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The Darkness Needs to Cry

By
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A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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Introduction

I am an artist interested in the subconscious, the uncanny, and the space of dreams. I make large scale, three-dimensional paintings that are both minimalist and baroque, non-representational and yet evoke the body as well as landscape. My paintings are process-based and are visceral in their explicit choice of material and form. I make work that relates to the idea of the feminine and the void or absence of the feminine in the history of psychoanalysis through focusing on texture and surfaces, forming relief-like three dimensionality and void-like spaces.

While I am invested in the history of painting, my prior work has been largely focused on realistic representation of dream-like states, my current, more abstract work, seeks to expand on the idea of representing femininity through symbolic, perhaps even uncanny means, rather than involving the conversation about painting as such, though both conversations overlap.

As part of this conversation with the visual representation of femininity, I am also interested in poetically unraveling social boundaries and in opposing the prescribed notions or phobias about the feminine, both within the traditional psychoanalytic discourse as well as within art discourse. Ultimately, my paintings explore sensorial experiences and psychological states. While contemplative in character, I hope my work also offers a quality of tension and contrast between simultaneously alluring and phobic surfaces and colors, and between hills and valleys or voids that map the large-scale, landscape like territories of my three-dimensional paintings.

In chapter one, I discuss the elements of my making process in relation to my investigations into both the history of psychoanalysis and the theories born out of several waves of feminist thought. I view psychoanalysis, and specifically contemporary psychoanalysis that involves feminist theory, as a tool for me as a woman artist to unpack the complexities of the tension between psychological phenomena and societal pressure. The psyche is a place where

bias and gender associations are held and should be confronted. In a way, I blend elements of psychoanalysis and art making together. I also discuss the origins of the term *uncanny* as one of the few times Sigmund Freud acknowledges the female bodily orifice as a symbolic site. I also focus on Bracha Ettinger's theory of the Matrixial to parse out the idea of the womb as a symbolic site within my visual work.

In chapter two, I examine the philosophical and layered notions of the void and the grotesque and how these notions relate to my working process of layering, sculpting, and building my painting up, into thick three-dimensional structures. The void and the grotesque in my work are not opposites, rather each contains an element of the other. The void is not merely empty space and the grotesque is not merely excess. Both contain complexities that relate to my work's content, symbolizing tension and unity between the two concepts. Chapter three delves into two other opposing ideas that my paintings are inspired by, and that are psychological in nature. Attraction and repulsion are both bodily experiences that occur within sensorium that my work aligns itself with.

In chapter four, I want to focus on the idea of the *hidden* within my own work and my work's potential relationships with Baroque art. I became interested in affect theory. Affect is defined as a pre-conscious sensation. This is exactly what I hope to tap into through my work. I continue to explore the hidden in chapter five. Through analyzing three of my performative photographs, I hope to point out the importance of gesture within my work as I link these hand motions to the sculptural elements I construct in my present paintings.

Painting Transitions, Transformations, and the Terrifying



I. Dunham, Damaris. *Phobos*, 2020, three-dimensional painting, 7.5 x 12.5 x 2 feet.

I construct three-dimensional paintings that have a strong relation to traditions of abstraction in both painting and sculpture. Conceptually, I seek to expand the idea of femininity and to reject the societal expectations of the feminine as singular, linear, and tied to sex. I hope for the viewer to discover a place of *uncanny* associations, perhaps touching the space of dreams. My art making process is informed and fueled by my interest in the theories of psychoanalysis and feminism, respectively. I layer and build surfaces and structures that somehow relate to the layering of knowledge and questions that form in my intellectual investigations.

I have a critical approach to most of Freud's psychoanalytic writing, yet I align my thinking with the contemporary feminist approaches to psychoanalysis. My work explores the sensorial experience of psychological states turned textural bodily and landscape-like territories that might appear in a dream or fantasy. I depict both psychological and painterly environments to speak to the tension of a simultaneously alluring and phobic sensorium.

Phobos (I) is a 12.5 x 7.5 x 2 feet three-dimensional painting I began in October of 2019 and am still in the process of building-up. *Phobos* is part of a continuous series of three-dimensional paintings I began in 2019 titled *Latent Collections*, which physically and symbolically represents a process of transformation. I work with the metamorphosis of materials, which I achieve through layering paper, fabric, lace, string, silicone, human hair, faux fur, sand, paper clay, and finally paint. The paper and fabric that make up the initial layers of the work are stiff yet malleable materials. They soften in the warm wheat paste bath that I soak them in. The drying process further transforms the softened material into hardened stone. As I work, my hands enter the creamy liquid and pull up the loosened materials; I wring them out as they weep their excess. They are now ready to find their place in the work. By the end of a working session, I experience many bodily reactions. The skin on my arms and hands is dried and resembles a

raisin, my back aches from continually bending down to interact with the *being* on the floor, and the entirety of my body and clothing is covered in dried or partially dried wheat paste. Creating this work feels both like a burden and a labor of care. I feel as if I give a part of myself, specifically my embodied self, to this limp, lifeless body lying on the ground. I tend to the surface of *Phobos* and *Latent Collections* as if they were human skin; I round and smooth certain areas of the work so that they are not simply depicting flesh, but rather, so that they stand for flesh itself, symbolizing human and non-human flesh, a *being* and in allusive way, referring to humanity.

This work intends to set up conditions for the viewer to experience or think about the work not as biologically alive but as a symbol of life. My work is about touching and making within this realm of the sensed and the sensorial.¹ In some ways, *Phobos* also evokes landscape and through its horizontal existence on the wall, it engages with conversations around the tradition of landscape painting. *Phobos* asks for the contemplation that landscape painting has traditionally inspired. The viewer may experience the work as something much larger than herself and be able to relate it to a natural landscape in this way. I want the viewer to be able to walk alongside it and experience the surface part by part. This work towers over the body of a viewer as she walks next to it, perhaps feeling its ever-changing surface; smooth then rough, bumpy then flattened. The viewer is free to discover an infinite range of angles and distances from the work. As she walks along it she may experience it through standing, sitting, walking fast, walking slowly, coming close, stepping back, crouching, looking up, looking obliquely, or from many other vantage points.

