For our daughters

Anna Marie Kilzer
University of Iowa

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Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.tg2b-xo7h

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FOR OUR DAUGHTERS

by

Anna Marie Kilzer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts
degree in Art in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2019

Thesis Supervisors:  Associate Professor Isabel Barbuzza
                  Associate Professor Jon Winet
I dedicate my thesis to my committee: Isabel Barbuzza, Jon Winet, Daniel Fine, and Daniel Miller. Much thanks to my many departments (sculpture, photography, and intermedia) as well as my family (specifically my mother and grandmother).
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During my time at the University of Iowa I have had the pleasure of working with many faculty and artists across disciplines. Thank you first and foremost to Jon Winet, whom I have worked with for over 4 years now. Thank you to the rest of my committee Isabel Barbuzza, Dan Miller, and Dan Fine. Without you all, I never would have been on time for my show or graduation. I appreciate all the countless studio visits over the years, Steve McGuire for always listening, and the many technicians involved in my years (Billy Cho, Tony Sutowski, Benji Upchurch, Kate Allen, Angela Regas, etc). I’d also like to thank my friends made here in grad school who have kept me going over the years JD Whiteman, David Meyers, Laura Burke, Jacob Jones, Neva Nobles-Alder. Lastly, I’d like to thank my family and the countless memories made during my time here.
This work explores trauma through the body and its long-term effects from generations later through installation art, video, and photography. As the human experience manifests over time, the past comes to surface through many versions of ourselves. The strong push to recreate oneself over time is shown through the shedding of old behaviors and absorption of positive behaviors. In my work, I take a longer look at three generations that have created unknowingly heavy baggage for me. The goal of this work is to start conversation about long term effects of mental health through genetics and how we can start repairing ourselves for our future generations.
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INTRODUCTION

Our skin of the body acts as an indicator for stress between the mind and body. Just as sponges absorb their surroundings, we do the same. Whether stress has been absorbed over months, years, days, hours, or even prior to our conception. Humans carry around much more than DNA. Stress manifests in many ways: bruises, physical illness, anxiety, stress receptors, PTSD, depression, environmental trauma, and obsessive thoughts. Most times, these symptoms go on without the notice or attention.

The beginning of my research into hereditary trauma started when I kept getting physically ill, causing me to miss a lot of school. Through my work, I hope to begin a conversation on generational trauma. Specifically, familiar and maternal as an example for others to heal. Opening the dialogue between relationships and physical well-being can help reduce the generational transfer of trauma.

The purpose of my MFA thesis research is to initiate more awareness of generational trauma. In doing so, I want to open a dialogue for future healing.
The transfer of trauma onto a child is known as transgenerational epigenetics. Epigenetics is defined as an unconventional finding. It goes against the idea that inheritance happens only through the DNA code that passes from parent to offspring. It means that a parent's experiences, in the form of epigenetic tags, can be passed down to future generations.

“what human beings cannot contain of their experience—what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable—falls out of social discourse, but very often onto and into the next generation as an affective sensitivity or a chaotic urgency.” (M. Gerard Fromm)

The trauma I am addressing is both societal and personal emotional and physical trauma. During my time researching, I also dove into racial trauma and catastrophic events, such as the Cambodian genocide and the Holocaust.

My research in epigenetics is focused on the trauma my grandma passed down in the womb to my mother, and that unresolved trauma then being passed down to me. I come from a blue-collar family with a lack of resources for mental health care. This shortfall in physical means and knowledge of transgenerational trauma contributed to the number of years these events carried on and pain they caused. Emotional legacies are often passed on through generations by unconscious cues or stress and anxiety falling from one story told to another.

Salt wars have existed from China to Africa to South America. The fascinating and dark history of salt reflects the history of human trauma for me in many ways, including a salt road in the Old Salt Route in Northern Germany. This route ran through the town my grandma and her mother grew up in, taking salt from mines to shipping ports.
Aside from economics, salt also has cultural and religious significance. It has long been used in Shintoism to purify things, and Buddhists use salt to repel evil. In Judeo-Christian traditions, salt was used to purify people and objects, as an offering, and to seal covenants. There are numerous references to salt in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. One of the most famous is Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt in Genesis after disobeying God's command. A rock-salt pillar that stands today on Mount Sodom is known as "Lot's Wife." (Shanna Freeman)

Salt was also often traded for slaves. Salt played a destructive role in a war tactic known as scorched earth policy, in which salt was thrown on the ground in large quantities to prevent anything from growing. In my work, salt is able to grow freely on my pieces, representing humans, growth, pain, and destruction.

Artists such as Ann Hamilton, Hanne Friis, Banks Violette, Lois Greenfield, Patty Chang, and Robert Smithson have influenced my visual work over the last years. Ann Hamilton’s and Hanne Friis’s use of fabric and visual language inspired the use of fabric and transparency in my own work. Patty Chang worked closely with her parents in the early years of her career, and she also worked with video and used discomfort to convey a larger message. I used the idea of discomfort in my visuals of myself peeling and scratching at my skin.

