

Voids, Blobs, and Bodies:
Representing Care and Chronic Illness in the Gallery

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Abstract

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The body of work explored in this paper depicts care routines connected to lessons from chronic illness: care for ourselves (skincare, massage) and care for each other (gathering, community, touch). I represent these care routines in large, gestural drawings, paintings, interactive sculptures, and delicate monotypes. Broadly, the work looks at chronic illness, showing the daily gamut of rest, (inter-)dependence, melodrama, varied physical sensations, vulnerabilities, and connections formed alongside my lived experience of autoimmunity. Through material exploration with loose weave canvas, bedsheets, table linens, furniture, rounded substrates, cotton gauze, and molding paste, I consider the painting as an object with intimate knowledge of the human body.

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Introduction

In Autumn 2023, artist Paul Chan came to the University of Washington to give a talk and conduct studio visits with graduate students. During our studio visit, the conversation was wide-ranging but landed on the problem of visual language for physical experiences: how can illness dictate form? After that conversation, with help from Virginia Woolf¹ and bell hooks², I took up a new version of this question: how can the knowledge I gain through direct experience of chronic illness dictate the form, function, and content of my work? In plain language: what does my chronically ill life look like? How could my creative decisions - from materials, surfaces, images, and support structures - reflect what I know from being ill? And ultimately, can that knowledge extend beyond the work into the spaces in which it is shown? My resulting thesis work explores material, pictorial, and philosophical answers to these questions.

Content

The primary jumping off point for this body of work is to allow the viewer to visit with my lived experience of chronic illness by creating representational images of familiar care tasks. Offering a window to view these experiences is not the same as offering an invitation to be inside them with me. While many people interpret work concerned with chronic illness as being about suffering or pain, I view my experience as significantly more layered. Without summarizing 60+ years of the disability justice

¹ In an earlier version of this thesis paper, I struggled to select passages from Virginia Woolf's pertinent essay *On Being Ill* because the whole thing is a tour de force about the lack of written language to describe physical experiences of pain and illness.

² Similarly, hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* outlines the challenge of having a body, especially a feminine and racialized body, within academic spaces. I highly recommend the entirety of both texts.

movement, my position as a young, white, feminine person with an invisible illness positions me very near the center of privilege among disabled people. My experience of disability, and in particular access to consistent affordable care and compassionate practitioners, is both alleviated and limited by that privilege. While my work touches on difficult components of chronic illness like the perennial vulnerability, isolation, and hypervigilance of avoiding or being at the mercy of infection and unexpected disease progression, this understanding of chronic illness is incomplete. My early experiments with visual language for pain were unsatisfying because they essentialized the experience of chronic illness to this singular dimension. In truth, my vulnerability invites me to be much more in tune with myself, my body, the people around me, and the world in which I live. While others in my environment consistently push through untenable amounts of stress, trading their long term wellness to perform well and meet the demands of academia, the so-called Art World, and exploitative workplaces, my susceptibility to illness challenges me to use creativity, innovation, and the latitude afforded to me by privilege to seek out and choose about more sustainable paths.

Subject Matter

For the majority of my thesis work, I focused primarily on depicting care tasks from my daily life or the lives of those around me. In a literal sense, these are repeated behaviors that we engage in to address physical discomfort or psychological needs. Specific examples include skin care, mucus membrane maintenance, self and partnered massage, and gathering in community. It felt important neither to judge nor romanticize what care looks like. A gathering can be

essential without being welcoming or joyful. Skincare can be simultaneously isolating, bound up in misogynistic anti-aging propaganda, and genuinely pleasurable. Partnered massage co-occurs with feelings of disembodiment, being trapped, irritation, and the hazy enmeshment of caretaking. Vaginal moisturizers, particularly hyaluronic acid creams and suppositories, exist primarily to address the uncomfortable vaginal dryness experienced by peri- and postmenopausal cisgender women; this important knowledge is seemingly shared only through whispers on internet forums despite a growing body of evidence that their results are comparable to oft-prescribed estrogen creams while causing fewer side effects (Dos Santos, Strute). Taken together, these images are a way to consider personal and communal manifestations of care.