I work with intuitive physical movements that occur as I try to tap into the uncanny, the unconscious, which then generate a form that is not a depiction of anything but stands on its own

as a symbol and as a metaphor. I lay material down onto the ground. I build-up the surface texture gradually, in layers. I move around and on top of this large, symbolic *being* in a sort of choreographed dance, constantly touching it, and changing my physical relationship with the prostrate mass. The work grows upward with the layers of material I carefully place, curve, wind, and smooth along its surface. When turned vertically the work protrudes outward, thick with built-up paper, fabric, and lace. It then gains a painterly impasto texture from layers of paper clay and silicone mixture that I smear and brush across its surface. I think about layering as both formal and conceptual elements of the work, a physical act relating to *condensation*, a term used in psychoanalysis to discuss both dream phenomena as well as fear. Julia Kristeva writes:

The phobic object is precisely an avoidance of choice, it tries as long as possible to maintain the subject far from a decision; this is not done through a superego blocking of symbolization or through asymbolia, but to the contrary through a condensation of intense symbolic activities that results in the heterogeneous agglomeration we call phobic hallucination.²

This passage references the idea that phobia is a layering or rather an “agglomeration” of symbolic activities that produce a hallucination symbolic of the object that incites fear in the analysand. I work with layers and repetition, as I observe my own fears. *Phobos* represents the unnamed layers of fear in its largeness and its darkness. The fear of the unknown contains many layers of unconscious material laid over the actual named fear, or as Kristeva puts it, the phobic object. Fear operates in the symbolic realm and in the realm of the hidden.

There are tropes within psychoanalysis and feminist movements that closely inform the intellectual layers of my current work. Later in this text I will engage with more contemporary and current psychoanalytic theorists such as artist/theorist Bracha Ettinger but would like to begin by noting the historical significance of Simone de Beauvoir and especially her ideas on the inherency of the idea of femininity.

De Beauvoir's rejection of the societal expectations for femininity back in 1949, pointed to a lack within psychoanalytic theory, although did not offer much of a theoretical escape or remedy to the (at that time) decades old problem. However, the revolutionary importance of her work was to name the discrepancies and the lack of equality and equity in terms of human rights. Women and queer people followed her cue and began the important work of investigating the complexities of the non-male within psychoanalysis. She noted the singular focus of Freudian theory on the phallus and comments on his concept of "penis envy" noting that phallus only symbolizes power, because men have been inherently given power throughout history:

In woman, the inferiority complex takes the form of a shamed rejection of her femininity. It is not the lack of the penis that causes this complex, but rather woman's total situation; if the little girl feels penis envy it is only as the symbol of privileges enjoyed by boys.³

Though not a psychoanalyst herself, de Beauvoir identified logical fallacies in the Freudian psychoanalytic paradigm. She challenged the origins of power and questioned the logic of claiming that a single body part could imbue a human with power. Indeed body parts are often implicated within this theory and I will investigate this further in a later section.

I began researching psychoanalysis in 2015 as a way to engage with and explore the unconscious happenings in my own life, such as my dreams and the recesses of my unconscious mind. I started a dream journal and recorded every remembered dream and nightmare as a time stamped note to my conscious self. These written secondary elaborations⁴ eventually became the foundation for my investigations into the dream world, as a manifestation and access point for the unconscious mind. Dream motifs and narrative threads often found their way into my oil paintings. Now, they inform my sculptural painting work in a more subdued but ever present way.

In 2016, I entered a used bookstore in Champaign, IL. It was an old building with many secret passageways, isolated corners, and small doorways into rooms that were filled with an enticing mixture of books, collected photographs, and newspaper articles. Among its cave-like corridors, I saw a book about dreams. I discovered it was an English translation of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*.

While I was immediately attracted to psychoanalysis and its theories, I soon became confronted with the lack of research or even mention of the female as an analysand and was baffled by the acute focus on the phallus and phallic paradigm. This lack that I experienced felt isolating and frustrating as a feminist diving into the realm of psychoanalysis. Part of my initial interest in this theory was to confront my own unconscious bias, yet my study of it led to evidence of misogyny and disinterest and denial of anyone other than a (white) male as a complex being. In her book, *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir examined the many components of female identity as determined by society and chose to start this exploration with a commentary on psychoanalysis. She saw it as a tool to be used to view socialized female identity. She wrote in her chapter on psychoanalysis:

Woman can be defined by her consciousness of her own femininity no more satisfactorily than by saying she is a female, for she acquires this consciousness under circumstances dependent upon the society of which she is a member.⁵

De Beauvoir believed that women were a product of the society they engaged with – a theory that was foundational for the later developed understanding of gender as *performed* in the writings of ground breaking feminist theorists such as Judith Butler. De Beauvoir believed that dissecting and identifying parts of socialized identity, or gender, could potentially uncover an expanded definition of femininity that acknowledged its complexity. She separates gender from sex in this quote and states that society holds a rigid idea of the “feminine.” Decades later in

1980, Luce Irigaray would echo de Beauvoir's sentiment and ideas about penis envy in her speech at the Fifth Conference on Mental Health entitled, *Women and Madness*:

Woman has no cause to envy the penis or the phallus. But because of the failure to establish a sexual identity for both sexes—man, and the race of men, has transformed the male organ into an instrument of power with which to master maternal power (puissance).⁶

Irigaray points to the phallus owners that have co-opted the body part as a symbol of power though the power does not lie in the phallus. Here, she differs slightly from de Beauvoir. She mentions a maternal power that, though it exists, has been overthrown by the phallic symbol. She attempts to set the stage for the reclamation of that maternal power by giving the female complexity within the realm of psychoanalysis.

Other contemporary female writers have both identified the oversights of the theory and used it to claim a space for the female within this discipline and the larger context of society. In her book, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch⁷ writes:

Psychoanalysis[...] can show us how we become gendered subjects within culture, thereby giving us the category “woman” or “the feminine” basic to any feminist analysis and giving us an analysis of the functionings of patriarchy within the individual psyche.⁸

Hirsch argues that psychoanalysis is in many ways at the core of feminism. Understanding the unconscious components that make up femininity and the larger realm of gender as they are viewed today is integral to overcoming the power differences in contemporary society.

