Empathy + entropy

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EMPATHY + ENTROPY

by

Carley Nicole Cullen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts
degree in Art in the
Graduate College of
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Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Bradley Dicharry
“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.”

-C.S. Lewis

*The Four Loves*

“Design needs to take human behavior into account.”

-Paula Scher
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a deeply emotional, visual artist, I feel that any words that I procure are a feeble, watered-down attempt to express the amount of gratitude and respect I hold for everyone who contributed to my MFA thesis exhibition. Thank you for believing in me, seeing my potential, and pushing me to continually be vulnerable and create through the anxiety.

I’d like to thank my professors Serina Sulentic, Brad Dicharry, Anita Jung, Ab Gratama and Jeremy Swanston for the patience and continual support as I grew and transitioned from an undergraduate student to a graduate student. You all witnessed the transformation first-hand, and I cannot be more overwhelmed with gratitude for each of your roles in my life.

I am forever grateful for my community here in Iowa City. I am thankful for God’s provision of a group of friends as loving and accepting as you all: Melissa, Calli, Mitchell, Vannessa & Mitch, Hanna & Tucker, Ally, Kenny & Dave—you all mean the world to me, and my heart aches to have to move away from you. Thank you for challenging me and supporting me through my darkest moments.

To my print family!! I don’t think my work would be where it is had it not been for your acceptance into your family. I value each of you more than I can put into words. Your critiques and challenges helped form who I am today. I hope someday I can fully give to you what you all gave to me. You all are so loved.

To each group of parents—I cannot thank you both enough. Mom, I love you and I miss you. Dad & Julie, I am so thankful you’re back in my life. I love you both so much.

To my sweet sister: you are the glue that holds me together. You are my best friend and partner in crime. I cherish our relationship and love you more than I can possibly explain.
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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Entropy, the slow but steady decline into disorder and chaos, is embedded deep in feelings of anxiety. Anxiety is a natural emotion that aids the human race in the fight or flight response. It can be positive and aid in the decision-making process, but also negative and completely world-shattering. The moments when anxiety devolves into entropic emotion is at the root of many anxiety disorders and other mental health concerns.

My work explores the vast emotional range of anxiety and presents conversations around the concepts of entropy and empathy. We are living in a time where mental health crises are at an all-time high. The world’s mental health epidemic can be attributed to the ever-present, demanding issues of the 21st century. I am most interested in examining the accumulation of emotions that accompany anxiety disorders and finding methods to communicate those emotions to foster community. My body of work explores various coping mechanisms while simultaneously offering empathic connections to the viewer in each piece.

My objective is not to inflict anxiety upon my audience, but to acknowledge these emotions as valid and overcome them to create a resounding hope-filled future. By utilizing vibrant colors, repeated patterns, hand-drawn line elements and installations of found material, I am encouraging the viewer to practice empathy and associate an emotional response to the provided visual stimuli. Using graphic design as a mode of visual communication combined with a variety of printmaking methods, this work examines what it means to not only exist and emote in the 21st century, but what it means to adapt in times of distress, overcome mental health concerns, and work together to establish an empathetic future.
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PREFACE

The basis for this body of work and research originally stemmed from a place of isolation caused by own battle with mental health concerns. My anxiety disorders had taken over my life. Armed with these experiences, my goal as an artist, woman, graphic designer, educator, and human being is to unite those enduring such concerns by creating community through viewing my artwork. Vulnerability breeds community and brings about understanding of others’ plights. An empathetic society is one that will flourish for generations to come and is created by actively practicing empathy in our daily lives.
The works presented in my MFA exhibition have been forming over the last four years of my life. Living with two anxiety disorders has presented a new series of challenges and room for growth. My body of work examines my personal struggles with anxiety and surges in emotion, while simultaneously offering entrances for the audience to emote alongside me.