Having a well-rounded education on the materials I use in my work is crucial for me to having conversations about the meaning of my work with my viewers. For Our Daughters is a personal journey and body of work for my mother and me, but that does not mean others viewing my work do not also have a personal connection. Referencing trauma by utilizing materials like salt and cotton fabric will open up wounds and conversations for those willing to enter the spaces I create.
For Our Daughters took on a lot of different forms over the course of a week. The base of this piece, a 24 ft. long by 12 ft. high transparent screen made of cotton. The screen was hung perpendicular to the north and south facing walls filling the space from one end to the other. Fabric draped in the water swaying with any amount of movement. Stiffening due to crystal formation from a salt water brine occurred on the bottom half of the cotton fabric. Still and moving imagery played across the fabric of my mother and me. Photos of my mother showed intimate and close-up imagery of our skin. Video slowed down to twenty percent in speed (without our faces shown) ripping at our skin, and rubbing and peeling off layers of glue that had dried on the surface. Audio filled the room with an ambient mix of a mic’ed underwater fan over nondescript conversations I recorded with my grandmother. The screen had been torn and cut into by me, allowing parts of the image to project straight through the screen and onto the wall behind, allowing for people to view each other from both sides. The idea that the viewer can walk around both sides of the screen was an important for me, as it literally showed “two sides.” I think every story has more than one—and often more than two—sides. The bottom of the screen was draped into a container that ran the length of the screen and was filled with a salt and water ratio equal to that of humans and the ocean. Over the length of the installation, salt crystals traveled up the screen and subtly changed the way the imagery was viewed. The projected large images added distortion as well as a change in scale. One was very aware of their size and physical being in relation to the screen because of the lighting and shadows.
Every day the show changed. It morphed with new ideas influenced by viewers and conversations sparked over my installation. Everything mattered, every cord, every light, every crystal on the floor mattered. The wooden trough at the bottom of the fabric took on many different forms and I worked out the best way to disguise the structure. I tried distinguishing the base with pounds of sand and salt surround the base the length of the trough but found out the next day that the water wicked from the fabric onto the sand and salt saturating everything. At the time this seemed like a huge defeat but looking back it helped me try different solutions, final opting to leave it clean and minimal. The word intentional came up for me a lot knowing that everything within the gallery needed to have a place and reason.

My Personal aesthetics morphed in the two weeks of my installation. By the last day I was able to look at what I had created and feel connected to my three yearlong research. Seeing the work of my mother and me on display surfaced more emotions then I was expecting. The day of the show my mother exhibited signs of being a proud mother seeing us on display. I felt as though I was sharing a piece of myself with strangers with which I was not reconciled.

The idea of finished work came up a lot in conversation surrounding my show. Some thought it felt unfinished or unresolved. To this, I would say, you’re right. Not because it did not satisfy me but more so because if my work was completely resolved or “finished” I would not want to continue researching and creating my work. For me, an installation is never done. There are stages and final stages but each one builds off another. Interdisciplinary art is at the heart of my work. Every time there is an idea for me to convey I ask myself “what is the best method of display of my thoughts, research, and imagery?” For the first year of my masters I was strictly a photographer. It was when I finally examined what I was trying to express and realized that showing my imagery in photography was not the best method. Switching to intermedia allowed
me to open up my practice and try new methods of displaying imagery. I bring this up because I am constantly working through the display methods. My MFA show was a step in this direction revealing more ideas and pathways for conveying the ideas I am most intrigued by.

Curiosity drives my work. I do not want to show my work as an insight to the human experience. I want to show my work with reasons why we as humans struggle, fight mental illness, feel the feelings we have and discover how we can better understand bodies and mind and to be cognizant of inner workings. I did this through the science of epigenetics and through learning what transgenerational trauma is-and is not. By looking at my own family, I was able to learn what my genetics meant to me and how my body processes information unique to me.

The idea of space and how my work is formed or defined by a space or gallery was central to the layout of my MFA show. When thinking about where my piece could live I sought out Art Building West. I spent many days in the Levitt gallery measuring and remeasuring to make sure the amount of space I would be using made sense and worked with, not against the gallery. I made AutoCAD drawings of the space and designed and built the structures of my show around the architecture of the gallery.