Psychoanalysis is a passage into the seemingly invisible or perhaps overlooked forces at play in the dynamics of gender construction. It can allow us to examine the complexities of the female from a less pre-conceived standpoint.

Bracha Ettinger highlights the role of female body parts within psychoanalytic theory and discusses the nuances of the female all while overtly pointing to the fallacies within Freudian and Lacanian⁹ discourse. Her book, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, seeks to redefine the feminine within

this theory and offers a new realm of thought: The Matrixial. Judith Butler says in her foreword for this book:

...she is displacing the “phallus” from its position as the original signifier for Lacan. She is opening up the landscape in another direction through this word “the feminine” or this word “the matrixial.” She is, I think, asking us to reformulate the very relation between the subject and its other, and to ask what precedes this encounter in which the phallus seeks to confirm its status, where the feminine acts only as a faulty mirror in the circuitry of that narcissism.¹⁰

This explanation by Butler of the broad purpose of The Matrixial is important to note as I continue to dive into the nuances of Ettinger’s theory because it demonstrates Ettinger’s objective of “displacing” the phallus from its throne within Freudian and Lacanian discourse and recontextualizing the feminine within, not outside of, the existing theory. Ettinger’s Matrixial is a concept explained comprehensively in her book but put simply, it is “a prenatal symbolic space.”¹¹ The Matrix functions as a symbolic womb that allows space for investigations of the feminine or other. It dreams up a space for dealing with the unfamiliar: “The Matrix is a zone of encounter between the most intimate and most distanced unknown.”¹²

Ettinger’s idea of the Matrix as a locus that connotes the female orifice and a feminine space finds its way into the orifices in my own visual work, especially *Phobos* and the *Latent Collections* series. The symbolic space of the Matrix rejects the phallus and connotes instead the self-sufficient space of a womb, which in my work also visually references a cave within the earth. In my paintings, there are many orifices or caves that become a signifier of the womb as a complex space, positioned at the same time inside and outside, and independent of the phallic paradigm. The idea of a womb space within psychoanalysis is not a novel idea so much as it is an overlooked one. Freud actually mentions in his text, *The Uncanny*, the notion of a womb space and the vague familiarity of it:

Whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: 'this place is familiar to me, I've been here before,' we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. In this case too, then, the *Unheimlich* is what was once *Heimlich*, familiar; the prefix 'un-' is the token of repression.¹³

This is one of the few times Freud mentions the idea of a womb space. Ettinger points out that he never expands upon this idea and none of his followers or successors did either.¹⁴ This is surprising to me as I notice that body parts and especially orifices are assigned particular importance within psychoanalysis. In light of this fact, the womb should have been taken into more consideration especially when equated as the potential source of the *Unheimlich* or uncanny, yet it is not. Ettinger notes this omission and confirms that Freud thought of the womb fantasies no differently than castration anxiety. She asks:

But do we have to accept the general conclusion drawn within the psychoanalytic paradigm that the *Unheimlich*, which is a repressed *Heimlich* or *Heimisch* (familiar, homely), can only be repressed by the "castration" anxiety?

She responds to her own question with a parsed out interpretation of Freud's negligence:

In "The Uncanny" Freud presents an unconscious infantile phantasy that may point to a complex whose difference from castration I will develop: "the phantasy, I mean, of intrauterine existence" or "womb-fantasies," *Muttersleibphantasie*. In psychoanalysis, the phantasy of the maternal womb is excluded by inclusion within the "castration" phantasy! Castration, which is a sexual notion even though the "phallus" is considered neutral, is the prototype of any separation from the bodily and archaic partial dimension, of any loss and absence that leads to an inscription in the Symbolic. Intrauterine phantasies are not referred to by Freud any differently, nor do they serve to indicate another function. It is here, however, that an unavoidable difference is revealed to us: an originary feminine difference."¹⁵

Ettinger seeks to differentiate the womb from the phallus as a source not merely of the uncanny but many other implications. The phallus, while most often overvalued as a psychoanalytic symbol, is acknowledged within Ettinger's theory as a symbol of something that can be possessed or lost.¹⁶ It is important to note, that while body parts are implicated and used within

this theory they are used symbolically and not physically. My work *Phobos*, is attempting to use the idea of bodies and orifices in a similar symbolic way.



II. Dunham, Damaris, detail and in progress photograph of *Phobos*, February 2020, three-dimensional painting.

I am looking at psychoanalysis as a Western tradition of viewing the innerworkings of the mind, yet as I make my art, I also engage with Eastern traditions of viewing the mind through acts of meditation and intuition. In *Spectrum of Consciousness*, Ken Wilbur talks about consciousness as going beyond words and symbols, “to the inwardness of one’s spiritual experience, which cannot be analyzed intellectually without somehow involving logical contradictions.”¹⁷ To some extent, the intuition of my making process combined with my pursuit of psychoanalytic theories feels like a contradiction yet the resulting work is part of my spiritual experience. I place a lot of symbolic weight on the process because I believe in a link between intuitive physical movement and the unconscious mind.

I use paper dipped in wheat paste to make up my papier-mâché and once I remove this paper, touch it, squeeze it, and place it where it will exist in the work, the drying time sets in. The paper is usually dry within a few hours, yet the drying time is dependent on the amount of layers of material that exist within that one area. This in-between stage that exists for a short time each day, when I have finished placing and layering the paper and fabric and string and lace, is a time of transformation. The materials are changing state. Once pliable and soft, they are in a matter of hours transformed into hardened stone-like sculptural elements. They are no longer viable, but are solid and petrified. They now have a significant physical weight and mass to them, and as I turn the work upright to lift it onto the wall, the work fights back. I come away from placing this *being* on the wall with small wounds: scratches, bruises, and muscle soreness from the weight and the hardened material pushing strongly against my body. We are both transformed and physically changed or marred in this process.