Living in the 21st century is no easy feat. Our generation has been presented with the errors and troubles from previous generations: environmental problems, a tense political climate, a terrifying drop in natural resources to name a few concerns. As a result, it is no surprise to see society as a whole react negatively to such issues with a spike in mental health diagnoses. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 1 in 13 humans globally suffer from anxiety. The WHO reports that anxiety disorders are the most common mental disorders worldwide—with specific phobia, major depressive disorder and social phobia among the most common anxiety disorders. Bringing the issue closer to home, the Anxiety Depression Association of America (ADAA) released a statement in early 2018 reporting that anxiety disorders affect 40 million adults in the U.S age 18 and older. Specifically, Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Panic Disorder affects 6.8 million and 6 million adults respectively. Causes of such disorders are like those aforementioned, while other factors can include but are not limited to family stress, money, education, work, and relationships. This is no longer something that can be ignored; we are living in a mental health crisis. The question that comes to mind is “what can be done?”, instead of looking to outward solutions, I believe that the solution lies within each of us.

Jeremy Rifkin wrote the *Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (2016). The idea of a civilization centered around empathy would provide solutions to many of the world’s struggles, including the mental health crises. Rifkin defines an
empathic civilization as a “new interpretation of human history where the concern is no longer the autonomous, self-centered individual, but where instead everything revolves around altruism and the connectedness between people”. An empathic civilization when executed would redefine human nature by empathy instead of egoism, competition, jealousy and aggression. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and bring about a deeper understanding of the other individual. The act of empathy is a trait that is learned, some struggle with vulnerability and sharing their emotions publicly. By sharing emotions and practicing vulnerability, empathy naturally begins to form. It slowly builds communities of support around the issues of that individual. Promoting empathy, and community building encourages a healthier society and civilization as a whole.

My work is a commentary of living and enduring the mental health crises of the modern day. In *empathy + entropy*, I began working from a line drawing I made in the midst of a panic attack. The repeated lines are an effort to ground me and bring me out of the chaotic depths of anxiety. Anxiety is a normal, healthy emotion; it allows us to make informed decisions and is a part of our natural fight or flight response system. However, when anxiety devolves into chaos is when it becomes entropic, toxic and all-consuming. The lines seen throughout all of my works are made in a variety of emotional states. Some are during times of intense panic, and others are created during times of intense anticipation and excitement. It is not my intent to inflict my own anxiety or emotions upon my audience, but rather to invite the audience in to experience emotion in a deeper manner than before.

The use of layers is a common thread throughout my work and a direct call to the depth of emotion in my life. Emotional trauma and memories are seldom single-issues, they are multi-faceted and can become more complicated as time passes. I intentionally use materials that can
be layered, combined with repeated line patterns to demonstrate this phenomenon. In *introspection, parts 1-3*, the use of silkscreen prints on clear Mylar sandwiching in bubble wrap gives the viewer multiple entrances into the works. Bubble wrap is used throughout these pieces and in *fixate* and *but how do you really feel?* as a common household object that is identifiable and approachable for the audience. Bubble wrap is used in many applications, specifically for packing up precious, fragile items and also for fun, stress relief by way of popping the pockets of air. The use of bubble wrap layered in between prints is a metaphor for owning anxiety, a containment of the emotion that once held complete control over me. In *but how do you really feel?* the use of many different types, shapes and sizes of bubble wrap overlaid over ink drawings is an attempt to convey the magnitude and gravity of anxiety disorders. Whether the viewer understands my personal plight with anxiety or it brings up another source for them, the quilting over the entire wall was done with the intent in mind to have a sense of organized chaos, a feeling that many who struggle with anxiety disorders know all too well.

Color psychology is another avenue that I investigated throughout the creation of this body of work. The use of bright, vivid colors combined with black ink throughout all of the components of my exhibition are not typically ones that are associated with feelings of anxiety. My MFA exhibition is a redefinition of my own personal color psychology, to allow certain colors such as yellow and orange to mean something visceral and triggering when I view my work but communicate a sense of joy and hope for the audience. In an effort to build community, encourage vulnerability and bring about a stronger sense of empathy, I choose to work with such bright colors to promote accessibility and conversation around the possible inspiration for my body of work.
Graphic design is defined as visual communication. By taking a more conceptual avenue with my body of work, I am encouraging the audience to practice empathy and assign an emotional response to the provided visual stimuli. The combination of graphic design, found material and printmaking methods explores what it means to adapt in times of distress, overcome mental health concerns, and work together to establish an empathetic future.
EMPATHY + ENTROPY: WORKS

The following images document my body of work that was exhibited from March 3-9, 2019 in the Levitt Gallery in Art Building West at the University of Iowa.
Figure 1. *introspection, part 1.*, 2019, silkscreen, plexiglass, bubble wrap, 12 x 12 inches
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