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Bodies of Empathy

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Abstract

Trauma is defined as the emotional and or psychological response to a deeply disturbing event. When looking at domestic, familial and generational trauma, however, it is not a singular event but a thread through a lifetime or even generations. When it accumulates and goes beyond one person or body, that trauma can embed itself deeply, go neglected and unaddressed. Despite this, trauma is not invisible, and it is not silent. It festers in the mind and surfaces on the body. In *Bodies of Empathy*, my body of work attempts to come to terms with my own past trauma in the context of womanhood, culture, and family. But what does it mean to “come to terms” with trauma? And how do you begin to grasp and heal something neglected for years? I have broken up my own way of dealing with these questions into three parts: realization, process, and reconciliation. However, these parts are not linear, and they are in constant conversation. The resulting work is a collection of forms made from repetition, contemplation, and time. I view these forms as bodies that are receptive to marks, like how the female body is a vessel that carries and passes the past. Though the following work may be in its final form and presentation, my process of healing and creating empathy is a continuous journey.
“To unravel a torment, you must begin somewhere.” – Louise Bourgeois

When trying to understand trauma, the body often comes up in conversation as trauma is an experience that is felt physically as well as mentally and emotionally. It is the emotional and or psychological response to a deeply disturbing event. A single horrific event is easier to trace, label, and address than a constant thread that weaves through a lifetime or over generations. Domestic, familial and generational trauma usually accumulates and transcends a singular person or body to affect a group of people, sometimes embedding itself so deep that it can go unaddressed. Despite this, trauma is not invisible, and it is not silent. I understand trauma as repetition of suffering that eventually surfaces on the body regardless of the time that passes. But how does one come to terms with trauma? Whether “coming to terms” means healing, acknowledging, or erasing, the process of reconciliation often begins with listening to the body. To me, the body is not just a living thing but a substrate, one that both receives and carries marks throughout its life then passes them to the next generation. My trauma festered due to repression and neglect, and so I must unravel it from my mind and body by creating forms that reflect me in their marks of ache, damage and perseverance.

I create forms to deconstruct and understand my own body empathetically. In doing so, I have come to realize that the process of “unraveling torments” comes in stages: realization, process, and reconciliation. Though I often think of them in this order, the actual journey is rarely linear. I will not be discussing my specific trauma but rather the practice of working through it and coming to terms with it. My awareness and acknowledgment of trauma has been fixated in the past, both shared and personal, while trying to stay rooted in the present. The reverberating use of meditation with accumulation of marks gives an emotional distance between the past trauma and the present self. I consider the female body as an inherent vessel of life,
history, and trauma, which means that my own body is at the intersection of past generations and future ones. A body does not die with its marks. Therefore, what I am able to work through, I consider it to be creating and manifesting hope in the future.

**Realization: Guilt and Shame**

Coming from an East Asian immigrant family, I was born into several roles: eldest child, care-taker, daughter and sister. And with the birth of my two youngest siblings—a brother with learning disabilities and autism, a sister with cerebral palsy—more were forced on me and broke me into fragments. The realization that my brother, the one who was to carry on the family name, could not fulfill the son’s responsibilities seemed like a cruel joke: to be given an incomplete son. This meant that I had to save face for my family, becoming both the eldest daughter and son (Chung 141). With the impossibility of fulfilling all my roles, I accumulated guilt and shame for what I lacked and what I perceived my brother to lack. The fragmentation of a self does not allow a whole identity to form.

*He’s different when he’s at home* deals with the wounds of bearing this burden while simultaneously fragmenting my brother to make him more acceptable to society (fig. 1). By fragmenting him, I tried to collect the parts of him that are ‘normal’ and hide the parts of him
where his disabilities are more present. As I obsessively cut, stitch, stain and wring the fabric, I recall the countless times I gave the excuse that my brother is not as he seems, that he is normal. At the same time, my mother blaming herself for having my brother past what people described to be ‘ripe’ child-bearing age rings in my head. My mother’s guilt is rawer and heavier than mine, stemming from shame in her aging body. But together, our guilts create this accumulation, a curtain of bodily silhouettes that sags like a sheet of skin (fig. 2). He’s different points to both my brother’s disabilities and the condensed repetition of my family’s unspoken shame. In the process of trying to retain a normal image of my brother for my family’s sake, I have ultimately inflicted and received wounds. This is the first step in recognizing traumatic wounds: it can sometimes be self-afflicted with guilt. It breaks me that I have been—and at times still am—embarrassed and ashamed of my brother.