I developed a method of working with several variations of texture to achieve this depth disparity, reminiscent of a landscape. The layers of paper, built-up on wire armature, stand nearly

two feet off the wall in places and a mere four inches in others, supported by a wooden frame hidden beneath. When the work is hung upright on the wall, this depth of field forces some areas to recede in shadow while others catch the light, casting a penumbra under the belly of the work. Some areas capture the light and some areas recede into shadow and reject the presence of light. Darkness and light are elements that contribute to a tension between the revealed and the concealed.

The texture of the work resembles folds in cloth in some areas and rocky terrain in others. Moments of smoothed papier-mâché covered with a silicone cement mixture, render sections to resemble skin. I knot and crumple material together to form patterns evoking something biological. I watch as my crumpled moments become symbolic flowers and foliage among the rocky terrain. The value-shifting textured surface is meant to possess a haptic quality that forces the viewer's mind out of a purely visual experience as she is led to question the sensation of the embodied structure before her. I ask the viewer to empathize, at either a conscious or subconscious level, with the body on the wall.

The final stage of my process involves painting the layers of built-up material and texture. This unifies the work and flattens the hierarchy of materials as the paint often transforms some beyond immediate recognition. In this way, the paint acts as a kind of skin over the surface and the material looks now more like thick impasto layers in a painting. The painted layer hides some material through misrecognition, yet reveals through its texture, the underlying strata of material.

Phobos and *Latent Collections* attempt to evoke the aftermath of some kind of event through the large and small holes formed throughout the surface. The gaps within the papier-mâché make up these orifices; they have physical depth actualized by the thick wood of the

stretcher bars that the paper is assembled onto. Some holes are formed to directly face out toward the viewer. I think of these holes as apertures because of their circular form. They can function as a portal into which the viewer can look and imaginatively be looked at in return, connoting a voyeuristic sensation for anyone who peers into them. Other holes are designed to more closely resemble a fold. They allow in less light and allow out less information. They exist amongst countless other small, tucked away, folded orifices and ask for more bodily movement from the viewer as she peers into the hole. Yet another hole or cave, existing between portal and fold, is located toward the bottom of *Phobos*, where the work begins expand outside the confines of its rectangular frame, perhaps breaking free.

Holes are ubiquitous and exist in varying forms that appear in humans and landscapes alike. I am interested in the ways holes are viewed in culture and in theory especially, because as mentioned previously, they often present themselves within psychoanalysis as some of the foundational aspects of the subject's psyche. The oral phase, the anal phase, and womb-fantasies are a few of the psychoanalytic theories that relate to bodily holes. I relate my psychoanalytic investigations with the holes seen in both female body parts as well as in landscape because I believe symbolic and visual links exist between these seemingly disparate orifices.

Visual and visceral form is present in my work. Some of the orifices begin to function as wounds within the surface of the "skin." Holes are not always inherent. Holes can be added to a landscape and to a body through erosion, trauma, time, and all kinds of external manipulation. While some of the orifices function as inherent parts of the work, some are evidence of a wound to the surface. Most wounds heal (as I paint them), yet often the surface of skin or the earth is eternally altered in some way.

Phobos hangs suspended on the wall so that the viewer is able to come face to face with the holes. The work prioritizes the viewer as she examines and excavates it, perhaps, as mentioned previously, walking alongside it, standing back at a distance, or experiencing it from infinite angles in order to grasp the entirety of the surface and scale.

Layering, Touching, Sculpting. Lack and Excess | Void and Grotesque



III. Dunham, Damaris. *Unconscious Manuals I & II*, 2019, paint on unstretched canvas, 6 x 2.5 feet.

Prior to my series of three-dimensional paintings, I experimented with material possibilities through a diptych built-up on yards of unstretched canvas. The work, completed in April 2019, is titled *Unconscious Manuals I & II* (III). A diptych, it consists of two paintings, each on six feet of unstretched canvas nailed straight onto the wall. They hang side by side with about two feet of space in between. Though both the same dimensions, the two differ in their surface treatment. The materials include yarn, paper, fabric, flour, potting mix, and jewelry wire to make up the surface texture and all are covered in a layer of atomized paint that I then brush over with more chromatic versions of the matte black. In constructing this work, I was attempting to use my hands as a vehicle for the unconscious. My hands are using materials to keep a record, they are recording my presence and specifically, attempting to record the actions of my unconscious.

This work is meant to function as a kind of psychological environment for the viewer through portraying the idea of the unconscious in the process of its birth. The condensation or agglomeration of objects on the canvas has been subsequently transformed beyond initial recognition with paint. They have been painted over, and as a result petrified through this gesture. They become in a sense, *uncanny* objects, transformed to be unrecognizable or othered. I use the familiar to explore the unfamiliar: the unconscious mind. No perspective, no depth exists except for the physical texture, perhaps akin to how I imagine my uncanny mind. The work is feminine in a way that feminine is not allowed to traditionally be in my unconscious.

In order to achieve the expression I desired in this work, it was important for my entire body to be involved. I developed a process here, that I now employ in the construction of my current series, *Latent Collections*. The physical and tangible nature of art making is an obvious aspect in many artistic processes. However in my method, touching is deliberately redirected into

access of the psyche. This is a labor, an attempt. Magdalena Abakanowicz says of the use of touch in her own work:

Becoming: Between myself and the material with which I create, no tool intervenes. I select it with my hands. I shape it with my hands. My hands transmit energy to it. In translating idea into form, they always pass on to it something that eludes conceptualization. They reveal the unconscious.¹⁸

I resonate with this view of touch as a possible way of accessing or revealing the unconscious.

Unconscious Manuals I & II inform this new process or method, symbolizing a huge departure from my prior work as a more representational oil painter. This new approach opened up a new realm of meaning-making for me as an artist.

In March of 2019, I decided to make a series of water color studies (IV) that were free from representation, to depart from my oil paintings which portrayed faces and hands alluding to dream-states. I felt my paintings ceased to portray the kind of symbolic, dream world I wanted to create. I watched the paper crumple as I wet them with the aqueous medium. It led me to begin working with crumpling paper and gluing it onto other materials. I also began working with papier-mâché and as I learned how malleable and moldable paper is in my hands, it became an essential part of my practice.

