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*Uncanny Bodies*

by  
Samantha Neu

A thesis presented to the  
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Introduction

Growing up in West Texas, the barren landscape was filled with objects that viscerally communicated how they would feel to the touch: dry, prickly, almost always abrasive. I remember the dirt being so dry I could lift the cracked topsoil up in solid sheets. Catching horny toads, I felt them squish their bellies into my hand as I traced my fingers over their spiky back. I explored the world and learned through touch. My body served as both a tool and a site of exploration. The body is foundational to our navigation of the world. Susan Stewart writes about the defining role of the body in Western society.

Traditionally, the body has served as our primary mode of understanding and perceiving scale. The world in English is measured by the body—spans of hands and feet, a yard the length from nose to fingers at the end of an outstretched arm...<sup>i</sup>

My obsession with tactility has continued in my studio practice. The presence of my body is evidenced in both my physical process and my finished work. The paper of my drawings shows the battle of marking and erasing, the brushstrokes on my paintings are left loose and present, and the visibly carved chunks in my sculptures all show the history of my hand's connection to the piece. My goal is that in addition to recording my body, my work evokes the desire to touch from the viewer. From the description of wrinkles in my drawings to the curved lumps of my sculptures, there is the memory and desire for touch.

The bodies in my work are amorphous and in a constant state of becoming. They emit feelings of discomfort in their states of fragmentation and disorientation. They are uncanny in their indecipherable familiarity. Similar to the suggested and fragmented body parts in the works of Eva Fàbregas and Jonathas de Andrade, a clear identification of the body is elusive. Kate Zambreno, in "Translations of the Uncanny" (2017), describes the uncanny in the artist B. Ingrid Olson's work:

What am I looking at: this is the strangeness of the work... to abstract the body, to other the self-portrait... The embodied self becomes no longer coherent, no longer easily locatable in space. The self and body as Other, dimensional, fragmented. Can the viewer place this body part....<sup>ii</sup>

Through abstraction, I hope to disorient the viewer, muddling their relationship to the work. The ambiguity attempts to create tension but also allows the viewer to freely form subjective associations with the work. I try to avoid set expectations or hierarchical understandings of my work.

By refusing to work with definitiveness and clarity, I create awkward experiences. The unfixed nature of the uncanny generates a range of possibilities and slippages like the ever-changing body. Through scale and abstraction, I take the recognizable and separate it to where it is no longer clear as to what the final image is referencing. The artist Amy Sillman's abstract paintings similarly do not offer singular statements. Her statement below speaks to the essence of my work:

What urge makes you want to do something that pushes further, on toward contingency, clumsiness, strangeness, or even brutality? Awkwardness is that thing, which is fleshy, funny, downward-facing, uncontrollable; it is an emotional or even philosophical state of being, against the great and noble, and also against the cynical. It is both positive and negative...<sup>iii</sup>

When we are confronted with the awkward, the grotesque, and the humorous in a shared space, we are forced to orient our relationship to this experience—to engage with the “uncanny.”

## Embodying the Uncanny

These forms, our forms, are jumbled up.  
Lumps bump into molds.  
My new heft revolts, and my mass fumbles to your toes.  
Is this gross?

Excerpt from “Big Bang Puberty” (2023)

My work centers around the body, exploring my personal corporeal anxieties and a shared experience of material embodiment. As a society, we are obsessed with bodies—measuring, defining, and judging them. I am interested in the multiplicity of the physical experience, simultaneously grotesque, humorous, erotic, intimate, painful, playful, and so much more. Reflecting this fluidity, the body emerges in my work as uncanny, unable to be identified directly as the body, yet evoking one. My awkward bodily forms are presented to the public and subjected to exterior judgment. The physical is subject to the social. My work shares my experience while hopefully evoking memories and experiences of the viewer's own physical body.

When I refer to “the body” or “bodies” I am mainly focusing on the materiality of a human body, referring to it as a physical entity, relating more to “bodily.” This language can set me up for unintended oversimplifications and assumptions. My goal is to acknowledge the plurality of the physical body. In his essay “Why I Don’t Talk About ‘The Body’: A Polemic,”

Gordon Hall writes, “Wherever there are bodies, there is the possibility, even the guarantee, that there is difference.”<sup>iv</sup> My anxieties regarding the body shared in my work stem from my experience as a white, able-bodied female raised within Western social constructions from the 1990s to the present. I hope that the amorphous ambiguity in my work allows space for viewers to form a diversity of experiences to feel a connection between the work and their bodies.

Stemming from my personal physical experiences, all my work is a form of self-portraiture, both in my body serving as source imagery and in my body’s presence throughout the process of making. In my charcoal drawings, aggressive marks and erasures remain on the final warped and wrinkled piece of paper. My large sculptures are visibly carved, conveying the feeling of being formed by hands. The final objects serve as indexical documentation of my physical relationship with the piece. My body remains present.

