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Feeling Blue

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FEELING BLUE

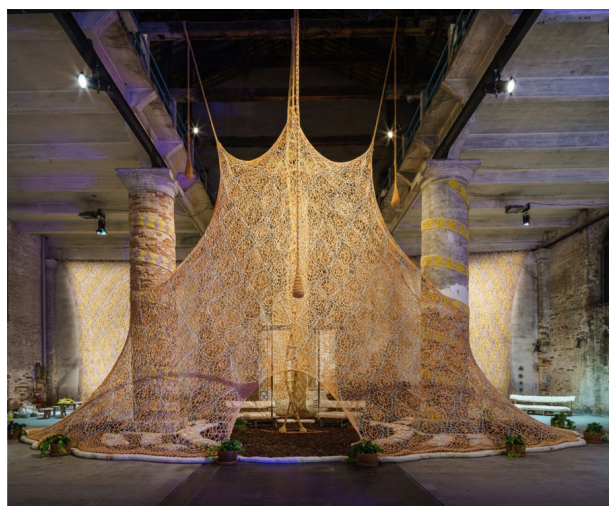
KATIE EWALD

Abstract

“Feeling Blue” discusses the intersection between art and science as it relates to my thesis body of work entitled *Bed/Room*. I delve into the sensory world of art, diving into how our environment can have an effect on our neurological and emotional state of being. This is explored through different pathways, namely the color blue, seasonal affective disorder, and the senses. The artwork reflects these ideas, providing a multi sensory environment with the goal of promoting tranquility. Through my process of creating the piece, my intentions shifted to removing *Bed/Room* from the fine arts context and transferring it into the “real world” as a tool for occupational therapists who work with children with sensory integration issues.

My work serves as a private sanctuary space within the realm of the chaotic everyday: a place to relax, to sleep, to meditate, to dream. Confined in the structure of a four post bed frame, I created *Bed/Room*, a multi sensory environment meant to instill comfort through sound, smell, sight, and touch. Within this boundary, I created a series of cyanotypes on fabric. Exposing the cyanotype chemicals to UVA and UVB rays ie: sunlight, I printed images of landscapes on pillows, blankets, curtains, and a self-constructed bean bag chair.

During the 2017 Venice Biennale, I found myself nestled within Ernesto Neto's piece, *Um Sagrado Lugar*. This piece served as an impetus for my current art practice, encouraging my urges to create larger-scaled installation work that encompasses the viewers. His massive hand-woven



Ernesto Neto, *Um Sagrado Lugar*

polyamide structure could house a large number of people, whereas *Bed/Room* is meant to provide a more personal and intimate experience with the space. Another way in which my work has split off from Neto's piece is through the inclusion of religion. During the opening, Neto had Shaman rituals performed within *Um Sagrado Lugar*, and later opened the work up for public access (Davis, 1). These religious ceremonies are a key aspect of his piece, as they directly reference the Shaman relationships to nature and materials included in the artwork. My work, however, creates a place of relaxation that is entirely separate from religion.

Throughout the process of creating *Bed/Room* I was encouraged to delve into ideas of temples and meditation as they tie in to religious practices, but my work took a different stance. As much as religion brings people together, it also acts as a means of separation, often causing an

“othering” within communities. Having *Bed/Room* be void of any one religion allows it to be accessed and understood by a greater community of people. It is in this way that *Bed/Room* can act as a sanctuary, untainted by religion, politics, or other societal problems to serve as personal escape within the public realm.

Another artist I looked to was Toshiko Horiuchi MacAdam, who has created interactive pieces like *Wonderspace II*. Similarly to my work, she draws on science and incorporates it into her art. She is primarily focused on gravity and tension, as her pieces are intended to hold human weight. The pieces she makes are focused on human interaction; she gives people a space to explore and play that isn’t made just for children. Her intersection of science and art has been a reference point in looking at how to tie scientific studies and principles into my practice, specifically the effects of the color blue and lavender, as well as seasonal affective disorder.