Process & Materials

Material exploration has been essential to my creative practice over the last two years. I started with reclaimed fabrics that “knew” or were made *for* people and in response to what our bodies do: placemats for eating, bedsheets for sleeping, garments for warmth and protection. In some ways, these represent the center of the venn diagram between the messiness of living with a body (crumbs, sweat, body odors, temperature sensitivities) with the necessity of living in a body-averse society (cleanliness, body coverings).

In terms of process, I oscillated between two generative exercises: quick, small, quantity-focused monotypes and equally quick large charcoal drawings made over molding paste. The former process came out of a period of ill health during which I worked from my bed, utilizing a discarded piece of window glass as a printing plate.

This daily practice resulted in the backlog of monotypes that make up one of my thesis works, *Dermis, Epidermis, Hypodermis* (please see [figure 1](#)). In the latter process, the molding paste allowed the substrate to function almost like a chalkboard. According to [Golden's website](#), molding paste consists of a combination of 100% acrylic polymer in the form of a gel with finely ground marble dust (Golden). The slick surface doesn't allow the charcoal to fully permeate or leave a final mark unless fixed. Alternately drawing, wiping away, and adding layers of molding paste or extra heavy molding paste allowed me to build visual atmosphere without committing to a final image.

Both of these processes start with rectangular surfaces: for monotypes: hand-torn bed sheets and exam table paper; for charcoal drawings: scissor-cut pieces of cotton gauze and loose weave canvas. Then, through mask-making or drawing, I find a more organic shape within which to hold the image. Mask shapes for the printing process came through tracing body parts (cupped hands, open mouths, outer ear canal, etc.) while charcoal drawing shapes came into view through the drawing process, typically in response to human figures that emerged over many layers. This process felt particularly resonant as "the body" or the figure both dictates the boundary of the image while also being constrained by it. These organic shapes felt like ways to explore visual language that takes its cues from living, organic, blob-like forms rather than the straight edges with sharp corners that often make up default painting choices.

Support Structures

In exploring more organic support structures, a.k.a. strainers or stretchers, I turned to James William Blake, a fellow artist and University of Washington alumnus/community member with extensive wood and metal fabrication experience. Together, we developed a process to trace the shapes in my large charcoal drawings and create rounded structures made with 2 by 4's and plywood. Please see [figures 7](#) and [7.5](#) for my actual notes about this process. While they have been a useful starting point to move away from the rectangle, the resulting objects seem to soften rather than fully depart from their rectangular cousins. A next step in this process is to explore truly organic, lumpy, orificial, and perhaps translucent forms.

While I have not yet fully explored this idea in my current work, I find the metaphor of the support structure to be ripe for visual and metaphorical play. The phrase support structure, which in the literal sense in painting describes canvas strainers, also encompasses seats, beds, and mobility aids like canes and walkers. In the figurative sense, support structures refer to the distributed networks of care in our social lives: our friends, chosen and biological families, greater communities, institutional support services, and community or state-run social safety nets. As a step towards engaging these ideas, I have moved towards creating paintings that come off the wall, make their support structures more visible, and in the bench piece, extend some of their physical support to viewers. On the other side of the shaped paintings, I used basic upholstery techniques to stretch the fabric over their rounded strainers and secured them with stainless steel upholstery tacks, referring

to chairs and couches which are objects that exist in response to and support of human bodies.

Alternatives to Canvas

As many painters know through experience, there are a litany of reasons to stick to canvas and linen as substrates. The surface needs to be resilient and be able to take layers of size, primer, paint, and the pokes, caresses, scratches, and sanding of the artist. Many artists in my life have described linen or canvas with an oil ground - or better yet, a lead white ground - as sensuous, skin-like, perfect surfaces. For me, the metaphorical resonance of the fabric, the ground surface, and the support structure as a kind of body became too present to ignore. I experimented with various painting substrates to replace or explore alongside canvas. In my mind, they were textiles that knew bodies: bed sheets, pillow cases, placemats, garments, and exam table paper. Each of those had varying degrees of strength and durability. I was drawn to the translucence and footprint of the bed sheets, light passing through them when wet with PVA size almost like skin. Unfortunately, something about the way the paint sat on top of that surface, coupled with the unnatural stiffness they took on from the glue, simply felt wrong.

