. Furthermore, the 'Heredity' (Figure 5) prints expand on the notions of inheritance.

"Most of all I think of how important it is for us to share the powers buried within the breaking of silence about our bodies and our health, even though we have been schooled to be secret and stoical about pain and disease. But that stoicism and silence do not serve us nor our communities, only the forces of things as they are."

(Lorde, 2017: 86)

This series of prints focuses on the inherited aspect of my experience with

endometriosis. Using photographs of my mother and grandmothers with their personhood removed talks about the invisibility of this disease. The cysts are taken from medical documents. Created in Lino cut to show the idea of cell replication. Additionally, embossed with the packets of my daily medication. The variation found in this series is to show the forever-changing and adapting nature of endometriosis. I try to find camaraderie with the other women in my family when I feel like no one else is there. It is this nature of stoic silence that was vital in my need to create work about this subject. To try and start a process of breaking this silence.

The Abject

The concept of the abject can be defined as “the body being undone and taken apart”. (Arya, 2014, p. 85) The purpose of the abject in art is to confuse the boundaries and limits of the body in all its inner secret moments. (Stewart, 1993, p. 104) To question the taboos surrounding the body; often in explicit ways. It is this mode of the inside becoming the outside that informs the visual manifestations of my work. To make the viewer question, be uncomfortable and yet intrigued. Inspiring a sense to need to know more. This can be seen in a number of my works; namely the use of needle felting to create an illusion of interior flesh, in addition to abstracted motifs found in my prints. The sculptures and prints sit in conversation with each other. Providing bits of information and intrigue.

To elaborate on this idea, I would like to draw attention to the two layer lithographic prints - ‘Hysteria’. (Figure 1) This large-scale two-layer photographic lithography print uses imagery from the medical journals, of the turn of the 19th to 20th century, to make an image that is obscured and confusing. The choice to use images from historical documents is to highlight the history that gynaecological medicine is based on. While there have been

improvements, I found that it was still important to take note of as the air of misogyny and racism still echoes today. Additionally, the depictions of the women in these journals accurately depict the objectification felt in a doctor's room. Reclaiming objectification through the agency of the abject. The feeling of being reduced to a body, an image on a page. The goal of this print is to break down this imaginary apart and piece it back together. The closer you look the more imagery can be identified. The tread speaks to the idea of the body leaking beyond its container. In addition to the IV bags used in other parts of my work These IV bags filled with herbs and spices show the contrast between traditional Western medicine and alternative medicine. The herbs used are from commonly suggested recipes for the self-treatment of uterine-related ailments. This leads to the notion of the grotesque in art.

The Grotesque

The grotesque can be defined as a “visual strategy and aesthetic that enabled the body to be reconfigured in interesting and inventive ways.” (Arya, 2014, p. 90) The relevance of the grotesque comes into my work through the simultaneous inside and outside-ness of my work - as previously mentioned. The use of the grotesque in art inherently makes people uncomfortable as the container of the body has been exposed. Stewart in ‘*On Longing*’ explains ;

“We want to know what is the body and what is not, and it is in the domain of ritual and the carnival grotesque that we see this boundary confused and ultimately redefined.”

(Stewart, 1993, p. 105)

The grotesque in my work is used in two key ways. The first being the more obvious

needle felting and prints that make use of textures and colours that immediately make one think of the internal body (Figure 1, Figure 2). Secondly, the less obvious use of materiality and texture to create the feeling of the grotesque and the breaking down of containers.

What I call my conglomeration sculpture is perhaps the best example of this (figure 3). ‘Conglomeration’ fully took on a life of its own in many unexpected ways. It came about from using what I had around me. Which was many broken glass pieces from my grandmother. Broken glass became a way of talking about the pain of Endometriosis. When it comes to describing chronic pain, I could not explain it in words better than Audre Lorde;

“I have periods of persistent and distracting visceral discomfort that are totally intrusive and energy-consuming. I say this rather than simply use the word pain because there are too many gradations of effect and response that are not covered by that one word.”