Gordon Hall asks, “What’s more ubiquitously human than feeling bad in relation to our bodies?”<sup>v</sup> The body is vulnerable to both internal and external forces. It is constantly assaulted by both corporeal and social attacks, and the threat of the body being rendered futile is ever-present. *Eating, Eatin’, Eaten* (Fig. 1) is a series of ceramic toothlike forms inspired by a recurring nightmare of my teeth falling out and losing their function. These pieces are studies of something losing its solidity; they are melting and left functionless. They are pushed into the uncanny by suggesting teeth, but the certainty of the label is obscured as their form shifts away from the familiar. Similarly, the artist Alina Szapocznikow’s piece *Tumor’s Personified* (fig. 2) is a series of clumps ranging in sizes from twenty-two to five inches made out of polyester resin, fiberglass, paper, and gauze. Some of these bulbous forms feature Szapocznikow’s face on them. She was inspired to make these after being diagnosed with breast cancer in 1969.<sup>vi</sup> They served as a place for her to exert control while her body faced something beyond her control.





Figure 1. Samantha Neu, *Eating, Eatin', Eaten* (series), 2024, ceramic and acrylic paint, ranging from 6 x 7 x 8 inches to 10 x 8 x 6 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Alina Szapocznikow, *Tumors Personified*, 1971, Ranging from 13 x 22 1/1 inches x 13 3/8 inches to 5 15/16 x 9 1/16 x 6 5/16", polyester resin, glass wool, newspaper, gauze. Courtesy of the artists and The Met.

In addition to internal factors forming anxiety around the body, external factors impart their own pressure. The social judgments the body faces range from concerns over appearance to anxiety regarding ability. My large-scale sculptural pieces, loaded with folds, share an anxiety over a body taking up space. The body seems to be everywhere, encroaching into the viewer's space. My painting, *Twirl* (figs. 3 and 4), thinks about the girlhood anxiety over body hair. A flat pink back is completely covered in black curly hairs. In defiance of the judgment/concern over their presence, the hairs twirl together, dancing across the stage set by the girl's red-scalloped camisole.



Figure 3. Samantha Neu, *Twirl*, 2023, acrylic paint on canvas, 48 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Samantha Neu, *Twirl* (detail), 2023, acrylic paint on canvas, 48 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

My work considers labels such as “grotesque” that are thrown at bodies; Susan Stewart describes the grotesque body as “the exaggerations of its internal elements, the turning of the ‘inside out,’ the display of orifices and gaps upon the exterior body.”<sup>vii</sup> Like the lump folding to the side in *Oscillation* (fig. 11), the crevices on *Flick* (fig.5), or the descriptions of transforming bodies in my zine “Big Bang Puberty” (2023), my work is an overshare of the body's interior paired with uncomfortably close depictions of its exterior. Stewart elaborates on how society's discomfort forms around “what is both inside and outside the body (feces, spittle, urine, menstrual blood, etc.) tend to become taboo because of its ambiguous and anomalous status.”<sup>viii</sup> Despite all this interiority shared within all bodies, we are alarmed when faced with their representations. At the large scale of my work, the massive displays of the private are extreme confrontations with the viewer foregrounding that which is “grotesque.”



Figure 5. Samantha Neu, *Flick*, 2023, insulation foam board, joint compound, and house paint, 73 x 46 x 32 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Samantha Neu, *The Split*, 2019, charcoal on paper, 54 x 60 inches. Courtesy of artist.

Through fragmentation, I project a sense of anxiety around the body. Stewart further describes the grotesque body as “a body of parts”<sup>ix</sup> where there is a “hyperbolization of the bowels, the genital organs, the mouth, and the anus...”<sup>x</sup> Anxiety manifested in the fragmented and broken is present in the photographs and collages of Surrealist photographers such as Hans Bellmer and Man Ray. Often breaking the female body into pieces, their work reacted to the devastation bodies were subjected to during World War I<sup>xi</sup>. My charcoal drawing, *The Split* (fig. 6), is a collage of the body in pieces. In the cross-shaped composition, a figure is suggested but undefined. The uncanny assemblage expresses the vulnerability of the body. In the 2022 Venice Biennale the artist Jonathas de Andrade filled the Brazil pavilion with parts of the body (fig. 7). Viewers entered the gallery through an ear, a five-foot-long amputated tongue bled on the

ground, and a giant inflatable heart hung from a mouth. The room of scattered parts is, as the curator Jacopo Crivelli Visconti describes, “A body literally and repeatedly fragmented, silenced, ignored, torn into pieces.”<sup>xii</sup>



Figure 7. Exhibition view: Jonathas de Andrade, *Com o coração saindo pela boca* (*With the heart coming out of the mouth*), Brazilian Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *The Milk of Dreams*, Venice (23 April–27 November 2022). Courtesy Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Photo: Ding Musa.