I started to think about the canvas as the dermis, the layer on the body that keeps the “outside” out and the inside in. For people with autoimmune disorders, or other chronic illnesses, that barrier starts to feel thin, like inadequate protection from pathogens, blunt force, and environmental poisons. What if the substrate reflected that material inadequacy? I found a small piece of cotton gauze and conducted a test with PVA, and then a material called *Stiffy* (yes, really) to size and firm up the

fabric for painting. While it looked promising - warmer, less chalky than gessoed canvas - and held a charcoal drawing within the material like a tattoo, the PVA still made it brittle and unpleasant to touch. During our painting seminar, Carly Sheehan recommended hard molding paste which I discuss in greater detail under [Process & Materials](#).

Another fabric I tested was cotton gauze. Previously, I had only encountered gauze in a wound-caring context. I had never pictured the large bolts of gauze fabric from which rolls of gauze in the first aid kit had originated. The Oxford dictionary defines it broadly: “a very thin, light cloth, used to make clothing, to cover cuts and to separate solids from liquids, etc.” (OED). In wound care, the gauze acts as a second skin - a kind of connective tissue when the normal barrier breaks down. I found the Dictionary.com’s definition broader and more clear: “any thin and often transparent fabric made from any fiber in a plain or open weave” (Dictionary.com). The fourth definition in the list is “a haze.”

All of this felt intuitively correct for my work. The second skin, the supplementary dressing, the haze as a link to brain fog. When covered in layers of hard molding paste, the gauze takes on and maintains a milky translucent quality similar to skin. It’s difficult to work with: because of the open weave and low thread count, it stretches, sags, and tears like skin. I pinned it onto stretchers with thumb tacks in order to tighten the surface after each application of molding paste. The tension and the tacks stretch oblong holes into the borders of the fabric like heavy earrings carving dashes into earlobes. The surface requires constant maintenance to stay taut. I suspect it will loosen, sag, and pool over time as it ages. In the right lighting, you can see the support structure through the paste-primed cotton gauze.

While these cotton gauze explorations have not yet made their way into the work that I show, experiments with them have been formative and will continue to offer rich directions for further research.

Artist Referents

Though the relationship between disability justice work and my work is somewhat tenuous, many disabled artists and writers have influenced my thinking. Canaries as a collective is best and succinctly described in this excerpt below:

Canaries is a network of art-adjacent women and gender non-conforming people living and working with auto-immune conditions and other chronic illnesses. The group name references the phrase “canaries in the coal mine”—shorthand for those whose sensitivities are early indicators of adverse conditions in the environment. Canaries functions as a support group with monthly meetings, a listserv of 200+ members for sharing confidential advice and support on surviving in and outside of medical institutions, and, previously, an art collective. (Stuudio)

While I am not privy to the network’s reasoning for moving from its initial conception as an art collective to a support group, the shift makes intuitive sense to me.

Participation in the art world seems to demand constant performance and production: make a lot, consistently, and well. Attend all of the events, submit all of the applications, be edgy in theory but only so much in practice. Even physically abled people burn out under those circumstances. Canaries, which is accessible to me only as a limited internet archive, reminds me that I must imagine and inhabit spaces other than the proverbial coal mine. Their presence posits that perhaps the

work is to consider new and wider ways to connect with art and artists, and to continuously involve and evolve networks of support.

My University of Washington community members have seen me wear this hat (see [figure 8](#)), but the only person who recognized it as a piece by contemporary artist Finnegan Shannon (in collaboration with Marisa Olson) was the new Jacob Lawrence Gallery Director Jordan Jones. The bench piece (*Gather / come as u r*, see [figures 2](#) and [2.5](#)) in particular steps a toe into the direction that Finnegan Shannon plumbs in their work that explores, invents, and makes visible the lack of accessible seating in gallery spaces (*Do You Want Us Here or Not?*, *The Only Thing I like About Stairs*, etc) (Shannon). While the work obviously engages in institutional critique, it tends to do so while actively addressing shortfalls through the creation of additional or at a minimum more comfortable seating in or around the exhibition spaces.