I will refer to several artists in the following pages who have come to realize the painful trauma of their pasts by observing and empathizing with their mothers. I am no different. Seeing how motherhood exhausts the body and soul made me dread and fixate on my own mother’s mortality since I was young. Watching her sacrifice her independence and become what I perceived to be just a body that births and labors traumatized me. I am now terrified of my own body and what it can do. Like Louise Bourgeois, I “reconstruct the images that haunt” me (Betterton 30). In her final years, Bourgeois returned to motifs from her early work and reflected on the maternal body,
almost with mourning (Betterton 28). The bodily red stains of *Pregnant Woman* refer to many things that haunt women: menstruation, birth, life, abortion, miscarriage (fig. 3). Likewise, in *Her Sonograms 2007 and 2010*, I appropriate sonograms of my siblings and repeat the fetus forms to visually create what I find frightening and threatening (fig. 4). The bodily forms look both recognizable and alien, soft and sinister. The focus on both life and death stemmed from *These Wombs Still Echo*, where life and death occupy one space. In this series, images of my family at different stages of life juxtapose an ancient Korean tomb and temple (fig. 5). Set against the colors of traditional Korean funerary clothing, both the past and present exist under the larger umbrella of mortality.

Together, *Her Sonograms* and *These Wombs* point to how the body is a site for life and death, and that the trauma can be birthed from within. Birth, despite being a wonderful, mysterious thing, can empty a mother’s body till she “withers and dies” (H. Kim 69). Because of the female body’s ability to carry life, I realize what I inherently carry within me. I also realize that being the eldest, I have come to perceive my own body as what began my mother’s trauma as we were born on the same day. This adds deeply to my sense of guilt and blame. Therefore, I have fluctuated between perceiving birth and life as being miraculous to being parasitic and destructive.
Figure 4. *Her Sonograms 2007 and 2010, 2019*, intaglio prints on gampi paper, each 8x11 in

Figure 5. *These Wombs Still Echo, 2019*, photo transfers on mulberry paper, linen, each approximately 12x16in
**Process: What is Repeated is Repeated**

My trauma is a result of repetition, and I seek to reconcile it through repetition. The act of processing what has been realized is not so much the second stage as it is what tethers the realization to the reconciliation. Without the repetition of form and mark-making, I have found that it is impossible to unravel the nuances of trauma because like any other wound it does not heal in a singular instance. I understand that over time my mind and body has taken on wounds from my burdens, deprived of the chance to fully process them. In relation to other Asian women, I now see that many of my roles and the need to save face are inherited results of tradition. In the Confucian family, the roles are concrete, and the expectations of women are decided by the patriarchy and previous generations (Chung 6). Processing trauma through repetitive motions of making helps me realize toxic patterns and meditate on them in relation to the past. Catalina Ouyang also references the female body as a vessel that both carries and passes trauma through generations:

\[ \text{Figure 6. Catalina Ouyang, Terrarium, 2017, red sand, alabaster, soapstone, wonderstone} \]

“The imagined lotus feet of my great-grandmother either bloom or die. My mother’s grandmother was of the last generation of women in China to have their feet bound…this left generational implications in how my family to this day navigates nurture and intimacy. [Foot binding] was about feeding a patriarchal erotic frenzy, it was about denying the physicality of women, mutilating (sometimes killing) them, stunting their
mobility...Yet it was also a sacred practice shared between mother and daughter, passed down with thick blood and tough love…” (Ouyang)

The dismembered forms result from Ouyang’s continuous pursuit of visualizing and finding her great-grandmother’s feet within a shared pain and history (fig. 6). Like Ouyang, Kim Sooja also references the toxic cultural structure around East Asian women as “wise mothers and good wives” (J. Lee 22). Kim creates bottari (cloth bundles) from the shared pains and burdens of womanhood, a nod towards both the traditional, domestic sphere that women live in and their destiny to carry the past wrapped inside their bodies, passed down from generation to generation (22). With these bundles in Cities on the Move, Kim goes on the road with the accumulated bodies and burden of all Korean women before her (fig. 7). The artist, the bottari, and the constantly changing environment are in conversation as Kim and her bottari truck silently weave through space as if with a destination, as if to escape something (J. Lee 23). This ritualistic journey or pilgrimage is a process of working through trauma that extends beyond the self. However, these bodies are constantly moving. They do not know rest and they do not have an end to their journey.