Auguste Rodin's *The Gates of Hell* (V), is an historical example of a large-scale sculpture resembling a three-dimensional painting. A monumental diptych-like sculpture, it depicts figures in frozen gestures, representing a gateway or door. Rodin included 180 figures within the work, inspired by the gates of hell described in Dante's *Inferno*. The subject matter of this piece is relevant to my work because the idea of hell generally brings up feelings of fear, curiosity, and speculation of this unseen meta-physical place, a liminal space, a place in between places.

I want my work to tap into imagination more than into something physically present in the work. The work functions as a portal or liminal space in this way. While it offers an

imaginative and symbolic hidden element, the work itself also offers physical evidence and presence.



IV. Dunham, Damaris, *Watercolor Sketches*, March 2019, watercolor on notebook paper, 4 x 6 inches.



V. Rodin, Auguste, *The Gates of Hell*, 1917, cast bronze, 19.7 x 13.1 x 3.3 feet.



VI. Dunham, Damaris, *Aperture*, October 2019, three-dimensional painting, 36 x 24 x 12 inch.

Aperture, completed in October 2019, part of *Latent Collections* series, is a 24 x 36 x 12 inch 3-dimensional painting (VI). It has one major hole or aperture that asks for the viewer's attention. Bulky, knotted, and interwoven mounds of material exist around the circumference of this dark hole, and it looks almost as if it has been excavated in the process of its formation. The orifice feels like the aftermath of an event or an action, and the residue of the excavation now lingers all around the edge. This high mound of material is made more evident in contrast to the flattened surface toward the base of the composition. The shallow quality of the bottom portion appears as if it is untouched. I use the term excavation in order to symbolize part of my process rather than explain it. I understand the excavation occurring within *Aperture* as symbolizing the internal made external; a building-up of physical and psychological material in order to construct a symbolic space that signifies an orifice while also pointing to a void.

Similar to *Phobos*, many associations about *Aperture* can be made. I tend to view the material surrounding the hole as resembling a flower. The rounded aspect of the built-up mounds of paper start to form the petals of the flower, while the hole itself stands in for what is known as the "stigma" of a flower. The stigma is the flower's reproductive organ thus the hole could symbolize a vaginal opening, the door to the womb as the source of the uncanny. This piece becomes charged sexually as well as symbolically because of the gaping orifice that exists and in its comparison to both flower and vaginal opening.

Aperture, as part of the *Latent Collections* series, served initially as a material test in my new sculptural mode of working. It quickly became a conceptual study as well, where I flushed out ideas and concepts while wrestling with various materials. Three of these smaller works stand out as important symbolic and metaphorical examinations that led to the development of my larger three-dimensional painting *Phobos*.

Interoception (VIII) consists of two separate wooden frames that fit together in a puzzle-like way and form one work. The left side of the piece is made of tightly crinkled paper pieces that are meant to weave in and out of each other as they start to form ripple-like motions on the surface of the work. Parts of this left side depict a more grainy texture made from the sand that I sifted across the surface of the work after laying down a thin layer of glue. Small piles or collections of string can be seen in the work and these elements add to the fine detail and textural saturation that this side of the composition contains.

As the viewer's eye moves toward the right side, she may notice a subtle shift in texture. This right side contains less intricate crinkles and folds but rather holds more broad, generalized paper folds. Though the two sides sit next to each other, woven into each other with differing surface textures and build-up, they exist as one entity. The term, "interoception," for which the piece is named, refers to the internal feelings of a body. It can refer to conscious feelings such as hunger or fatigue, but it can also reference more unconscious states that the body can experience such as anxiety, attraction, fear, and repulsion.¹⁹ The inclusion of the winding, tubular material suggests an internal investigation of a body.

Bluff (IX), is one of the thickest of the smaller works I made within the series. The large, knotted portions of the composition can be read as rock or even suggest a portion of a rocky terrain. The intense layering that led to the bulk that exists in this piece, suggests an element of time and collection that natural rock possesses. It resembles the build-up of material in *Aperture* in this way. Rather than form one large hole in this work, I crafted several smaller crevices that are concealed by the larger, bulkier parts. These holes still conceal and perhaps conceal better in their obscurity. The work overall, is a collection of folded and knotted paper and fabric. It can be viewed as a pile of discarded baroque fabric, replete with Deleuzian folds²⁰.

In Summer 2019, I was in Berlin at the Hamburger Bahnhof where I encountered a work by Lee Bontecou.²¹ Bontecou's work often contains dark, orifice-like holes, such as in her *Untitled, 1960* (VII). Bontecou chose not to title any of her sculptural paintings. They are inherently mysterious beings and in not naming them, they are assigned another level of unknown. As I stood before it, I noticed the two large, gaping holes that met me at eye level. As a result, I was forced to stare into the intense blackness contained within the orifices of the work. The light entering one hole did not illuminate the other, and the void continued on seemingly infinitely. In fact, it felt as if these holes consumed light. They were permeating shadows. My stomach started to turn. What bothered me was not that nothing seemed to exist within. Instead, I feared that the darkness was so intensely palpable that it turned physical matter. I felt as if I was being spiritually swallowed by the dark abyss that the holes contained.



VII. Bontecou, Lee, *Untitled 1960*, steel, canvas, and copper wire.

The outer portion was notably constrained by the harsh rectangle that the substrate formed. A false rigidity existed within the structures. At first, they seemed contained and constrained, but the longer I looked, I realized they were breaking free from the attempted strictness of the structure. One aspect I noted in the outer, geometric framing device, was the stitch work by the artist. Because every move was carefully calculated and strategic, I knew that nothing was unintentional. The coarse thread stood on end every 1.5 inches or so and gave an overall appearance of body hair. In that moment of observation, I realized that these objects were more creature than painting. Bontecou imbued these works with a sense of life and agency. The orifices she forms are full of womb evoking elements and allude to the female body without conforming to the societal bound idea of femininity.