Toshiko Horiuchi MacAdam, *Wonderspace II*

Seasonal Affective Disorder affects my family, and has come to take its toll on me in recent years. SAD is depression characterized by a “recurring seasonal pattern,” often occurring during the winter months, coinciding with the diminished amounts of sunlight (Seasonal, 1). My methods of coping with SAD have varied, but I often treat my main symptom, lethargy, by retreating to my bed, seeking a sense of rescue through the sleep it brings with it. My bed provides me with a place to be alone with my thoughts, away from the outside world, almost like a protective bubble. The biggest aid to my SAD symptoms, however, is going outside. Being out in nature and in the

sunlight helps to increase the levels of Vitamin D in the blood stream, countering some of the effects of SAD (Seasonal, 2). But going outside to feel happy isn't as simple and easy of a solution as it sounds. In those brutal winter months, it can feel nearly impossible for someone with SAD to motivate themselves to go outside. This has brought on the invention of light therapy, or Happy Lights, that are meant to make up for the decreased sunlight available in these months. With *Bed/Room* I sought out a different solution. Through repeating nature imagery, I created a sanctuary that references being outside, in places where I personally have felt inner peace and happiness, while allowing the viewer to be in the warmth and comfort of an indoor space like their bed. This piece is by no means a cure for SAD, but rather a step forward in tackling my personal issues with the condition, as well as aiding others who may experience similar problems.

Many people associate the color blue with depression, with the common statement about “feeling blue,” but as a color, it's so much more complicated than that. Blue is the color of the sky, the water, of calm and peace. It is a color of desire. It has a depth and brevity to it that no other color can boast. In Rebecca Solnit's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, she expands on the color blue and its importance in our world. In the color spectrum of light, blue disperses the most of any of the other colors, it scatters to pigment the



Detail shot of *Bed/Room*

otherwise colorless sky and water in its tones (Popova, 1). Blue is a color of purity; we base the quality of a day's weather on how clear and blue the sky is, almost as if white clouds taint the blue sky's perfection. Blue in the outside world is an unobtainable color; it's in the sky, bodies of water,

or mountains in the distance, urging you towards it, but when you arrive, the color you saw is no longer there (Popova, 3). In *Bed/Room* I capture this color and immerse the viewer in its splendor.

Blue is so much more than just a pretty color. Looking at the color blue slows breathing and heart rate, as well as calming brain activity, thus promoting relaxation and inner calmness, whereas colors near red on the spectrum have been shown to increase brain activity, pulse, respiration, and perspiration, along with increasing muscle tension and activity (Adler, 2). Blue holds many contradictions, from being perceived as simultaneously the most natural yet unnatural color, to relaxing a person while also improving productivity. Shades of blue in combination with white take over the interior and exterior of *Bed/Room* for this exact purpose. My project, positioned in a public setting, allows viewers a brief escape from the real world, providing them a sanctuary that promotes relaxation through various means, ideally encouraging them to be more productive once they exit and return to their daily life.

It has been found in studies that in rooms colored with blue light, those inside perceived time to be passing much slower than those in rooms with other colored lighting (Adler, 2). This slowed and distorted perception of time within a blue space enhances the escapism factor of *Bed/Room*. In a personal study conducted at the gallery, I briefly interviewed people after they exited the piece. I found most of them had experienced the same misconception of the amount of time they had spent in *Bed/Room*, as they left the piece only to be surprised by the growing line of people waiting to experience this same sensation.



Still from video projected into *Bed/Room*

Bed/Room is home to a multi-sensory experience, all intended to promote relaxation. The video projected on the back wall is a loop of the ocean. The visual aesthetics of the waves, as well as the sound, play on sleep-sound

machines, and other meditation tropes for calming oneself. The dim lighting, except for the



Interior of *Bed/Room*

projection and the soft string lights, promotes sleep and relaxation by increasing melatonin levels, the naturally occurring chemical in your brain that lulls you to sleep. The space includes a faint scent of lavender, referenced by the lavender prints on the entrance to the space. Over time, lavender has been coveted for aiding symptoms of epilepsy and migraines, as well as acting as an anti-anxiety treatment in some studies. It has also improved “symptoms such as restlessness, disturbed sleep, and somatic complaints and had a beneficial influence on general well-being and quality of life,” while being

proven to act as a natural remedy to insomnia

(Koulivand, 3). These scientifically proven effects lavender has on the human nervous system led me to incorporate it into *Bed/Room* for a more rounded sensory-based sanctuary experience.