Figure 7. Kim Sooja, Cities on the Move - 2727 km Bottari Truck, 1997—2001, Duraclear photographic print in lightbox
I see Kim’s thoughtful intrusion into unknown past women’s lives as means of penetrating my own history. My field of operation is of memory carried through the body—that which belongs to a woman’s history: chastity, subservience, responsibility, sacrifice and love. What is imposed on the woman’s body is at times contradictory, straining and abusing these vessels. The dialectic between woman as subject and object, as spectator and participant, can be seen in *And here I bleed*, where I perceive myself and the piece as fulfilling these roles. The mulberry paper reflects my own body; it is a vessel that absorbs what has been emptied from myself. With reciprocity in mind, I treat the material with respect by letting the work make itself: the red ink defies gravity and naturally crawls up the paper over weeks. The piece captures the heavy passage of time as it affects a body, taking on indexical marks of time that feel too delicate to collect otherwise (fig 8).

Like the artists I discuss, I use materials and substrates highly receptive to marks, such as worn fabric and paper. These stand as vessels which hold “personal affects,” and their sensitivity to marks and time mirrors how I understand empathy (Nochlin 191). When we are able to recognize that same experience in someone else, we are empathetic towards them. Working with things that already carry or imply history plays into the duality of creating something by deconstructing something else. This desire to navigate a historical and social context parallels the desire to reclaim and re-

Figure 8. *And here I bleed*, 2019, ink crawled up mulberry paper over ten weeks, 22x96in
form a self that can hopefully exist outside of its trauma. Letting go of control and decisions was actually meditative and effective in that it distanced me from being too emotionally and physically involved with the process.

*Rosary in 55 Strokes* is a similar work but one more intimately involved on my part as the creator (fig 9). For this work, I recited the Catholic Rosary as I painted a bead during each individual prayer. Catholics are taught to use prayer methods such as the Rosary and Stations of the Cross to help facilitate meditation. The repetition of dragging the brush slowly across the paper abstracted my thoughts and emotions by compartmentalizing them. This speaks to how the rituals of prayer are for us to empathize and understand Christ’s life and pain without appropriating his experiences as our own. The five decades of the Lord’s Prayer and Hail Mary puts me into a form of meditation I have known all my life. But rethinking through years of neglect and silence is emotionally and mentally exhausting, so I used the ink circles of the Rosary as a mediator, allowing myself to process my past from a distance. The beads culminate to form an imposing presence that also mirrors a portal. Individually, the beads do not hold a commanding aura; it is the amassed form of their repetition that accomplishes this. The processing of what is repeated serves as the bridge between realization of the past with hope of the future.
All the contemplation and repetition would mean nothing if it could not propel one into the future where hope exists. In many religions, the female body is often understood to be a spiritual medium, one that is inhabitable by other lifeforms, whether through birth or by possession. Women in both traditional Korean Shamanism and Christianity are portrayed as vessels. Though many different faiths coexist in Korea today, the most traditional and basic reality of religious experience is rooted in Shamanism (An 11). Korean Shamanism provides women “with a cathartic release from their oppressive reality and empower them to share their pain” (An 17). Shamans, or mudangs, are traditionally women, and they are considered to be vulnerable to possession and communication with spirits. And in Christianity, emphasis on the body and its mortality is prevalent with the belief that God came down to earth as a man (New
American Bible, John 3:16). However, rather than interpreting this in a dark and dreary way, I find it to be a reminder to treasure and take care of what we have.