VIII. Dunham, Damaris, *Interception*, September 2019, three-dimensional painting, 33 x 48 x 4 inch.



IX. Dunham, Damaris, *Bluff*, October 2019, three-dimensional painting, 16 x 20 x 8 inch.

The element that brings all of these works together, in my mind, is the concept of the void. The void references the idea of a vast empty space and implicates many systems of thought such as religion, mysticism, philosophy, and physics. It appears across Eastern and Western thinking. The Void is called sunyata within Buddhist teachings and Ken Wilbur discusses this spiritual view of a void:

In sum, the Madhyamika calls the Absolute: Sunyata, Void! Void of things and Void of thoughts. But again, the Void is not mere nothingness, it is not nihilism, it is simply Reality before we slice it up with conceptualism...²²

This kind of spiritual void makes an appearance within Taoism as well as Hinduism, with variation, yet it is notable as a recurring religious and mystic concept. The void also exists within a merging of physics and philosophy as well. Frank Close contextualizes Aristotle's ideas with modern mathematicians and physicists surrounding the concept of an empty space or nothingness.²³ In, *A Universe from Nothing*, Lawrence Krauss equates a scientific void with a philosophical void.²⁴ The way that the void can link two seemingly disparate systems of thought shows the mystery and complexity surrounding this concept. Despite the many interpretations of the void across time, thought, and location, similarities exist. I find that though many versions and appearances of the void come up within starkly different disciplines, it always exists as a kind of contradiction of emptiness vs. fullness. I have taken this overall idea of the void as a contradiction in order to apply it to my work. I create spaces that are meant to connote emptiness but offer the presence of matter to explore within. Simultaneously empty and full.

I often think about the void as a state of mind or of being that is closely linked with the act of sleeping. Sleep is the body's facsimile of death, and in this place we lose our conscious selves for a time as the unconscious is allowed to work mysteriously. I think of this as a kind of void of our consciousness. In this strange, dark place, the unconscious is allowed to create in the

emptiness. It brings forth dreams which consist of imagery and emotion. The void mind quickly ceases to be void, but instead becomes a place of emptiness prepared to form new creation with latent information stored in the unconscious. In this way, I think about a void as a temporary state, a state of flux. I view it as an intentional clearing out to reveal hidden or creative possibilities. The void represents a place of lack and while it finds great importance as a symbol in my work, it does not account for the excess of material that surrounds these voids.

The grotesque presents ideas about excess and expanding bounds that is also portrayed within the form of my work. The grotesque is derived from the Latin word “grotto” which led to the Italian word “grotte,” meaning cave or hidden place. This term was used to describe Roman ruins which resembled caves as they were excavated during the Italian Renaissance. Inside these excavated buildings were artworks, decorating the inside, that depicted strange otherworldly combinations of human and animal parts woven together with fruits and flowers. These works were called “grottesca” in Italian and led to the English word grotesque that I am referencing today.²⁵ This origin is fascinating to me as the birthplace of the grotesque because of the implications it holds for my work. The original grotesque was a blend of bodies and nature. My work seeks to exist in the symbolic and alludes to both bodily forms as well as natural landscape elements. In this way, the original grotesque feels like distant cousin of the work I am creating. Another implication of the origin of the term grotesque, is that it was formed in a cave or cave-like space, a hidden place. The hidden is an idea that I include in many iterations and forms throughout my work. The grotesque has expanded past its original meaning and now finds context within art and culture as an entity that exists somewhere between comical and disturbing. It can also be defined as something that expands past its original confines of space, it functions as a kind of excess.

I have often thought about the void and the grotesque as related to each other, as I sculpt and layer my works. I think about them as the antithesis of each other, yet also each containing an element of itself in the other. The void is associated with the idea of intense emptiness and nothingness. I view it as a place of lack. The grotesque, conversely, serves as a symbol of excess. The combination of the lack and excess co-existing manifests itself in my three-dimensional paintings. I think both can serve as a means to hide or create a hidden place. The hidden can refer to something that covers or acts as a guise to serve as an intentional obfuscation of an entity. This can be seen within my work in the multiplicity of the layering of materials. The layering is a physical act of covering that obfuscates parts or all of what exists underneath. What is covered, is not ever revealed, yet it informs the form, presentation, and physical depth of that which is placed over it. The paint that covers my work tends to serve as more of a guise rather than an intentional obfuscation, because it transforms the material to some extent, making the exact materials and objects used less immediately legible. They do not reveal their true identities as quickly once they are covered in a layer of paint. The hidden can also be found within the holes and orifices of the work, as symbolic voids that represent a lack or emptiness. The darkness and void formed in these spaces serves as a way to hide. Another way in which things can be hidden is through sheer number and excess, which can imply the grotesque. The scale of *Phobos* is inaccessible to the viewer because of the amount of mass that sits in front of her on the wall.