As far as other artists whose work has informed this body of work, influential stops on the path have included Maria Lassnig's imagined self-portraits, Kiki Smith's delicate and spare rice paper drawings and books, William Kentridge's sweeping and monumental charcoal drawings, and Kathe Kollwitz's sensitivity and humane depictions of maternal love and collective pain. The awkwardness and honesty of Paula Rego and Cathie Wilks's sculptures offered me a way to imagine full persons in the round. Through all of this work, I sought models of self-sovereignty and intimacy between people. I revisited [an Albertinelli painting](#) that stopped me in my tracks at the Uffizi which depicts a visitation consisting primarily of two older women facing one another and touching (Albertinelli). The two veiled figures in Albertinelli's Visitation figured heavily in my mind as I reworked *Wind Down Routine* (compare [figures 3.5](#) and [3](#)).

Another artist that influenced the process of *Wind Down Routine* is Leon Golub, suggested to be my critic and writer Seph Rodney during a studio visit. Seph brought my attention to the paint breaking over the figures, the short strokes and the ambling bodies, the sense of violence in the material surface supporting the violence in the pictures. While I am not interested in intentionally doing violence to or in my work, I responded to the active, layered, worked, and almost atmospheric quality of Golub's more ambiguously imagined solitary figures. These images appear to be chunky, whole, contemplative, atmospheric, and teeming. In these images, the site of the action is the figure itself. In light of his other work, evoking scenes of torture and war crimes, paintings like *Philosopher III* take on a greater sensitivity or even tenderness (Golub). Keeping these teeming tender surfaces in mind, and Golub's process of building up and scraping down his surfaces, I returned to extra heavy molding paste to carefully cover, scrape, and fix the charcoal to explore they layered sense of tenderness, discomfort, intimacy, and enmeshment that I associate with caretaking (Broad).

Conclusion

What can I conclude about visual language, chronic illness, and care tasks? Viewing the work, I feel that each piece contains some valuable learnings. For [Wind Down Routine](#), the layered material surface seems most varied and realized, creating perhaps the most tonally complex image in the group. I'm excited by the possibilities opened up by [Gather](#), though I must do further research and likely many more iterations of unusual or interactive support structures to deliver on the thought. [Skin Care Routine](#) and [Chatter](#) have moments of what I'm looking for: varied but

recognizable spaces, punchy color, emotion; that being said, they seem to me to be, as Sangram sometimes says, “unbaked” in both material and content. As an ongoing series, I feel that [*Dermis, Epidermis, Hypodermis*](#) holds promise, though I would like to explore alternate curation approaches for this piece that more strongly highlight the bio, psycho, social levels of their text and imagery. At the end of this intensive studio research process, I find myself with more questions than answers. How can work be informed by personal experience while transcending the limits of self absorption and narcissism? How can the way a drawing is put together more strongly evoke the emotion or sensation that it portrays? How can paintings create more sustained interactions with viewers? These lines of inquiry, paired with explorations of lumpier, more delicate shapes and substrates, seem like fruitful directions for further research. Care and connection will continue to lead me as I transition out of grad school and into what’s next.

Illustrations



Figure 1. *Epidermis, Dermis, HypoDermis (there's layers to this)*

Block print ink and lip liner on torn bed sheets, exam table paper, fax paper, and printmaking paper

Dimensions Variable (this formation 96" x 96")

2023-ongoing

Photo by Jacob Chung



Figure 2. *Gather / come as u are (painting view)*

Charcoal, conte crayon, and molding paste on canvas stretched over custom support structure

84 x 68 x 30"

May 2024

Support structure fabrication by James William Blake, photo by Jacob Chung



Figure 2.5. *Gather / come as u are (bench view)*

Same as above



Figure 3. *Wind Down Routine*

Charcoal, conte crayon, and molding paste on (mostly) sized canvas nailed to reclaimed cedar spacers

90 x 108 x 2"

2024

Photo by Jacob Chung



Figure 3.5. *Support Me/Support You, early stage of Wind Down Routine*
Charcoal and molding paste on canvas thumbtacked to a wall