While Andrade’s divided body parts can be labeled as grotesque, they are also comical. As humans, we can find humor in these complicated experiences. The material experience is that of multiplicity. Things are funny, weird, erotic, and gross simultaneously, and all interpretations differ depending on the viewer’s experience with the work. Like the Pepto-Bismol pink of my sculptures, they evoke a gross interior of organs or genitalia but also seem playful, like a joke. Both visceral reactions can exist simultaneously. This multiplicity of interpretations is what

draws me to working with the body and its different facets of material being. As Amy Sillman writes, the body is a:

Moment of tension between the ideal and the real, where what's supposed to happen goes awry... the body, is embarrassing: your hand is too moist, your fly is open, there turns out to be something on your nostril...<sup>xiii</sup>

My work strives to be an honest portrayal of this “real.” An uncanny depiction not of a body, but an overshare of the bodily: sweaty mounds, drooping, lumped over at your feet.

## Transforming the Uncanny

Mushroom gills”

“Elephant ears”

“Whale belly”

“Jellyfish”

\*The human body\*

“Elbows”

“Knees”

And “toes!”

[“dicks, butts, clits, and nuts”]

When someone discusses my work, I often hear a list of things they see, a series of identifications that are varied, unique, and typically uncertain. Apart from one frequently asked question that asserts a singular subject, “Is this a penis?” the references they list are posed as possibilities, not certainties. Through ambiguity, I attempt to challenge our desire to categorize and define. As I create, divisions fade between the animate and the inanimate, the erotic and the grotesque. Uncanny projections and surreal depictions create murky spaces of intangibility in my work. The absence of solidity in my work provides room for the freedom of exploration and play—just mind the gap and excuse the bumps.



In his essay, *The Uncanny* (1919)<sup>xiv</sup>, Sigmund Freud defined the uncanny as the experience when something is simultaneously familiar and alien. Similarly, my work evokes the identifiable but refuses identification. This game of suggestion and negation stirs discomfort but also enables subjectivity for the viewer, offering them the role of discernment. Kate Zambreno's essay *Translations of the Uncanny*, 2017 describes the uncanny in art as "perception and estrangement, transforming the familiar...something unable to be exactly deciphered."<sup>xv</sup> Transformation becomes the catalyst for the uncanny. As the creator, I experiment with different manipulations, deciding what of the original remains and what becomes obscured. Objects such as cypress knees, slides, tongues, fingers, and my own body are subjected to the process of dissection and regurgitation. Zambreno describes the transformation's "rhythm of disappearing and emergence"<sup>xvi</sup>. This process of bouncing between the two prevents a viewer from settling on one orientation.



Figure 8. Studio View, Samantha Neu, 2019

My series of large-scale charcoal drawings from 2019 (fig. 8) serves as an example of my process of transformation. I began with close-up photographs of my hands, which I then manipulated to obscure the original images. The first step of distortion was zooming in and discovering the micro-textures of my body—wrinkles, folds, and freckles. Despite offering detailed information of the hand’s surface, these photos confused the original subject by being cropped; the context of the hand was removed.

Similarly, Dora Maar’s photograph, *Pere Ubu* (fig. 9) turns the familiar monstrous



Figure 9. Dora Maar, *Pere Ubu*, 1936, Gelatin silver print, 15 5/8 x 11 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and The Met.

by zooming in. The close-up photo shows more than we want to see of a taxidermied armadillo: the fuzz of its hair, folds in its armor, threatening talons, and its posture, hunched over like Igor.<sup>xvii</sup> For my drawings, I further transformed the photos of my hands by creating digital distortions and combining them to form collages in Photoshop (fig. 10). I translated these collages into the final massive charcoal drawings, ranging from five to eight feet wide, again using scale to further separate the final image from the original photo of my hand. Like *Oscillation* (Fig. 11), the drawings are no longer identifiable as hands. Yet, the viewer still experiences the uncanny evocation of the body.



Figure 10. Samantha Neu, *Digital Collage*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11. Samantha Neu, *Oscillation*, 2019, charcoal on paper, 60 x 80 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

In addition to my body, I also pull from nature to serve as the source imagery to be transformed through my process of making. Growing up, I watched shows that consisted of bizarre, anthropomorphized characters: *Timmy the Tooth*, the thumb people from *Spy Kids*, and a sexualized willow tree in *The Last Unicorn*. The inanimate turns animate in these mutations. I am curious why we look to nature to see ourselves. Susan Stewart, in her article “The Miniature, The Gigantic, The Imaginary Body”<sup>xviii</sup> explains this projection:

Since we know our body only in parts, the image is what constitutes the self for us; it is what constitutes our subjectivity... Anthropomorphism, for example, tells us much more about the shape of the human body than it tells us about an animal other. We continually project the body into the world in order that its image might return.

Identifying parts of our bodies in nature allows us to relate, provides a mirror for us to see ourselves, and enables subjectivity. This relationship allows room for metaphor or mirror, with the viewer deciding how directly it relates to their own body. My *Knobs and Bobs* series of prints are inspired by cypress knees, bizarre protuberances found around wetland trees—awkward forms with an unknown function (fig. 12). They stand erect in the mud and pop out around the base of a tree. Like their label ‘knees,’ I am drawn to the imagination and play of relating these knobs to different parts of the body. By taking these parts and abstracting them, the prints exist in a space where they are neither a representation of the knee nor the parts of the body. Instead, they constantly slip between the two.

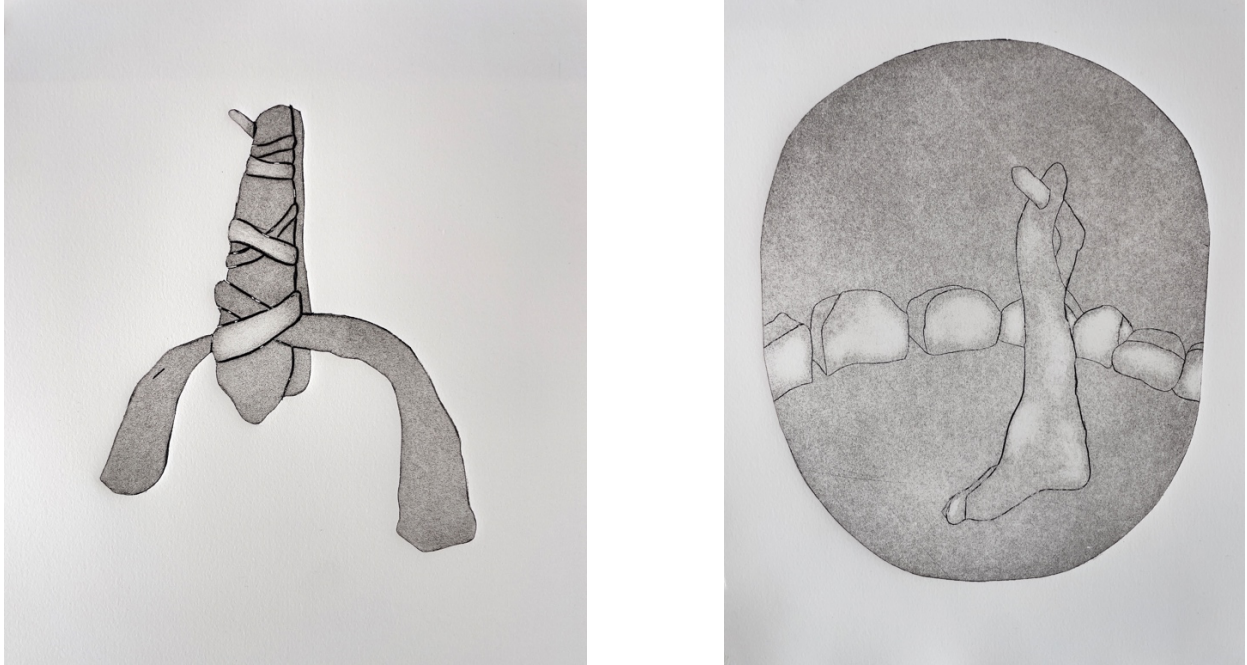


Figure 12. Samantha Neu, Prints from *Knobs and Bobs* series, 2023, intaglio on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Expanding on the *Knobs and Bobs* (2023) prints, I pulled from the abstracted cypress knee form and translated it into a human-scale sculpture. *Flick* (figs. 5 and 13) is a large pink sculpture made from insulation foam that I carved and painted. The synthetic rectangular sheets of foam board are glued together and then arduously sculpted, pulling out an organic rounded form consisting of mounds and folds. Working from the original image, I intuitively reacted throughout the process of carving. Forms emerged: a foot with nervously twisted toes, a consolatory arm wrapping around itself, a crack down its back, and a phallic lump hanging from the front. The uncanny mass can be described as relating to body parts or objects from nature, but there is no singular answer to what it is. My use of ambiguity is an intentional denial of fixed interpretations of my work. Its human scale and bodily gestures ask the viewer to consider, as Freud says, “whether a lifeless object might not be, in fact, animate.”<sup>xix</sup> Through these uncanny transformations, I hope to create a space that challenges the viewer’s empathy for the abject.



Figure 13. Samantha Neu, *Flick*, 2023, insulation foam board, joint compound, and house paint, 73 x 46 x 32 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist.

*Flick* (figs. 5 and 13) and my later sculptures, *Spit* (fig.16) and *Homesick* (2024), are all a light shade of Pepto-Bismol pink. This solid color aids in the uncanny experience for the viewer. In Freud’s “The Uncanny”<sup>xx</sup>, he references a quote by the philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling about how the uncanny is something that should have remained hidden that has been exposed. This tacky pink (both for its tactility and social assignment) is a *private pink*. It represents a private interior made public—a chewed-up wad of bubble gum and the pink tongue that presents it. Coated in this *private pink* and with their voluptuous forms, the sculptures evoke the erotic. They are not blatant depictions but merely suggestions of sexed forms. The suggestion of the sexual creates discomfort; the viewer becomes the voyeur. This tension forces the viewer to ask, “Am I allowed to look?”



Figure 14. Samantha Neu, *Homesick*, 2024, insulation foam board, joint compound, and house paint, 84 x 132 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



My thesis project's title, *Homesick* (fig. 14), is inspired by the discussion around the German translation of the uncanny in Freud's text.<sup>xxi</sup> The term references the German “unheimlich” which translates literally to “unhomely.”<sup>xxii</sup> This idea of *heimlich*, (home) represents the familiar and the comfortable, the *unheimlich* (the unhomely/the uncanny) being the unfamiliar. In addition to home as comfort, Freud also discusses its relationship to private, hidden secrets. The unheimlich is an exposure of what is meant to be hidden, made public. This vulnerable exposure adds to the already uncomfortable experience of navigating the alien presented within the uncanny. Eva Fàbregas' large tubular sculptures have the feel of an interior that has been forced into the exterior (fig. 15). These lumpy strands resemble organs that have been removed and strung throughout the gallery. Like the *private pink* of my sculpture, Fàbregas' sculptures offer a gross reveal, with its form evoking a bodily system that is typically concealed. The arched hole leads to an extended slide-like form, like an open mouth unrolling its tongue. This gaping canal awkwardly reveals too much; the intimate is put on display.



Figure 15. Eva Fàbregas. View of the exhibition, *Devouring Lovers*, 2024, Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart. Courtesy of the artist and Berlin.de

My work is not comfortable. It proposes a potentially threatening stance of insisting on boths and neithers. Ambiguous and amorphous, my forms are transitory, parts that are not yet defined. This is a reflection of the body's constant evolution, ever-changing. There is not a singular, shared experience of being a body, just as no singular understanding is presented in my work. My forms are an uncomfortable exposure of a “grotesque body... the exaggeration of its internal elements...the ‘inside out,’ the display of orifices and gaps upon the exterior of the body.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

However, my goal is that there is generosity and freedom in open interpretation. By my denial of a definitive understanding, the viewer is left to form their own associations with the work. The uncanny encounter is describable but undefinable. Nevertheless, if the viewer insists on an answer to the question, “What is it?” my response is an excerpt from my book, *Big Bang Puberty* (2023).

It is...

foldedknobs

solidflops

gappedtrails

slabholes

moundheaves

wedgechunks

bonelumps

hunkrolls

clumpbobs

# Encountering the Uncanny

NOT WHAT WE SEE  
IN  
THE SCULPTURES  
BUT HOW  
THE SCULPTURES  
MIGHT  
ENABLE US  
TO SEE  
EVERYTHING ELSE  
OBJECTS  
CAN TEACH US HOW TO SEE  
OTHER  
OBJECTS  
AND HOW TO SEE OTHER  
BODIES  
AND HOW TO SEE OUR OWN  
BODIES  
RECOGNIZING  
RENEWED  
POSSIBILITIES  
IN ONE ANOTHER  
AND OURSELVES  
WHAT  
IS ACTUALLY  
HOW  
AND  
WE LEARN FROM  
THE THINGS  
THEMSELVES

Script for Two adapted from Gordon Hall’s “Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture”<sup>xxiv</sup>

The large-scale nature of my work asks the viewer to navigate a physical and emotional relationship with the piece. Ambiguity and abstraction disrupt a direct connection, but a link between object and viewer remains. How does the image of a sagging human-scale form make the viewer feel? Do they connect their own body to the mass, or does it remain other? Is there a feeling of disgust or possibly sympathy for this weighted form? Like anthropomorphizing nature, my work aims to project the possibility of animation, question an object's subjecthood, and perhaps elicit empathy from the viewer. I hope to push back to a binary between subject and object and potentially hint at the object's ability to gaze back at the viewer, offering it subjecthood. Douglas Fogle's essay "Loving the Alien"<sup>xxv</sup> discusses the potential for uncanny bodies in art:

It is so close to being familiar to us as a representation of the human body. However, it is nonetheless completely other. Yet it is this proximity to our own embodied being that allows it to communicate with us.<sup>xxvi</sup>

I am curious how distant from a representation of a human body, art can be and still evoke a connection. What encompasses a body? What is the reach of alienhood a viewer can navigate and still relate to an object?

Working in two-dimensional media, there is a physical dimension (the size of the paper and the object drawn), but as viewers, we understand two-dimensional art as a pictorial frame where scale is suggested, not literal. David Company's 2022 exhibition *ACTUAL SIZE! Photography at Life Scale*<sup>xxvii</sup> played with the historical and philosophical dialog around scale and photography, questioning what "actual" means. While discussing my *Knobs and Bobs* print series, I became interested in how I imagined a specific size of the cypress knee-inspired shapes printed on the paper; however, my imagined four-foot-tall forms were not apparent to the viewer when they looked at the six-inch shape on the paper. With two-dimensional work, "...we can

only stand outside, looking in, experiencing a type of tragic distance.”<sup>xxviii</sup> What happens when the scale becomes definitive? How does the viewer’s relationship to the piece change when the object exists in the viewer’s space? With sculpture, the viewers must navigate their bodies around the piece, and a choreography develops from this movement. Walking around the sculpture offers opportunities for discovery and allows the viewer to develop a physical connection to the piece.

Scale functions in my work as both a tool for creating a physical relationship with the viewer as well as encouraging a psychological response. Most of my drawings and sculptures are big, human-scale or larger. My sculpture *Flick* (figs. 5 and 13) stands six feet tall, slightly larger than the average adult’s height. This closeness between an adult standing and the sculpture puts them in dialogue with one another. With a shared characteristic, it can be asked, what else do we have in common? My massive drawing, *Oscillation* (fig. 11), looms over the viewer. This heightened scale disorients, switching back and forth between object and landscape.



Figure 16. Samantha Neu, *Spit*, 2023, insulation foam, joint compound, steel tubing, steel chain, house paint, and sand, 120 x 50 x 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

In my sculpture *Spit* (fig. 16) two organic forms are entangled, hung by a chain inside a ten-foot by five-foot raw steel frame. The pink mass that hangs inside is human size. The entanglement is a bodily act, tongues or fingers meeting and desperately grabbing each other. It is an intimate moment on display. The steel frame suggests a wall, but the onlooker can see inside. The viewer navigates their body around the frame, experiencing an awareness of exteriority, a sense of their body on the outside. The form's privateness is rendered public, leaving them vulnerable to external assumptions and assignments. Erotic? Grotesque? Sympathy? Disgust? Hung from the chain, these forms are offered up for public consumption and judgment.

The steel frame around *Spit*, (fig. 16) forms a cage similar to those in Louise Bourgeois' *Cells*. The frame serves as a divider, separating and entrapping what is inside. While some of Bourgeois' *Cells* have a more human-like form, I am interested in the versions where the trapped subject is not obviously human. This separation connects with the uncanny by asking how minimal an object can be and still evoke a body. In her sculpture *Cell 3* (fig. 17), three marble spheres group together inside a cube cage. There are no markings of the body. They are simple shapes, yet their placement in this cage evokes viewer empathy. We project ourselves onto these inanimate objects. Like the spheres, *Spit* (fig. 16) consists of two organic forms, not obvious bodies, but they evoke fingers or tongues wrapping around each other. How alien can something be and yet still have an element that allows humans to find a way to connect with it?



Figure 17: Louise Bourgeois, *Cell III*, 1993, steel, glass, marble, and mirror, 81 3/4 x 85 1/2 x 84 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Saint Louis Art Museum

My thesis sculpture, *Homesick* (fig. 14), continues my exploration of the connection of the viewer's body to my work through implied physical interaction. As the viewer's body engages through the choreography of navigating around the massive sculpture, a physical encounter is suggested. The form resembles a child's slide described with the corporeal language of the body's canals. The slide shape renders physical memories, spurring the viewer's awareness of their body while also drawing awareness through the denial of interaction. Gordon Hall talks about how the artist Richard Artschwager similarly references objects with implied functions and connects to the viewer through the visceral denial of experience by rendering them functionless.<sup>xxix</sup> For example, Artschwager's *Splatter Chair* (fig. 18) shows a wooden chair that has been squashed and smeared into the corner of an art gallery. Flattened, the chair can no longer offer physical support for the viewer to rest. They imagine sitting down, but the viewer is forced to remain on their feet, becoming all the more aware of the weight of their material body. Gordon Hall expands:

Can I say that these sculptures, through their noninteractive representation of typically interactive situation, produce for me a virtual double of my body? An imaginary experience of my own body based in the experience of a material object? And why does this allow me to conceive of myself...<sup>xxx</sup>



Figure 18 Richard Artschwager, *Splatter Chair I*, 1992, enamel on wood and formica, 53 x 42 1/8 x 38 3/4". Courtesy of the artist and MOMA.