Bill Viola came up in conversation about my work. Because of the use of natural materials, religion, projections, and space installation. Bill Viola uses water as the essential life force as do I but my focus is largely on salt. I strive to be like Viola using beauty as a shock factor to other topics. We are different in that I speak to trauma and the human experience a little more than life and death as the central focus, but both of us use religion to question the human existence. The use of ultra-slow-motion video is in both of our works, allowing imagery to sink in and evoke emotion in its purist form.
To conclude, I wouldn’t change my show. I learned a lot and it drove me to conceptualize more shows and installations – and new installation concepts.
The addition and subtraction of physical materials over the past eighteen months has informed my process by both expanding and justifying my choice of materials. The presence of the body is represented through the saltwater brine, which mirrors the salinity of the human body. The human body’s saline proportions are closely match the proportions of the ocean, creating a connection between physical and liquid bodies. Water, along with salt, plays a critical role in the Judeo-Christian creation myth of Adam and Eve. This reference is important to my story, as I grew up in an extremely religious environment. I grew up as an Evangelical Christian, where I was involved with a youth group titled Salt Company. Their mission was to spread the word of God like salt across the nations,” based on a biblical passage which declares that believers “are the salt of the earth.” This always stuck with me as a strong metaphor, as salt is essential for all life forms and critical to a balanced ecosystem. It is also a preservative, disinfectant, ceremonial offering, and a unit of exchange (this is where the word salary comes from). Salt is the very pinnacle of creation.

Along with those myriad uses, salt acts as a balancer. It not only balances sweetness and bitterness in food, but also balances the human body. This idea of life-critical balance was the truest metaphor I could find for the most essential relationships in my life: family.

Salt also has the ability to grow and transform over time. In the week-and-a-half that my work was installed, salt crystals formed and transformed the screen of spandex, nylon, and cotton. Throughout my past installations that also used salt, I found that the addition of air movement and heat speeds up the process of crystallization. With that in mind, I utilized underwater fans, as well as a dissolved salt solution before pouring to accelerate the crystallization. The use of the
spandex and cotton material provided a screen of transparency that allowed the story to be seen from both sides of the gallery. This gave the audience a chance to involve themselves in the stories unfolding across the screen, with projections going through the screen and onto the walls and other people. This translucency in the material represented layers of skin, and was meant to break apart the unseen for it to be seen. The fabric was gently stitched together to represent repair, growth, and healing. Keeping the material clean and ironed took meticulous care and dexterity.

Glue is used to form attachment, form a bond, repair, and resist separation. I used glue to rip at my skin and peel away hurt or pain felt within my life and relationships. For the entirety of my materials and presentation choices glue became the rawest component. I showed the most emotion while using glue and felt the most resistance to having it on my skin. In the same way, materials used in my research show both healing and destructive patterns. All of my materials were selected carefully, allowing for personal interpretations and relationships to form between me and my materials.
Throughout my three years in grad school, I learned a lot about defending myself and balancing relationships. I lost and gained some really great people in my life. Regarding the relationships I lost, I examined myself and my role in the falling-out. I found that I would spiral into unhealthy habits of replaying situations over and over again. Knowing that relationships play a large role in life, I wanted to work with the longest relationships I’ve had in my life for more answers.

The relationship I have with my mother started long before I was a part of this world, and long before I was able to comprehend the love she has for me. Throughout the last twenty-five years, we have had a lot of trying times that affected our bond in both healing and damaging ways. I tried for so long to be the opposite of my mother, and it wasn’t until I was ready to accept our similarities that I was able to embark on a journey of creating art with her.

When I first proposed to my mom that we work together, her response was pure surprise. Looking back, I think my mother was honored I would want her to be a part of my life in that way. Over the last three years of working with my mother, our relationship has changed in ways I am not sure we could put in words. I saw my mother open up and take photos of her body that I never thought she’d be open enough to allow me to take. This project granted me different perspectives on my mother’s life I was disinterested in prior to grad school. I am slowly learning what is important to me within relationships. I know when I need to give myself time alone to process, as well as when we need time together to process what the next steps may be.

Along with working aside my mother, I introduced my grandmother Loraine into some of my work. My relationship with my mother has been rocky, but my relationship with my
grandmother has been even worse (as is the relationship between my mother and her mother). However, my grandmother very recently fell ill with cancer. Due to changing circumstances, I was forced into situations in which I was the only one present to make critical medical decisions. We spent an ample amount of alone time together. During this time, I was able to ask my grandmother questions I had formerly given up on ever knowing the answers to. Some of the discoveries I made are still too raw, and that’s something I am sorting through in the many discoveries of this work.

Other conversations led to a further understanding of why my grandmother is the way she is. I was shocked to discover how open my grandmother was about her transfer of stress down to her kids, and opening her kids up to more than they ever should have seen. My grandmother also acknowledged the ways in which my mother struggles, and how the demons she had not faced were passed down onto me. We were able to talk openly about the possible future generations of our family—either through me or my brother—hence the title of my show: “For Our Daughters”.

Through the relationship work with my mother and grandmother, the most important takeaway for me has been the establishment of balance. Sometimes I need to be alone, give myself space to breathe, come to my own conclusions, and cultivate understanding rather than anger. Other times, I need to reach out to the women in my family for my own self-understanding, as well as for my mother’s love she so longingly gives. Art is an outward projection of oneself that takes an entire lifetime to work through, rework, discover, and tear apart. This work is very close to me, and I have fought to defend its power over the last three years. As difficult as it has been, I do not regret it in the slightest. Salt also comes from sweat.
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