Attraction and Repulsion in my Three-Dimensional Paintings

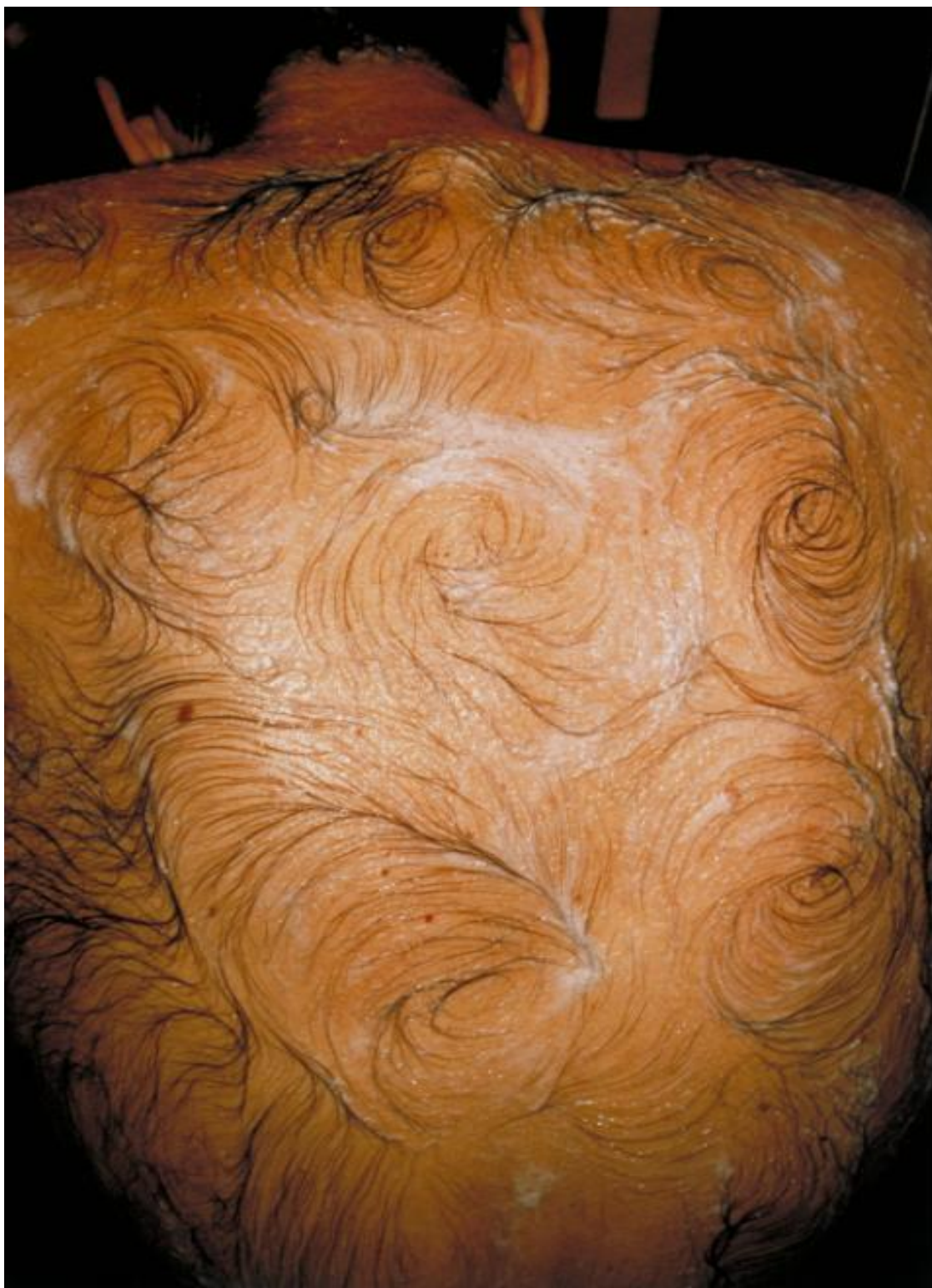


X. Dunham, Damaris, *Detail of Phobos*, January 2020, three-dimensional painting.

Phobos includes human hair to further embody the reference to the skin. The hair appears as if it is growing from the crevices. Location of the hair on a body determines whether hair can be considered attractive or not. Human hair has been used as a material or trope by many contemporary women artists such as Mona Hatoum and Anne Wilson, most notably. Hatoum implicates the body and the fragility of the body through the use of hair in her art (XI & XII). She weaves hair into homemade paper, paints with it on the human body, or collects her own to present as installation in a room. Hair, especially when presented as detached from the human body, implicates the body.



XI. Hatoum, Mona, *Jardin Public*, 1993, wrought iron, wax, and pubic hair. Photo by Edward Woodman. Courtesy Arnolfini, Bristol © Mona Hatoum.



XII. Hatoum, Mona, *Van Gogh's Back*, 1995, color photograph on paper, 23.6 x 15.8 inch.

As seen through my investigation into hair, attraction and repulsion are often thought of as completely opposing forces. Similarly to the way I view the void and the grotesque, I tend to think of them as complexly intertwined. Repulsion is a response that manifests through smell, sight, feeling, sound, or taste. Repulsion is taken in through and experienced by my body, which begins retching, cringing, shuttering, covering and gagging. Many of the responses associated with repulsion can also be experienced in pleasure. Helen Chadwick once noted that she hoped her work would incite, “sensations like gagging... which is an ambiguous reaction because there is gagging through pleasure rather than just gagging through revulsion.”²⁶ The most tangible example in my own life that I have explored in my own artwork, is the attraction and repulsion of the female body.

The human female (gendered by society) body, has a complicated history of being both an object of desire as well as one of disgust. It has been regarded as a mysterious entity that has been both honored and feared as a direct result of associations with birth and blood. A woman's body from the exterior has been praised, exalted and even worshipped for its shapely contours that are symbols of her fertility. The hips are widened to deliver and carry a child and the breasts rounded to sustain life. There are, however, instances where the appearance of the female body has been viewed as repulsive. This usually takes into account the internalized nature of the female sex organs; Freud referenced the opening to a womb as a gash or wound that was a result of the penis being removed.²⁷

The very look of the entrance to the female organs is associated with an open wound and it does at times function as a wound from which blood pours out, bodily fluid that is widely considered repulsive or even taboo in many cultures, unlike sperm, urine or sweat. While both genders leak bodily fluids, feminine blood challenges the ideal of woman as an object of sexual

pleasure, by connoting its fertile empowerment, and therefore the unknown (to the patriarchal) universe. While the female orifice as a bleeding wound has displaced the idea of the attraction of the female body, it has not ceased its objectification.

The hidden nature of the vagina adds to the level of mystery and associated (male) fear. Her opening is inherently hidden yet within the womb, life is created, the fascinating and repulsive phenomenon of birth ensues. When life is not created, the uterus sheds blood; this organ is mysterious and the evidence of its workings are considered repulsive by patriarchal, phallic cultures around the world. This aversion is seen in ancient texts like this one from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The book of Leviticus in the Pentateuch or the Torah keeps record of what is considered clean and unclean by Yahweh:

When a woman has a discharge, and the discharge in her body is blood, she shall be in her menstrual impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. And everything on which she lies during her menstrual impurity shall be unclean. Everything also on which she sits shall be unclean.²⁸

Women have been considered unclean and untouchable by law because of the repulsion of the workings of her body. This notion of the female body as dangerous or even grotesque can be related to Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection: "Abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its own kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory."²⁹ Female orifices are considered dangerous and mysterious by patriarchal culture and therefore rendered invisible, a paradoxical omission that is apposite to sexually explicit pornography as a source of consumption of female orifices by male gaze. Perhaps this explains Freud's mention of the uterus as the origin of the uncanny and his subsequent refusal to dive deeper into the complexity of the womb as a symbolic space within psychoanalysis.