(Lorde, 2017: 95)

The use of plastic is to mimic the patterns created in my prints as well as to invoke the feeling of discomfort as examined previously. Looking sticky, while being sharp, taking over aspects of my life, potions of herbal medicine, speaking to alternative remedies, and a willingness to try anything at this point. This was one of my first ideas yet the sculpture broke time and time again. Mimicking the patterns of having to rebuild the broken parts of myself. I became the surgeon trying to piece back together parts of my body and my mind through a sharp and unruly materiality.

Radical Self Care

The politics of care and rest are nothing new. Black women have paved the way for these ideas to support organising and community building for some time. Audre Lorde is one

of these women. Perhaps most well known for her quote;

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

(Lorde, 2017)

Yet, self care is still unjustly shamed. In essence, the stance that Lorde is to say that without taking care for yourself you cannot take care of those around you. The role of care has historically been on that of women, especially women of colour. (Mirk, 2016) It is important to listen to the words of women such as Lorde, especially as a white person. Race does inherently play a factor in the politics of care. As our society is built on hierarchies. To separate ourselves based on difference is to support these hierarchies. That does not mean to say difference should be ignored but rather acknowledged and taken into account when it comes to offering solidarity. And for the longest time, white women chose not to listen. I cannot make work about care without acknowledging the black women at the forefront of this. In a world of hierarchy and commodification, taking time for rest and care is to fail. A feeling I know all too well when I was in too much pain to meet this level of productivity. Without rest and care the oppressive forces of our society maintain control. Refusing them that control is an act of political warfare. Lorde often talks about her place of privilege to write and to speak. My work is through my the lens of a white person who can afford health care. It is only in acknowledging this privilege that I can start to make work that goes beyond myself - as it is this privilege gives me the opportunity to do so.

The work titled ‘Ova-reacting’ (Figure 2) is an example of how I proactively started to take notions of care into my practice. This artwork came about as a reaction to my frustration,

not only with daily pain but the process of making with materials that do not always go my way. The creation of this mode of making was important to notions of care. I had to find a way that I can say everything I wanted to say but find a way to work that does not put my body on the line. (Lorde, 2017) The title is about a joke a doctor made to me while I was in the ER. After effectively giving me painkillers and sending me home. Only to find out later that I had a cyst that burst. Of which I should have been admitted in case of complications. Luckily there was not any but the frustration remains. I wanted to make something tangible to take out this frustration. Needle felting felt like the correct choice of method due to the idea of stabbing repeatedly with needles. In addition to being able to do this at home should I need to in the times when I cannot get out of bed. A process that I feel accurately reflects the pain I feel. However, oddly the process became cathartic for me. The sound and the repetitive nature made me feel like I had control in moments that I usually do not.

Additionally, ‘Mess’ (Figure 4) marked a turning point in my practice. Halfway through this year, I had to take a hard look at what it is that I want to do and what I want to say. How can I express myself while supporting myself? These prints are a result of self-reflection and a period of immense anxiety in progressing with my work. When all else failed I drew. Drawing from images of my room after a similar period of deep depression. Initially, I was not planning on doing much with these drawings but a new study into Endometriosis sparked the fire that I felt in my need to express myself. And so these prints were created as a result. The drawing turned to vectors in which microscopic images of Endometriosis were combined. This work goes to show the entanglements of Endometriosis with my anxiety and depression, often making each other worse. In reading A Burst of Light I found relatability in the descriptions of pain, question, and depression that come along with illness that does not have an easy treatment or answer. Lorde wrote to deal with this and I draw. (Stewart, 1993)

"I want to write down everything I know about being afraid, but I'd probably never have enough time to write anything else."

(Lorde, 2017, p. 39)

These prints serve as my way of finding a balance between supporting myself and expressing myself. Laying out intimate parts of myself in serving what it is I want to express from a more personal experience.