The process of perceiving patterns and the desire to heal and empathize led me to start a piece called *Small Rituals* (fig. 10). As process itself can be a way to reconcile and intercept toxic patterns, I began this simple four-month long project as means to intercept and add small moments of self-care and rest to my routine. I drank tea and let the teabags become mark-makers to slowly stain the paper as a ritual. The growth of marks across a surface harkens back to *And here I bleed* because time itself is the creator as much as I am (fig. 11). A visual accumulation of these otherwise forgotten moments, the piece stems from an awareness of the body and listening to its needs, a forward projection in reconciling and reclaiming myself from past grievances and future worries, giving myself a space and time to do so.

In terms of reclamation, Yun Suknam is an artist dedicated to giving life to the discarded and the worn. She reflects on the exhaustion of the female body especially in motherhood and creates figures out of discarded pieces of wood. “While painting my mother on it, I immediately realized that the medium I had been looking for was this rotten piece of wood” (Yun). Its texture is that of wrinkled, worn skin but with a softness and warmth that invokes a feeling of intimacy. The reverence for material in treating each piece of wood as a body is something that I also invoke in my own work. Because of its perseverance, there is still beauty in the body after trauma. Therefore, Yun’s treatment of a damaged substrate as a body worthy of respect and sensitivity is seen in her work (fig. 12). As noted, just the use of an
already ‘used’ material is a potent choice. There is a still a sense of mourning and reflection on previous generations and the female body, but at the core is redemption (N. Lee 363).

“Women, who have had to exist beyond history, floating on the surface of water, inspire me with their traces of the brilliant spirit with which they lived their lives. I am pleased when I unearth their sorrow, agony, and anger out of the dark grave of history and give them shape. Sometimes I even sense that these women dwell in my body and soul.” (Yun)

In my piece Bottari Undone, I adopt the same bundle motif as Kim Sooja, but I let the form free. The installation process being as integral as the physical objects themselves, I go through the ritual of literally unwrapping my past, filled with symbols of my familial and cultural history (fig.13). Completing what Kim Sooja started, I free this bundle from any attachment to regret and bygones, but the material is still of the inherited past (J. Lee 23). Again, going back to the woman’s body as a vessel, the bottari that once held neglected parts of me takes on a new life. Motifs and forms that I explore in my other work come together in Bottari and they quietly exist on top of the body that carried them. This is my attempt at balancing the acknowledgment of what has passed (and what is passed down) with reclamation and hope in the future. It is possible to be informed by and free of your wounds, your trauma. “The past is not fully present, and the future is yet to be determined”—this gray area of progress is where Bottari Undone and I exist right now (Betterton 44).
Haunted by my trauma and my own failures, I am figuring out how to love that which has hurt me, that which has hurt others. How to reconcile the traumatic wounds of the past with my present self. But listening to my body and using it in the process of art has made me more empathetic to myself and others. Reconciliation itself can be a constant and changing process. Rather than a desired end or final form, my process of healing and creating empathy is what defines this body of work. My work is a healing embrace that transcends time. Though it is birthed from traumatic wounds, I make it in hopes that it does not die the same way but rather projects forward with acceptance of what has passed.
Figure 14. Bottari Undone, 2018, mixed media, 54x50 in
Works Cited:


Yun, Suknam. Interview and e-mail correspondence by Na Young Lee, 2006.
Image List:

**Figure 1.** *He’s different when he's at home*, 2018, ink on hand-sewn cotton, 40x70 in

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**Figure 4.** *Her Sonograms 2007 and 2010, 2019*, intaglio prints on gampi paper, each 8x11 in

**Figure 5.** *These Wombs Still Echo*, 2019, photo transfers on mulberry paper, linen, each approximately 12x16 in

**Figure 6.** Catalina Ouyang, *Terrarium*, 2017, red sand, alabaster, soapstone, wonderstone

**Figure 7.** Kim Sooja, *Cities on the Move- 2727 km Bottari Truck*, 1997—2001, Duraclear photographic print in lightbox

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**Figure 10.** *Small Rituals*, 2019, teabag stains on mulberry paper over four months, 8x200 in

**Figure 11.** detail shot of *Small Rituals* in process

**Figure 12.** Yun Suknam, *Red Meal*, 2003, acrylic on wood, 125x10x158 cm

**Figure 13.** *Bottari Undone*, detail shots of installation process

**Figure 14.** *Bottari Undone*, 2018, mixed media, 54x50 in
Bibliography:


