

Vulnerability: The Better Choice

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Abstract

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee: Professor Michael Swaine Three Dimensional Forum

Meaningful human connection is predicated on sharing or exposing vulnerability to one another to establish trust. In this paper, I explore the relationship between vulnerability and meaningful human connection, via sources such as Brene Brown, Alphonso Lingis, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and John Berger. I also explore the relationship that sensitivity and tenderness, both qualities of and tools for approaching vulnerability, have to connection and touch. I explore other forms of touch - the touch of sight and the touch of words. Then, I illustrate these themes through both the work of other artists, as well as my own, including my master's thesis exhibitions, *The Better Choice* and *I Love You Are You Okay*, 2017.

Vulnerability: The Better Choice

Inherently risky, relationships are predicated on trust, on taking what is not known as though it were known.¹ In relationships, trust demands our ability to be vulnerable to one another. Brene Brown, a social work researcher who specializes in shame and vulnerability, succinctly describes the fundamental role of trust and human-to-human connection as “it is why we are here.”² Her research explores the fundamental nature of vulnerability to human connection that, “in order to have connection you have to let yourself be really seen,” that is, you must risk letting others see your vulnerability.³ Brown’s research illuminates that meaningful human connection necessarily begins with the bold risk of exposing our vulnerabilities.

Importantly, the way we understand one another’s vulnerability, philosopher Alphonso Lingis points out, is not an intellectual understanding, as much as it is a bodily phenomenological knowing. He elaborates, “I do not observe the vulnerability on the face of another and do not construct it by interpreting perceptual data; it affects me immediately. I make contact with her pain and I feel it in my body. My eyes do not look at the sensitivity of her bare skin and its wounds; they flinch, they feel his pain within their gaze.”⁴ When approaching one another in a vulnerable state, there is an ethical responsibility to approach with tact, with care. Describing tact as that which “holds back one’s forces and intentions” and as “a sensitive form of receptivity,” Lingis exclaims, “It’s the body in the room that imposes tact!”⁵ Sensitivity and tenderness are simultaneously tools of tact and qualities of exposed vulnerability. They are

¹ Lingis, Alphonso, *Violence and Splendor*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011, 82.

² Brown, Brené, "The Power of Vulnerability." Brené Brown: The Power of Vulnerability | TED Talk | TED.com. Accessed May 02, 2017. https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability#t-323361.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lingis, Alphonso, *Violence and Splendor*, 82.

⁵ Ibid., 83.

characteristics revealed and reciprocated between people, fundamental to facilitating connection between them.

Meaningful human connection can be understood as a kind of spectrum of love, and love can make us especially vulnerable. Lingis writes, “love is rare because we fear it, knowing that we are never so vulnerable, never so easily and deeply hurt, as when we are in love.”⁶ The phenomenology of exposing one’s vulnerability via the expression of love is demonstrated by native dancer/choreographer Emily Johnson, founder of Catalyst Dance Co. in her piece, *The Thank You Bar*, 2009 (*fig. 1*). This work is the first of a trilogy of dance/installation/ community events, and one particular gesture reveals how expressing sentimentality can expose vulnerability.⁷ In this scene, the music abruptly changes from a sauntry sleepy steel guitar to a sprinting drum beat - fast, loud, aggressive, relentless. Johnson stands to face the audience mid stage and with the drumbeat begins rapidly repeating this action: right hand over heart, left hand over right hand, extend left hand to audience, extend right hand to audience.

heart-heart hand-hand heart-heart

hand-hand heart-heart hand-hand

heart-heart hand-hand heart-heart

her chest becomes another drum

hand-hand heart-heart hand-hand

heart-heart hand-hand heart-heart

hand-hand heart-heart hand-hand

⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁷ "THE THANK-YOU BAR." Catalystdance.com. Accessed May 05, 2017. <http://www.catalystdance.com/thankyoubar/>.

throbbing hands thumping numb
heart-heart hand-hand heart-heart
hand-hand heart-heart hand-hand
from fatigue a sloppier slapping
heart-heart hand-hand
heart-heart hand-hand
heaving drum sweating
heart-heart hand-hand
drum breathless drum ⁸