Bed/Room takes on the shape of a four posted bed frame. Rather than placing a mattress inside, I have created a room within these confines. The idea for this was drawn on the history of the bed, and how it has altered through time. In the beginning, the bed was a communal object. There would be one per household, shared among all members of the family. Thousands of years passed, and along came the Renaissance period in Europe. It was during this phase that ornate beds came into existence. They were often wooden framed, four posted beds, and would be out in the main rooms of one’s home to show off wealth (Pendleton 2). When visitors were received in one’s home, they would be invited to dine on the bed and that’s where they spent most of their

time during the gathering. As time went on, beds eventually were pushed into their own room rather than being out in the foyer, thus came the creation of the bedroom. Beds shifted from a public furniture object to being private, within a private room, hidden away from guests. Today, beds are some of our most coveted and personal pieces of furniture within our homes. They are home to personal and intimate actions, as well as providing a place to hide yourself and your emotions from the outside world, and they help you to heal when you're sick or injured through promoting sleep. My decision in creating my sanctuary space in the form of a bed references all the connotations of comfort and relaxation that beds hold in our current society, while subverting the idea of what makes a place private vs public.

The construction of my space is primarily cyanotypes on cotton fabric. The cyanotype process utilizes sunlight to produce images in rich blue hues. Choosing cyanotypes for this project was a natural fit that came to me instantly, and the project could not have been completed to this level of success through any other means of production. The hands on process of working with cyanotype chemicals on fabric is referenced through the emphasis on viewer interaction and the tactile qualities of my work. While sunlight was completely eliminated in the gallery installation, it still plays an important role. Not only was it crucial in exposing the images on the fabric, but the act of utilizing the rays reflected the powerful effects sunlight has in those who experience SAD.

The dream-like quality of photographic prints produced through the cyanotype process adds to the whimsy of the piece, absorbing those who enter into a blue dream-world, surrounded in images of the landscape. These landscape images are sourced



Closeup of blanket in *Bed/Room*

from personal experiences I have had interacting with nature. Being from Maine has vastly impacted my art practice, as I've found myself constantly trying to get back to the feelings of tranquility and calm happiness that I have when I'm home. The northern rural atmosphere of the majority of the state, along with its thousands of miles of coastline, are constantly in the back of my mind, naturally leading me to incorporate them in my work. While many of these images are from back east, I have challenged myself to find places around the world that instill the same feeling as those I'm familiar with back home. Some of the non-Maine places I have included in my project are Lake Tahoe out in California, parks outside of St. Louis, mountain ranges in Scotland, and beaches in Malta. In fact, the first cyanotypes I ever made, were done in the fall of 2017 while I was spending the semester studying abroad in Florence, Italy. These images were the beginning of my work not only with cyanotypes, but focusing on ideas of escapism, through exploring the rural mountain villages of Brione Switzerland. When I created these, I had no idea that just under one year later they would become the foundation for my entire thesis.



First Cyanotype Prints

While being in the gallery for my BFA show was the envisioned end-goal of sorts for *Bed/Room*, I see my piece taking a new life going forward. I plan to be in touch with the Pediatric Development Center of Portland, Maine, where my mother works as an occupational therapist. Her specialized input on sensory integration and stimulation, especially in children with mental disabilities of all levels, has largely impacted my project, and continues to lead me forward on my next steps. Through conducting more research of my own on how sensory spaces and situations

affect those who experience them, I hope to transition my piece, and potential future pieces, into helping others.

This shift in audience and intention is reflective of my process in creating *Bed/Room*. The creation of this piece was a nearly year long discovery, and will continue to be a discovery as well as a research opportunity in the coming months. I recognize that this work does not act as a one-size-fits-all solution to sensory stimulation issues, and see this realization as a new challenge to drive my improvement and creativity moving forward.

Images from *Bed/Room*:



Right top: Close up of curtains
Left bottom and top: Selections
from book
Right bottom: installation of
Bed/Room in studio





Top: Closeup of blanket
Bottom left & right: installation of *Bed/Room* in gallery



Top: Detail of curtain
Bottom: Detail of woven blanket



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