Photo by A.E. Meyer and Kevin Phan



Figure 4. *Chatter (shaped canvas 1)*

Oil paint on sewn pieces of gessoed loose weave canvas stretched over custom wooden strainer

62 x 74 x 2.5"

2024

Strainer fabrication by James William Blake, photo by Jacob Chung



Figure 5. *Internal Maintenance (first go)*

Charcoal and conte crayon on photo backdrop paper, wood

94 x 54 x 1"

2024

Hanging structure fabricated by James William Blake, photo by Jacob Chung



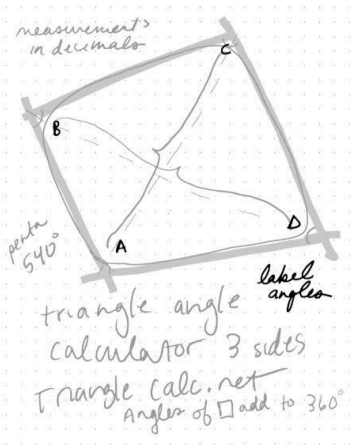
Figure 6. *Beauty Routine (shaped canvas 2 - tripod)*
Charcoal, conte crayon, and molding paste on canvas stretched over custom wood support structure

84 x 78 x 24"

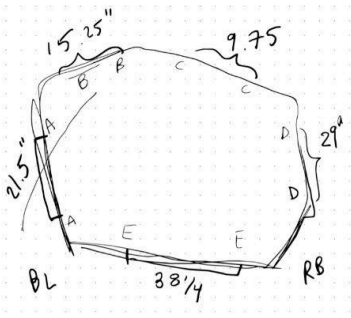
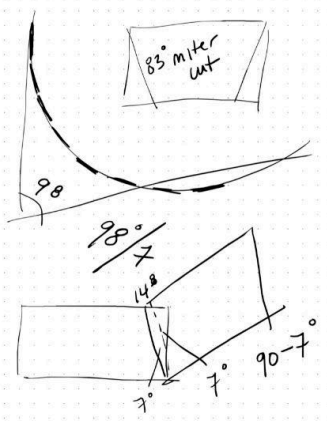
2024

Wood fabrication by James William Blake, photo by Jacob Chung

ROUNDED FRAME PROCESS re JAMES



find all for round up & down to nearest whole #
 Check still add to 540 total (or w/e)
 Half inch ACX plywood 98
 big curve = big plywood



Lay out angle traced plywood

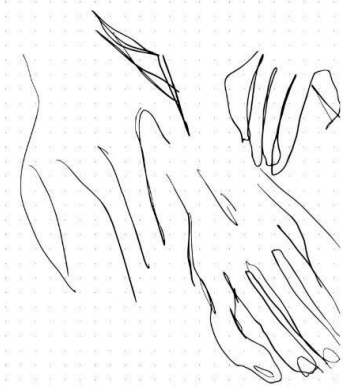
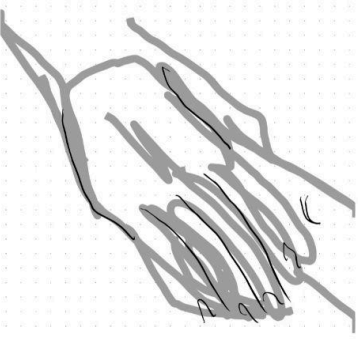
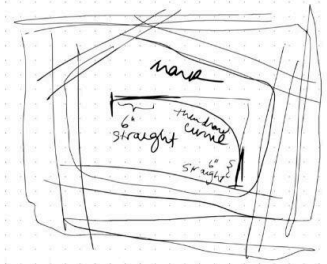


Figure 7. ROUNDED FRAME PROCESS, digital drawings, 2024



Figure 7.5. ROUNDED FRAME PROCESS, digital drawings, 2024



Figure 8. Cripple (@_cripple_), “Sick Hat! — @marisaolson fundraiser Get yourself a Sick Hat, as a treat!

A collaboration between artists Marisa Olson & Finnegan Shannon, this soft, comfy, adjustable cap is fun for all ages & gender identities and raises money for Olson's healthcare, post cancer surgery.” September 9, 2023”,

https://www.instagram.com/p/CxylkORRf4u/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

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