Remember the first time you told a partner that you loved them? Now imagine walking up to a stranger, and telling them that you love them -- but sincerely mean it. Johnson, slapping her chest and casting love towards her audience, towards strangers, illustrates in this breathless scene the work it takes to be vulnerable. However, not all vulnerability is so clearly on display. Softness lives at the edge of visibility, that is, softness is characteristically subtle, and in order to see it, one must stay sensitive. John Berger, in his essay, *On Visibility*, writes, “To look: at everything which overflows the outline, the contour, the category, the name of what it is.”⁹ To see the way that Berger beckons is to wait on the wooded trail until a breeze moves a thread of spider’s silk just so the sun can trace its line and glint across space, at what you thought was an empty path before you, that is in fact latticed, interwoven, occupied. This kind of seeing is a comprehensive seeing that slows the typical quick distracted scan. It requires that one stays

⁸ By, Created, "The Thank-you Bar (5min Excerpt) in Emily Johnson/Catalyst." Vimeo. May 02, 2017. Accessed May 05, 2017. <https://vimeo.com/channels/emilyjohnsoncatalyst/8825236>.

⁹ Berger, John. *The Sense of Sight: Writings*. New York: Vintage International, 1993.

sensitive. Staying sensitive is to choose to remain vulnerable, patient, aware, to look well. It is the ground necessary to impose tact, that “sensitive form of receptivity,” that in turn allows our mutual vulnerability to establish a sense of connection.¹⁰ For Berger, looking is to enter into a visual understanding of the interdependence of what is seen, to understand it, “as a form of growth” and as such, to understand that the visual is always greater than our ability to describe it with language.¹¹

However, while language may be limited in terms of reproducing the visual, words are a powerful form of touch and connection. Berger writes, “Separate objects are like isolated words. Meaning is only to be found in the relation between them.” Like the spider silk, the relationship between words weave and bridge across what we thought was empty space to connect and touch. Ann Hamilton’s project, *the common S E N S E*, 2014, explored this relationship between touch and language. In the project description, she writes,

“In silence or in speech, reading and being read to are other forms of touch. The words of poets and writers stir us. When this happens we may be compelled to note, copy, or underline and often to share that touch—by passing the book from hand to hand, by reading out loud, or by sharing the page. The distance between author and reader, and reader and reader diminishes as the capacity of words to compel recognition travels from contact to contact, screen to screen, and perhaps from hand to hand.”¹²

¹⁰ Lingis, Alphonso, *Violence and Splendor*, 83.

¹¹ Berger, John, *The Sense of Sight: Writings*.

¹² Ann Hamilton Studio, Accessed May 07, 2017.

http://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/projects/the_common_SENSE.html.

Sound waves from spoken words reverberate through a room to tickle, to make contact with the tiny hairs in an inner ear; to hear is to be touched. Light waves reflect from words on a page or screen to an eye, bringing the seer and the seen into an interdependence, touching and connecting. Whether spoken or read, words touch and connect. Sight and touch, writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “belong to the same world,” because it is “the same body that sees and touches.”¹³ The tangible encroaches on the visible, and the visible on the tangible.

Hamilton’s installation of *the common S E N S E* visually demonstrated these ideas. This installation was composed of two sections, two smaller installations in two side gallery rooms, and a larger installation in the main gallery space at the Henry Gallery. The smaller gallery rooms were occupied with stacks of copies of different selected phrases or passages, such as, “that language is shaped air.” These passages from various texts were printed on soft off-white newsprint and were situated on a low counter that ran the perimeter of the room. Viewers were invited to take with them the phrase or passage that they found meaningful. As the copies of phrases ran out, they were replaced with different selections that were submitted by volunteers via email.

In the center of these smaller rooms were taxidermied animal specimens from the University of Washington Burke Museum collection. These animals also occupied the main large gallery space, but in photograph form. There, Hamilton covered the walls, floor to ceiling, with stacks of images of feet, paws, wings or other parts of taxidermied animal bodies from the UW Burke collection (fig. 2). These images were printed on soft newsprint and varied from poster to wallet size. Like the passages in the smaller gallery rooms, people were invited to tear an image

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Claude Lefort, and Alphonso Lingis, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000, 134.

from the stack on the wall that they found meaningful. In this exhibition, Hamilton's endeavor to reveal the relationship between wings, toes, paws, claws and written language is clear. If touch is the common sense, then I argue that vulnerability is the common condition. Even in the small act of reaching to tear a photo of animal feet off the wall is a reach through or in vulnerability towards contact and meaning.