Conclusion

To write a conclusion for an illness and a search for answers that is never ending feels almost impossible. As this body of work comes to a close I cannot say I have found closure. What I can say is I have found acceptance or at least an excuse to never stop talking about the topic. Supported by the theories of the abject, the grotesque, care, and materiality my work aims to provide a look inside; inside of me, inside of illness, and inside of the viewer. Through conversation, we learn and grow. In conversation, I can try and highlight the commonality of something many people have not even heard of. It is my hope that for those people my work gives opportunity to pause and consider more than themselves - to spark thought beyond the topic of endometriosis. It is in conversation that I have found solidarity. Providing a means for people to share their experiences. That has been the most fulfilling part of this project. Making the invisible seen and a reminder that I am not alone - none of us are.

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Appendix

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

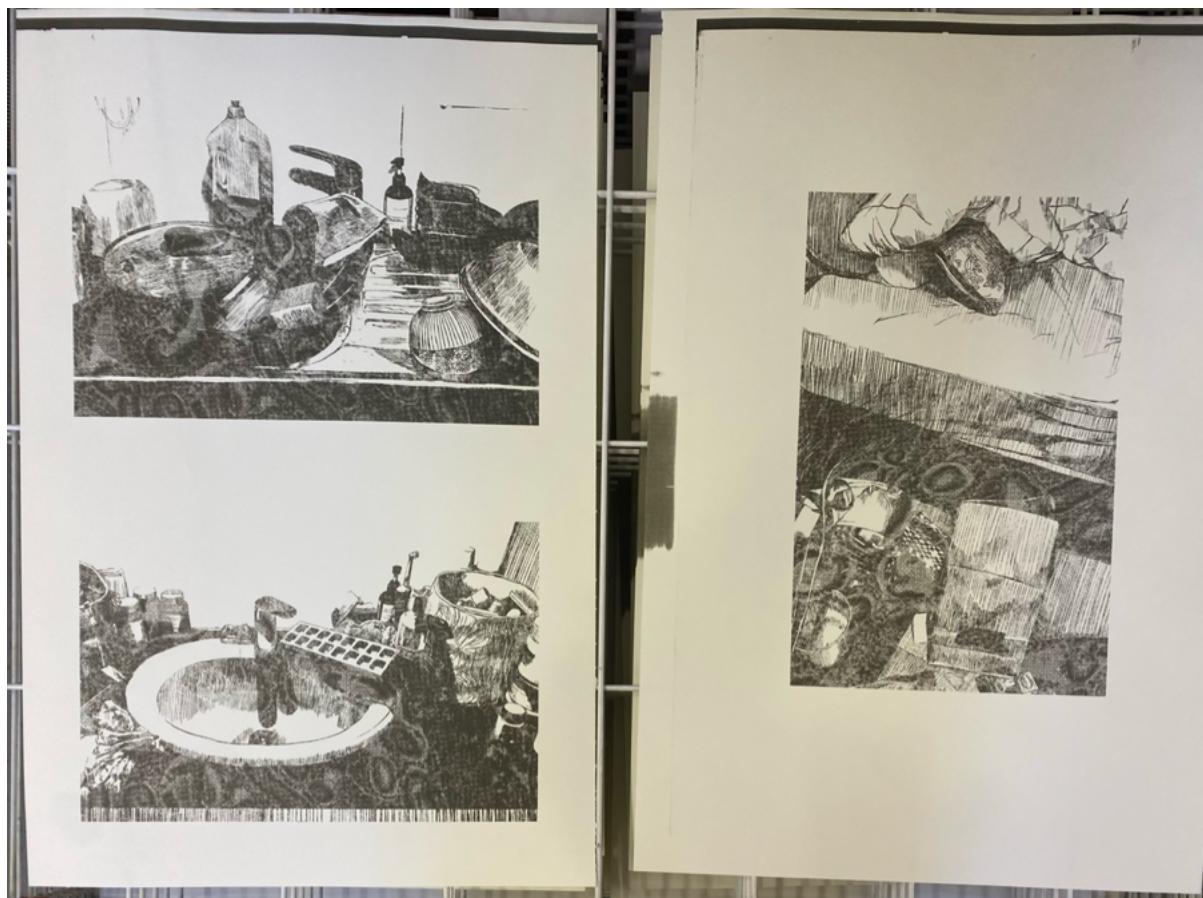


Figure 5

