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Tracing Patterns: Making Sense of Experience

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Abstract

In my life, I have developed several practices in attempt to preserve my memories in a way that I can relive them, knowing exactly how I felt at the time. Two of these practices are the practice of frequently journaling, and the practice of keeping objects for their sentimental value. For my thesis, I used journal entries and sentimental objects as a starting point for creating a metaphor for how I process emotions in my life. I created a quilt out of 36 excerpts of journal entries from throughout college to symbolize the way it is comforting to me to go back and condense abstract emotion into something I can grasp. I also created a book chronicling objects I have kept for their sentimental value and the memories I am trying to preserve through keeping them. I placed these two pieces in a cozy installation setting together, allowing viewers to sit with the objects, creating a vulnerable space through the highly personal and emotional texts in the work. Psychological research suggests that vulnerability is the gateway to empathy; applied to my work, viewers feel empathy towards me when they read about my emotional experiences. Other artists use a similar tactic of displaying their most personal experiences, such as Iviva Olenick, Nan Goldin, and Tracey Emin. This vulnerable method of art-making emphasizes the cathartic nature of exposing one’s deepest emotions, and also allows for the viewer to empathize with these emotions and heal as well.
Tracing Patterns: Making Sense of Experience

In life, we experience infinitely complex emotions and situations. We relate to countless people, some for an instant, some our whole lives. We undergo intense emotional highs and lows, sometimes within the same day. Understanding and recording the experience of being alive in words is an impossible task, because no form of expression can precisely explain such an abstract and constantly changing phenomenon as the human experience. But even though I know it is impossible, I constantly attempt to summarize my life in language and visual forms anyway, because it gives me comfort to distill something complex into something concise that I can hold on to.

Distilling Experience, Tracing the Patterns

My artwork comes as an extension of the way I process and move through my life. I experience emotion that is intense and fluctuates a lot, and as a release in the moment of something, I tend to write in a journal so I can start coming back to neutral. I have maintained this practice in some capacity since I was 10 years old. As a result, I have massive amounts of rambling text from all different phases of my life. As I have gotten older, my intention in journaling has expanded beyond simply needing to channel some emotion, and has started to be targeted at preserving an emotional experience so that it is not lost. The intention behind
documenting the emotion is so that I can read the journals later and relive what I felt at the time, so that the emotion is not transformed by my memory. Without my journals, I would simply be reminiscing on my past when I recall it, but with my journals, I can actually relive my past experiences by reading what I felt at the time the event happened.

These journals became the basis of much of my art practice. I make quilts to act as a metaphor for how I use these journal entries and how I move through emotional experiences. An example of this is my quilt entitled *Tracing Patterns (2014-2018)*, in which I sought to condense my four years in college into one piece of art. I went back and read every journal entry I wrote, starting from freshman year move-in, searching for interesting passages that I felt like encompassed the emotional truth of a situation concisely. Then, I narrowed these hundreds of passages down into just 36 excerpts of one or two sentences, which I embroidered onto a quilt (see Fig. 1).
This narrowing down symbolizes the way I edit down my life events into only emotions I understand or can describe, and then put them in context with each other to create a larger neat narrative. The quilt then provides the viewer with warmth and comfort, with neatly and concisely embroidered text on it, the same way that distilling intense experiences into something neat and tidy gives me comfort.

In order for viewers to be fully immersed in the comfort provided by the quilt, I created an installation similar to a living room, with a couch acting as the “pedestal” for the quilt and an
embroidered lampshade acting as a title. Warm lighting over the installation furthers the comforting appearance (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

![Image of the installation with a lampshade and a couch with a blanket on it.]


In addition to these elements, I included a book in the installation called *Sentimental Value* that gets at the same processes that are displayed in the quilt, just through different media. When I experience love, my immediate reaction is to fear loss. So to curb this fear, I save any physical objects I can that are tied to relationships in my life. Some of these things are logical to save, such as gifts or articles of clothing, but some are illogical, such as crumpled wristbands, dead flowers, or hookah mouthpieces that are, effectively, trash (see Fig. 4).
The reason I save all these objects is in the hopes that I can preserve the feelings of love and connection I felt when I acquired the object. In the book, I chose to chronicle the objects I have saved from one particular relationship and to match the photos of these objects with text describing the memory I associate with them. This distillation of memories into a few objects and short texts mirrors the process of distilling hundreds of journal entries into only 36 short passages meant to span a wide range of time and emotion.

**Potential for Emotional Connection With the Viewer**
There is a quote from a speech by Neil Gaiman that I frequently think about when I am creating my art or generally living my life: “The moment that you feel, just possibly, you are walking down the street naked, exposing too much of your heart and your mind, and what exists on the inside, showing too much of yourself...that is the moment you might be starting to get it right” (Gaiman). I have found that as the expression of experiences and emotions becomes more specific and personal, it simultaneously becomes more universal. Art that arrives at an emotional truth or confesses something in a vulnerable way begins to extend beyond simply narrative context and starts to speak to general truths about pain, love, and the human condition.

My hope is that through diving uncomfortably and intimately deep into my own experiences in my work, the viewer will experience empathy and will be able to emotionally relate. This reaction would allow both me and the viewer to feel less alone in our life experience. Research in sociology suggests that the revealing of painful or shameful episodes opens the door for empathy to occur, leading to healing from these episodes. For example, Dr. Brene Brown, a researcher studying shame at the University of Houston, seeks to find out what causes some people to be resilient in the face of shame and others to remain feeling shameful. Through a collection of personal accounts of shame from interviews with 215 women, Brown discovered that the opposite of shame is empathy, which she defines as “the ability to perceive a situation from the other person’s perspective -- to see, hear, and feel the unique world of the other” (Brown 47). Shame and empathy exist on two opposite ends of a spectrum, with a wide range of these experiences in between. The reason these two experiences are effectively opposites is that shame diminishes the same qualities that empathy promotes: shame is a lack of
Davis 10

connection and extreme emotional isolation, whereas empathy is strong interpersonal connection and a sense of openness. Brown highlights that in order to move towards empathy, we must exhibit four main behaviors: vulnerability (acknowledging the possibility of being emotionally wounded), critical awareness (acknowledging the cultural and social factors that may be causing feelings of shame), reaching out (ability to offer empathy to and receive empathy from others), and speaking shame (ability to articulate our shameful experiences) (Brown 48-49). Participants who exhibited these actions and attitudes were much more likely to be resilient to shame and able to heal. Applying this research to my work suggests that since I am displaying thoughts and emotions in a vulnerable way, this opens up the opportunity for viewers to empathize with my experience.

Further, it is possible that this reaction of empathy is ingrained into the making of art itself. Leo Tolstoy discusses the purpose of art in his writing “What is Art?”, suggesting that art involves the bestowing of the emotional state of the artist onto the viewer. He poses that if the viewer, in observing the piece, feels the same way as the artist felt when he or she created the piece, this qualifies as art: “Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others the feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them” (Ross 179). Although the view that this is the overarching definition of art, such that a work where emotion is not conveyed in this way does not qualify as art, poses some problems, Tolstoy’s view suggests that art could serve as a means of the artist receiving empathy. Applied to my work, this would mean that the viewer would be able to feel the emotions I felt in order to make the art. They would see the
labor taken to embroider the text, as well as the stories that lie in the texts themselves, and get a sense of the emotion behind the work.

**Emotional Connection Through Confessional Art**

Contemporary art that specifically focuses on the revealing of emotional or personal truths has been referred to as “confessional art,” which “focuses on an intentional revelation of the private self. Confessional art encourages an intimate analysis of the artist’s, artist’s subjects’, or spectator’s confidential, and often controversial, experiences and emotions” (Jackson 123). Confessional art can take shape in countless artistic mediums, but in relation to my work I will be focusing on photography, drawing, stitching, and textiles.

The artist Nan Goldin descends deep into her personal life and relationships in her book *Couples and Loneliness*. Among other things, she chronicles her own abusive relationship with her boyfriend through photographs capturing both times of passion and times of fear and pain. Her photograph entitled “Nan and Brian in Bed” from 1983 depicts her boyfriend smoking a cigarette at the end of the bed while she looks up at him nervously and cautiously while lying down. The photograph emphasizes Nan’s vulnerability and highlights the physical and emotional power that Brian has over her in the way he sits tall and relaxed as she cowers below him (see Fig. 5).
She also includes a 1984 photograph entitled “Nan One Month After Being Battered,” a straight-on self portrait where Nan has a burst blood vessel in her eye, bruises on her face, and bright red lipstick. The image is unsettling, with the red lipstick matching her bloody eye, commenting on an effort to maintain outer appearances in the face of intense physical abuse (see Fig. 6).
Regarding the photograph, she writes “I showed the photograph of myself taken one month after I was seriously battered so I would never go back to the relationship” (Goldin 30). This quote highlights that Goldin was aware of the power of documenting and sharing her experience as a means of processing it and healing from it to the extent that her behavior actually changes, a process I see in my own work as well.

Another artist who exemplifies confessional art is Iviva Olenick, with her poetic and delicate pieces reflecting on her experiences and those of the people close to her. Nancy MacDonell writes that Olenick’s works are “hand stitched embroideries that read like postmodern musings on love” (MacDonell). The text stitched onto her 2011 work entitled “When You Return” reads “When you return, bring back the part of me you traveled with so I can love you better so we can start a new episode, fully present, fully engaged.” (see Fig. 7).

Fig. 7. Olenick, Iviva. When you Return. 2011. Hand embroidery on antique textile, private collection.
Another work from her series “Embroidered Confessions” is embroidered onto a piece of antique lace dyed to a lavender color, reading “I slept with a famous artist to get ahead. It didn’t work”. She notes in the work’s caption that this is ‘borrowed text’, presumably something a friend disclosed to her or that she overheard, but the confessional element remains the same despite the words not being her own. (see Fig. 8).

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 8.** Olenick, Iviva. *Get Ahead*. 2012, embroidery on antique fabric dyed with mixed berries, borrowed text, private collection.

The expression of loss, failure, or deceit is personal information we do not usually provide to other people -- creating art that expresses these things to total strangers allows for an immediate closeness between the viewer and the artist in which the artist is truly seen. Therefore, the art serves as a technique for processing and being resilient to difficult experiences.
Another artist who exemplifies these same themes is Tracey Emin. In introducing Emin’s work, art critic Rosemary Betterton writes “Emin frequently uses images, objects, and materials from her own life to address difficult subjects such as rape and abortion, but her work consciously reworks her ‘life story’ as a set of narratives and memories” (Merck 27). Similar to Goldin’s work, Emin’s titles often provide autobiographical context, such as in the work *The first time I was pregnant I started to crochet the baby a shawl* (see Fig. 9).

![Image](image.jpg)

**Fig. 9. Emin, Tracey. The first time I was pregnant I started to crochet the baby a shawl.** 1999, yarn, needle, wood, text, plexiglass. White Cube, London.

The title implies Emin’s personal experience with abortion or miscarriage, topics not openly discussed. The work parallels mine in the way Emin keeps objects for their sentimental value, and simplifies a complex emotional experience into one sentence. In this action, as Betterton points out, Emin constructs the narrative of her life and memories in a meaningful
way. Further, Emin describes this process as cathartic (Merck 29), calling upon the idea that displaying her shame allows her to heal from it through empathy from the viewer.

Despite some variety in media, a notable underlying theme of the work of Olenick, Goldin, Emin, and myself, is the use of text to add meaning that is conveyed by the imagery or forms alone. In some instances, such as in Goldin’s and Emin’s aforementioned work, this text comes in the form of a title that informs the viewer of the personal significance of the piece. In my and Olenick’s work, text is fully integrated into the art itself, such that the work would be reduced to a bland household object without it. The ability to read the text is obligatory to interpret the meaning of the work.

Material Connotations

From photography, to embroidery, to quilting, I use a range of media to describe personal experience, each one highlighting different elements of the experiences I am describing. Even though I use a range of visual or verbal description to chronicle life events, each media falls short of fully describing an experience and allowing me to relive it.

For example, even though we think of photography as containing some honesty, the photographs in my Sentimental Value book do not give the viewer a window into the emotion behind the objects. Even though perhaps there is a greater sense of what something actually looks like when it is photographed versus described, in the end the abstract experiences associated with an object cannot be explained in a photograph. To emphasize this point, I placed objects completely out of context, on a black background, showing that even though I, myself, am fully aware of the context of these objects, they are permanently out of context for a
viewer. And ultimately, as the experience associated with the object fades in my memory, the object will lose its context even to me. Therefore, the photograph is much like the object itself: a falsely accurate or flawless representation of an abstract experience that can never fully explain or quantify the intricacies of that experience, even to the person who took the photograph.

Similarly, the experiences that I piece together into a quilt are far too personal and specific to be fully understood by someone else. Inevitably, no quantity of information I could provide would accurately describe something as abstract as a feeling; factual accuracy is not the most important thing. The important thing is the viewer’s interaction with the material in a way that affects them, literally and emotionally. This interaction is encouraged on a physical level, calling on the cultural connotations of the quilt as a cozy and comforting object that provides warmth. As Cheryl Torsney writes in *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, “No matter who we are, we all want to wrap ourselves in a quilt, metaphorically speaking. Like those comfort foods of childhood...quilts provide a sensory experience that makes us feel good about ourselves” (Torsney 1). In my quilt, I capitalize on this sensory experience as an added element of healing and being soothed: the viewer is literally wrapping themselves in the experiences that have affected me most, acting as some sort of calm resolution to all the emotional upheaval. The comforting nature of the quilt acts as a blanket resolution to the complexity and emotion of each experience described in the embroidery.

The tactility, process, and content of my work all coordinate together to create a meaningful experience both in making and in viewing the work. The work creates a vulnerable
space in many ways, both through the intimate and cozy nature of the quilt itself and installation setting, and through the highly personal and emotional text embroidered onto the quilt. Through this vulnerability, I as an artist have the opportunity to process my life experiences in a healing and meaningful way, and likewise the viewer can find comfort in relating to someone else’s experiences.
Works Cited


Figures and Illustrations

Fig. 1. Davis, Isabelle. *Tracing Patterns (2014-2018)*. 2018, hand-embroidered quilt, Washington University in St. Louis.


Fig. 5. Goldin, Nan. *Nan and Brian in Bed*. 1983, silver dye bleach print, Museum of Modern Art, New York.


Fig. 7. Olenick, Iviva. *When you Return*. 2011. Hand embroidery on antique textile, private collection.

Fig. 8. Olenick, Iviva. *Get Ahead*. 2012, embroidery on antique fabric dyed with mixed berries, borrowed text, private collection.

Fig. 9. Emin, Tracey. *The first time I was pregnant I started to crochet the baby a shawl*. 1999, yarn, needle, wood, text, plexiglass. White Cube, London.
Bibliography