This relationship between sight, touch and vulnerability was central to my installation, *Even The Mountains Long To Be Held*, 2016, (fig. 3) in the South Gallery at the Ceramic and Metal Arts Building. Thinking about spider silk silently connecting space, the installation began with the idea of making a room a loom. Using barely-visible thread, I wove a small 12" x 12" platform in the corner of the 12' x 6' room that was about three feet above the floor. The weft and warp ends of the woven platform were secured into the four walls with straight pins. On this platform a I placed a small hollow mountain-like form sewn from hand dyed waxed interfacing. This material yields a translucent crumply skin-like surface, which I dyed in light sunset shades of purple, pink and yellow. Balanced across one end of the warp threads was a printed poem. Written and performed by me during the opening reception, it read (fig. 4):

look down at your palms

wiggle your fingers

Earthquake

hold the crumpled landscape, of-and-in

see

even the mountains long to be held.

How do you make a mountain vulnerable? Take away its ground and take away its range. In this piece, the viewer's eyes wander from the landscape of their wrinkled palms to the crinkled surface of the mountain. The mountain is held, hovering, fixed in range and relationship by your sight. In order to see, we must be seen. We must be both of-and-in the world.¹⁴ This phenomenological notion is referred to as reversibility, and is what gives *Even The Mountains Long To Be Held* conceptual ground. How many ways can you hold a mountain? How many ways can it hold you? That we can see things, that we are seen, means what is of-and-in the world is always, already held. Ponty wrote that while not all things are sentient, all things are sensitive. This work uses poetry, written or spoken, to point the viewer to the idea that our sensitivity and vulnerability is shared -- even with the mountains.

This work marks the first time I incorporated printed poetry authored by me into an installation. An important driving question for this work, and for subsequent works I will discuss, is how can I combine poetry and sculpture? How can I make works where the poem, the text or language is both *of-and-in* the sculptural object or installation?

In my thesis exhibition, *The Better Choice*, 2017, in the Ceramic and Metal Arts Building North Gallery, the objective of making the poem of-and-in the installation was central. Like an expanded view of a quilt, the installation was composed of three layers of cloth 109" x 95," hung from 12' high, spaced about 4' apart, with 6" of space between the fabric and the floor. From the entrance of the gallery, the viewer can see portions of all three layers at once (fig. 5). The first layer is an Ohio Amish Star quilt top. Made with the traditional Amish dark background and

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Claude Lefort, and Alphonso Lingis, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, 134-135.

simple colors, the palette ranges from white, yellow, to paper bag brown. The stars are set in a dark navy and black background, and are made from fabric, paper, waxed paper, oil cloth, tulle, organza and card stock. The wax paper stars, lit from behind, glow subtly and resemble the texture of skin.

With soft fuzzy edges, the middle layer is ¾” loft batting, and text has been hand-quilted in a barely- visible light-tan color of thread onto the batting (figs. 6 & 8). This layer is oriented such that on entrance-side of the batting, the text is backwards. As the viewer walks around to the opposing side, the side that would be legible to an imagined sleeper tucked under this expanded quilt, the poem, *Irma Said Softly*, comes into view. The quilted text on the batting is puffy, soft and irregular (fig. 8). The letters are defined by the shadows cast in the recesses created by the compression of the batting from the quilting. The poem reads:

born reaching for my *Better Choice*
I follow longing, inherited ground
sniffing out all the softnesses
I turn, turn, turn to delight I turn inside out
like both panhandling and handing out my guts
I will expose as much tenderness as they can stand
and hold it-
right there waiting
in the street, even
as a Ross must.

Trace the edge of vulnerability, Irma said softly, and see.

The back layer or the quilt bottom is hung so that the inside raw edges are oriented towards the entrance of the gallery. The back of the quilt is a simple design of four cream quadrants partitioned by a wide navy cross or plus-sign, with a Ohio Amish Star block in the center of this cross (fig. 7). Like the wax paper stars on the front of the quilt, this star is also made from wax paper, and glows subtly, but is different in that it is set against a white background.

This installation began with *Irma Said Softly*, and as such, the language dictated what the object should be. The primary themes of the poem are the risk and necessity of exposing vulnerability, and its relationship to my maternal heritage. I began with the format of an Amish quilt for a number of reasons. The line, *I follow longing, inherited ground*, refers to the long history of spirituality and religion, including Amish and Mennonite traditions, on my maternal side. It also refers to poetry and artmaking that runs in my family, as well as our generally sensitive disposition. The line, *I turn, turn, turn to delight*, a quoted lyric from the hymn Simple Gifts, is another reference to the history of various Christian denominations in my family. This line carries additional meaning, which relates back to the line which precedes it - *following longing*. In my early twenties, when I told my mother that I had quit my secure and well-paying job to go paint a mural in Kansas without pay, she responded, “follow your joy.” Turning to delight is following joy, following and reaching toward some kind of inherited longing.

To follow your joy is to take a risk, to expose one’s vulnerability, it is like both *panhandling and handing out your guts*. The palette of the Amish quilt, with simple colors set in a dark background reflects the boldness, the tooth that is as much a part of vulnerability as tenderness is. While tenderness and softness are referenced in the lines, *sniffing out all the*

softnesses. and *I will expose as much tenderness as they can stand*, within them is also a declaration or commitment to staying sensitive, to braving this risk. The poem is quilted into the batting, the soft guts or innards of the quilt that are *right there waiting*, exposed. The quilted text reflects the themes of softness, tenderness, and with its inconsistencies and hand-made quality, vulnerability.

The introductory line, *Born reaching for my Better Choice*, references a self-published collection of poetry, and well as an introductory essay of the same title, written by my grandmother, Irma Ross. The essay, written in the 1950s, discusses the sexism Ross faced when inquiring to writer Paul Engle at a reading, “why has it been, down through the ages, that only men have become truly great writers?”¹⁵ His response was that women did not have the stamina for the rigorous creative arts. While deliberating the (false) dilemma of choosing motherhood or a writer’s life, Ross discovered her *Better Choice*: to do both. The significance of *The Better Choice* is acutely relevant to me, as I am 4 months pregnant and fear the same discrimination Ross experienced over 60 years ago. As a self-published book of poems, *The Better Choice* represents a passionate DIY of exposing as much tenderness as they can stand, a watch-me-do-it-anyway disposition that snuggles right against an *inherited ground* of sensitivity.

Drawing from Berger’s insights about seeing, the final line, *Trace the edge of visibility*, *Irma said softly, and see*, refers to the importance of staying sensitive, and the role that sensitivity plays in our ability to see a thing well. After I had written this poem, my Mom remarked how my Grandmother was always asking her to see - to see the shapes of the clouds,

¹⁵ Ross, Irma. *The Better Choice*. Mt. Pleasant, IA: Self-published, 1995.

the flitting birds camouflaged by branches or even imagined shapes that could be found in a kernel of popped popcorn.

Seeing well is predicated by our ability to stay sensitive. *I Love You Are You Okay*, my piece for the 2017 MFA Thesis exhibition, also asks the viewer to see well (fig. 9). This piece consists of six upholstered chairs arranged around two different palm-like large artificial plants. The leaves of both plants have been embroidered with words from text messages between my dad and I. The texts are stitched in a few different shades of green thread that are a few hues brighter than the green of the plant. The similarity of green thread and plant renders the messages visible only from a close distance. The quality of stitching on both plants is economical, angular, quick, different from traditional embroidery, and with this angularity, has a digital quality. One plant is older, dingier, has slightly frayed leaves, and the text messages embroidered on the leaves are the ones my dad has sent to me (fig. 11). The other plant is newer, and has embroidered text messages that I have sent to my dad (fig. 10).

These messages are on the surface of this work. To expose vulnerability is to wear your heart on your sleeve, to let your emotions be on the surface. While the messages are subtle, they are *right there waiting* to be noticed, shared with the public, *in the street, even*. In order to see, you must stay sensitive, and in this work, staying sensitive is the doorway, the point of access for the viewer to enter the work, to notice, but also, staying sensitive allows the viewer to see in another way, that is, comprehend, understand and potentially, connect.

While the plants symbolize my dad and I as individuals, the waiting room, as place for holding people to allow the passage of time for something else, is a metaphor for the estranged relationship I have with him. People hate to wait, and the boredom of waiting can range from

uncomfortable to aggravating. Waiting rooms are typically equipped with distraction (magazines) or comforts (chairs) to ease this passage of time. One of the most popular tools for waiting distraction is the cell phone. Just one glance at people waiting for a bus - with their heads bowed to their devices - will reveal this common tactic. The presence of text messages sewn onto the plants and the corresponding reference to a cell phone bring this common waiting room prop into the installation.

Waiting rooms are also associated with illness, such as a waiting room at doctor's or therapist's office. In these spaces, waiting is complicated by anxiety associated with illness, the frailty of the body, or with suffering. Some of the difficulty in the relationship between my dad and I stem from his illnesses, physical and mental. Because my dad's text messages discuss these various illnesses, it is important that the waiting room remain non-specific, so that it can operate on a broader, metaphorical level.

The chairs that comprise the waiting room have been altered so that the cushion feels worn when sat in. This subtle alteration gestures towards the duration of this waiting - how long we have shared this waiting room - as it has been over nine years since I have seen my father. Amongst many complicated factors, my father's illnesses and associated behaviors have resulted in a suspended, strained relationship that feels fake, and like artificial plants, cannot grow. We are both fixed in a place that has been made shallow and impersonal out of necessity and circumstance.

The older plant with my Dad's texts is full, and each frond of leaves contains a least one phrase. While each frond of the newer plant also has a phrase, it contrasts with my dad's plant in that it is significantly more sparse. The phrases are mostly limited to variations of "I love you"

and “Are you okay,” and this choice reflects the difference in the way we communicate. My messages are terse and guarded, whereas my dad’s is maundering, inappropriate and sometimes drunk.

While my dad has been the subject of other works, in this piece, by using my Dad’s own words, I wanted to shift the responsibility of discovering and unfolding our relationship dynamic on the viewer. The subtlety of the embroidered text allows the viewer to discover their own understanding of our relationship dynamic. This sense of discovery is two things. It is a reward to the viewer for noticing, and with the discovery, there is an increased sense of ownership for the viewer, like the way one feels a sense of ownership for a favorite underground band after they make it big, this discovery can lead to heightened sense of connection with the work and consequently, the artist. And, to refer back to Brown’s understanding of meaningful human connection as “why we are here,” this sense of connection is always a desired outcome for my work.¹⁶

Since the opening of the Henry Thesis Exhibition, I have had many people tell me about similar situations that they have experienced (fig 12). Many people have told me that they were moved to tears, and I am honored by the reciprocation of their vulnerability. The experience of waiting in relation to the illness of a loved one is common. Many people have lost family members, have estranged family members, or have experienced difficult relationships with loved ones. By *turning myself inside out*, that is, by exposing my own vulnerability to the viewer, I have engendered the potential for deeply felt connection between the work and the viewer. Exposing my vulnerability has been a catalyst for meaningful connection, for allowing the

¹⁶ Brown, Brené, "The Power of Vulnerability." Brené Brown: The Power of Vulnerability | TED Talk | TED.com.

viewer to move beyond the physicality of the work and enter the emotional and psychological space that is alluded. Through the interactions and generous feedback I have received from viewers of this work, my argument has that reciprocated vulnerability is necessary for trust meaningful human connection has been confirmed.

While some people were touched emotionally by the work, physical touch plays an equally important role. On my Dad's plant, the leaves hang from the frond like a hand of cards, to read them, they need to be leafed through, pushed gently pushed aside to see the next text. To read my plant, the fronds need to be gently palmed to better illuminate the shadowed text. The deeper the reader is willing to go, the more contact they have with the work. Recalling Lingis' understanding of tact, as "a sensitive form of receptivity" and as a bodily, phenomenological knowing, the viewer touches this work through leafing, reading and sitting in the chairs. They make contact with someone in their vulnerability in a bodily phenomenological way. To engage this work requires the tools of tact - sensitivity to notice the embroidery, and tenderness to read deeper.

The epicenter of vulnerability for this work is love, because "we are never so vulnerable, never so easily and deeply hurt, as when we are in love."¹⁷ If the waiting room is a place for holding people to allow the passage of time, in this piece, it is a place of holding onto love - and here's the tooth- doing so bravely, with an open palm, regardless of risks stitched and pain displayed, choosing to expose as much tenderness as they can stand.

¹⁷ Lingis, Alphonso, *Violence and Splendor*, 83

Illustrations



Fig. 1. Johnson, Emily, *The Thank You Bar*, 2009. "The Thank-you Bar (5min Excerpt) in Emily Johnson/Catalyst." Vimeo. May 02, 2017. Accessed May 05, 2017. <https://vimeo.com/channels/emilyjohnsoncatalyst/8825236>.



Fig. 2. Hamilton, Ann. *The common SENSE*, 2014. Photo credit: Dan Bennett. Ann Hamilton Studio. Accessed May 07, 2017. http://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/projects/the_common_SENSE.html.



Fig. 3. Ross-Gotta, Cicelia, *Even The Mountains Long To Be Held*, 2016. Photo credit: Nadia Ahmed.



Fig. 4. Ross-Gotta, Cicelia, *Even The Mountains Long To Be Held*, performance film still, 2016. Photo credit: Nadia Ahmed.



Fig. 5. Ross-Gotta, Cicelia, *The Better Choice*, 2017. Photo credit: Cicelia Ross-Gotta



Fig. 6. Ross-Gotta, Cicelia, *The Better Choice*, 2017. Photo credit: Cicelia Ross-Gotta.

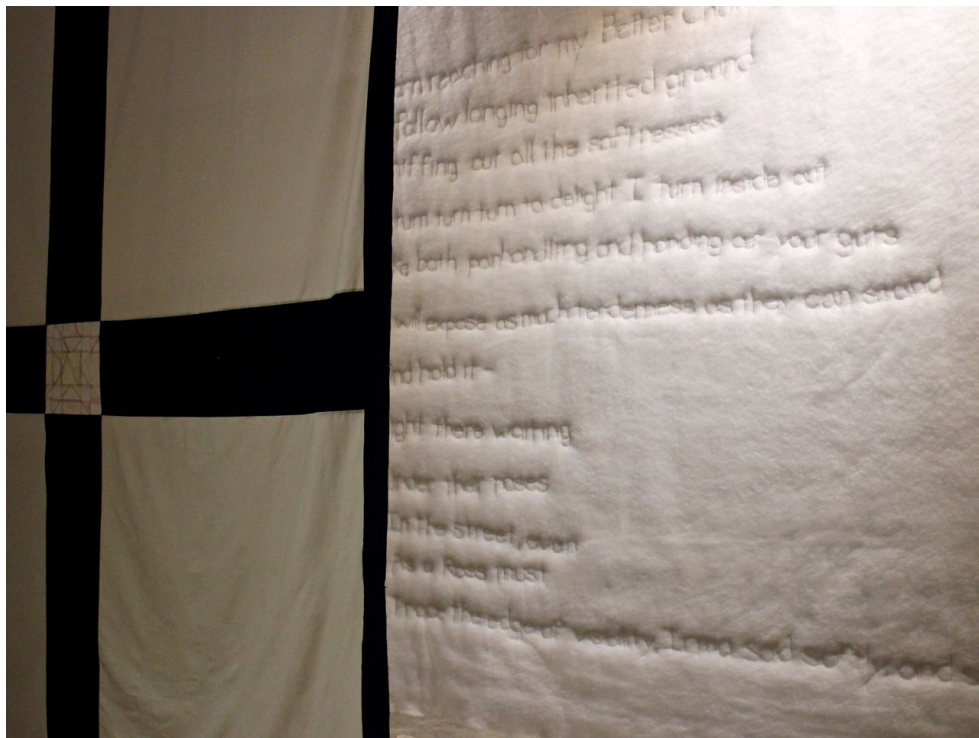


Fig. 7. Ross-Gotta, Cicelia, *The Better Choice*, 2017. Photo credit: Cicelia Ross-Gotta



Fig. 8. Ross-Gotta, Cicelia, *The Better Choice*, 2017. Photo credit: Cicelia Ross-Gotta.



Fig. 9. Ross-Gotta, Cicelia, *I Love You Are You Okay*, 2017. Photo credit: Cicelia Ross-Gotta.



Fig. 10. Ross-Gotta, Cicelia, *I Love You Are You Okay*, 2017. Photo credit: Cicelia Ross-Gotta.



Fig. 11. Ross-Gotta, Cicelia, *I Love You Are You Okay*, 2017. Photo credit: Cicelia Ross-Gotta.



Fig. 12. Ross-Gotta, Cicelia, *I Love You Are You Okay*, 2017. Photo credit: Andrew Bartlett.

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