Whether evoking the human body through its form and scale or the viewer's choreography around the work, I hope to raise awareness of a physical connection between the viewer's body and my work. The viewer's discovery of a physical relationship to an inanimate object asks them to question greater empathetic implications. Gordon Hall writes about this potential power of abstract art:

What lessons can we learn from objects? Art objects can tell us many things—about their origins, their intended and received meanings, their makers. But what can objects teach us about how to see? About how to see other objects, or bodies, in realms far removed from their museum, gallery, or studio? <sup>xxx</sup>

By sitting with the unfamiliar, the uncanny, and the weird, we can learn how to appreciate and relate to the abject.

## Conclusion

In my work, I impose awkward transformations and evolutions, exploring the uncomfortable experience of material existence. From puberty and beyond, the body is in an amorphous state. There is not a universal experience for a body, but change is guaranteed for all. My work is an overshare of crevices and lumps traditionally kept hidden. It is grotesque, erotic, and intimate, overlapping to share the humorous experience of embodiment. As Amy Sillman puts it:

Just having a body is a daily comedy...one gazes downward...upon this “loose, baggy monster”..., this laughable casement that is the body below. As ankles swell, farts are emitted, rolls of fat jut out, the penis does its own thing. Shit happens and then you die.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Through fragmentation, transformation, and concealment, my work separates itself from an original reference, with its final iteration presenting the uncanny, ambiguously undefinable, but hints of the familiar remain. While creating a feeling of uncertainty, my work is firm on resisting set definitions and rebelling against binaries. My *Knobs and Bobs* (2023) embossments are quiet whispers, white shapes on white paper, but despite their softness, they are meant to be strong statements of the presence of the becoming, of the constantly shifting ever-changing body, and slippages between categorizations (fig. 19). This unplaceability is as Gordon Hall quotes

David Halperin:

Halperin describes ‘not a thing but a resistance to the norm’ which, ideally enables us to uncover for ourselves a space of concrete freedom in the possibility of our own self-transformation.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

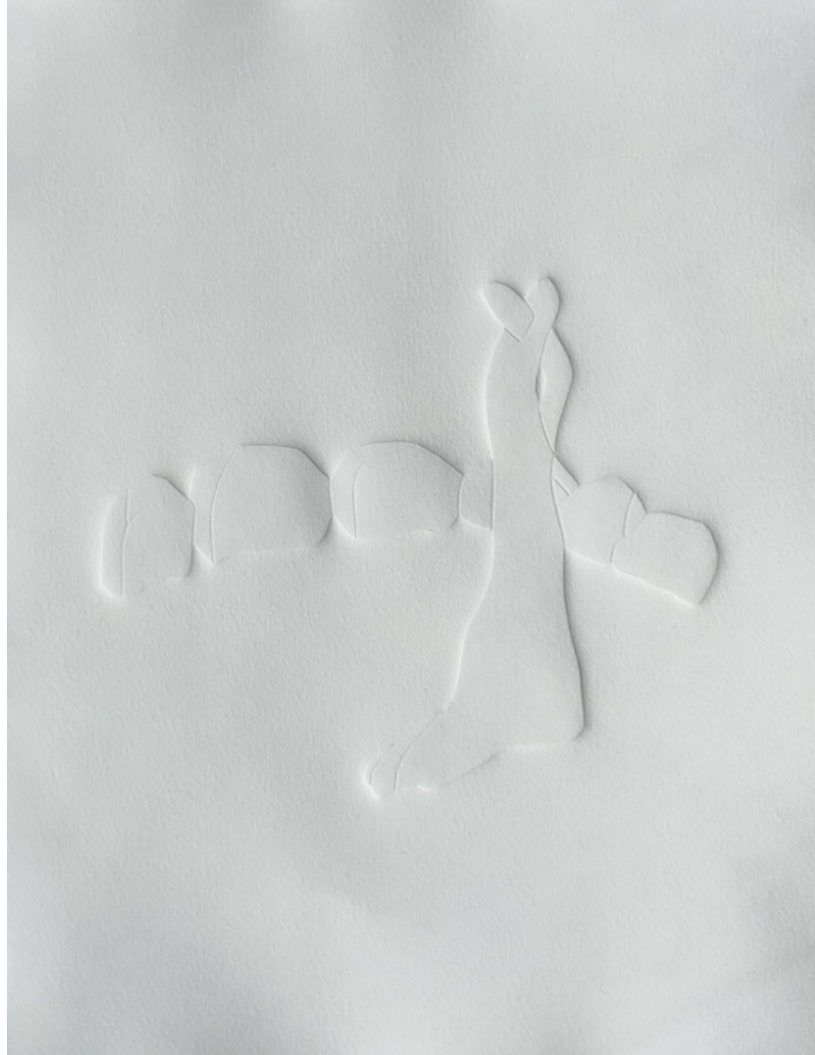


Figure 19. Samantha Neu, Untitled (*Knobs and Bobs* series), 2023, embossment on paper, 11 ½ x 15 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Simone de Beauvoir’s “Ethics of Ambiguity” (1947) notes the inherent ambiguity of our existence and our futile fight against this uncomfortable truth. Categories and definitions attempt to construct order, but nature is too slippery. Jerry Saltz shares his struggle with the ambiguity within Richard Artschwager’s work, where there is “the coexistence of yes and no, almost, in between, not quite, not and neither.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> In my work, I similarly hope the uncanny offers a space to embrace the unknowable.

In Freud's "The Uncanny" (1919), the German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch discusses how the uncanny in literature leaves the reader in uncertainty. He warns against having the viewer focus solely on the uncertainty as he may "be urged to go into the matter and clear it up immediately... quickly dissipating the peculiar emotional effect of the thing."<sup>xxxv</sup> I hope that my work goes beyond the viewer just trying to decide what the object is but instead explores art's potential to connect with a viewer on both physical and emotional levels. Douglas Fogle's "Loving the Alien" (2007) questions how a viewer can relate to abstract art. He asks if, through this encounter, it is possible for subjecthood versus objecthood to be challenged, questioning states of animate versus inanimate. Fogle describes "the ambivalent or quite possibly irreducible space between the self and the other, this constant inversion of subject and object."<sup>xxxvi</sup> I hope to push this proposal further. What is necessary to suggest the sensate? How far removed from a human body can art be and still have the viewer relate it to their own body? What forms human connection?

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Duke University Press, 1993), 101–2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1220n8g>.

<sup>ii</sup> Zambreno, Kate, “Translations of the Uncanny,” *The Renaissance Society*, n.d., 12.

<sup>iii</sup> Amy Sillman, *Faux Pas: Select Writings and Drawings* (After 8 Books, 2020), 165.

<sup>iv</sup> Gordon Hall, “Why I Don’t Talk About ‘The Body’: A Polemic,” *Monday Journal* Vol. 4 (2020): 97.

<sup>v</sup> Hall, 101.

<sup>vi</sup> “Alina Szapocznikow | Tumors Personified,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed April 28, 2024, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/656491>.

<sup>vii</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, 105.

<sup>viii</sup> Stewart, 104–5.

<sup>ix</sup> Stewart, 105.

<sup>x</sup> Stewart, 105.

<sup>xi</sup> Dr. Charles Cramer and Dr. Kim Grant, “Surrealism and Women (Article) | Surrealism | Khan Academy,” accessed April 28, 2024, [https://www.khanacademy.org/\\_render](https://www.khanacademy.org/_render).

<sup>xii</sup> Sofia Lekka Angelopoulou. designboom, “Brazil Pavilion Translates Idioms Referring to the Human Body into Playful Installation in Venice,” designboom | architecture & design magazine, April 26, 2022, <https://www.designboom.com/art/brazil-pavilion-idioms-human-body-playful-installation-venice-04-26-2022/>.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sillman, *Faux Pas: Select Writings and Drawings*, 167–68.

<sup>xiv</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” 1919.

<sup>xv</sup> Zambreno, Kate, “Translations of the Uncanny,” 13.

<sup>xvi</sup> Zambreno, Kate, 6.

<sup>xvii</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1818.

<sup>xviii</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, 125.

<sup>xix</sup> Freud, “The Uncanny,” 6.

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<sup>xx</sup> Freud, “The Uncanny.”

<sup>xxi</sup> Freud.

<sup>xxii</sup> Freud, 2.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, 104.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Gordon Hall, “Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture,” 2013.

<sup>xxv</sup> Douglas Fogle, “Loving the Alien,” 2007.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Fogle, 3–4.

<sup>xxvii</sup> “ACTUAL SIZE! Photography at Life Scale | David Company,” accessed April 28, 2024, <https://davidcompany.com/actual-size-photography-life-scale/>.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, 71.

<sup>xxix</sup> Hall, “Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture.”

<sup>xxx</sup> Hall, 56.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Hall, 1.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Sillman, *Faux Pas: Select Writings and Drawings*, 167.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Hall, “Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture,” 6.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Freud, 4.

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