Historically, when the female has been examined in art through the male gaze, she was as a body objectified rather than identified. This relates to the object in its embodiment of the art

historical view of women, where, "...abjection itself is a composite of judgement and affect, of condemnation and yearning, or signs and drives."³⁰ The female in both art and psychoanalysis has been forced to inhabit a space between the attractive and repulsive identification, or as Kristeva states: "...the condemnation and yearning."

In my own work, I attempt to take ownership of this concept and conceive work that affectively embraces the *abject*, transforming it into visual and sensorial, and intentionally gendered, pleasure. In both *Phobos* and the larger series of *Latent Collections*, I form visceral flesh-like moments that reference the female body. I use paper, lace, string, and silicone and other materials to mimic muscle and fat tissues surrounding various orifices that reference wombs and wounds. In creating these deep orifices, I deal with the abject as it is seen in the hidden nature of female body parts and seek allure and complexity inside these hidden spaces.

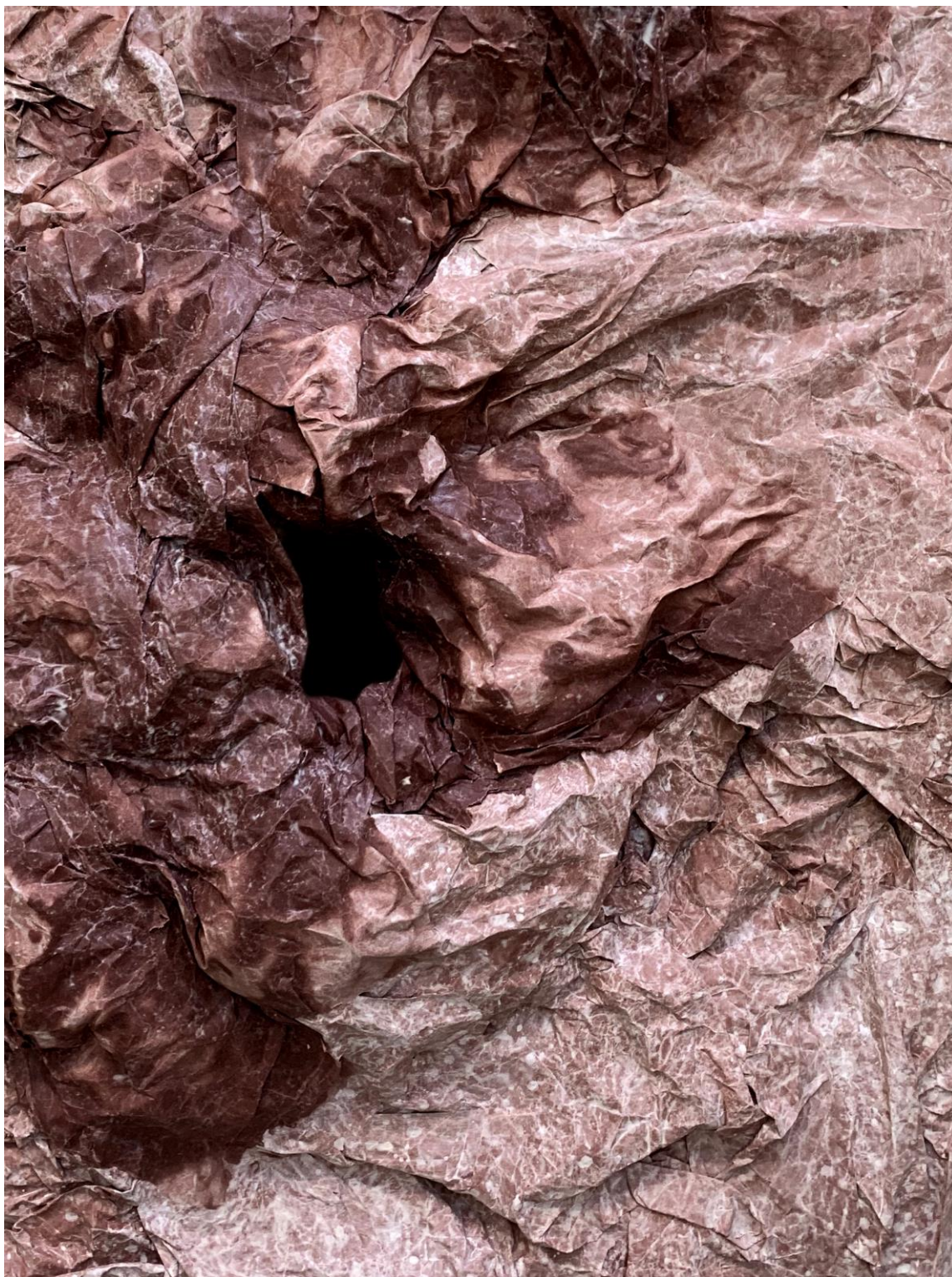
In brain science, repulsion is closely associated with fear; the link between the two is evidenced in studies on how the brain processes these emotions. The same part of the brain, the amygdala, lights up when one experiences fear or repulsion. The amygdala is responsible for processing several emotions, but fear is the main player and the fact that it depicts both fear and disgust suggests that the two may be closely linked.³¹ When discussing the patriarchal repulsion in relation to female orifices, the idea of fear implies social and psychoanalytic ramifications. In psychoanalytic theory, the phallus is representative of something that can be possessed or lost.³² The womb stands in as an entity that is deeply part of its owner and cannot be feared as something to be lost.³³

But the womb is not only associated with masculine repulsion and fear of it; again we see the complexity of repulsion being a nonexclusive emotion. It is a sought after place as well as a place of familiarity. All humans enter this world through the opening of a womb and recall it,

perhaps with nostalgia, as home, as our origin. Some even seek a second birth or rebirthing process for psychological benefit or revelation.³⁴ Again, we are reminded of Freud's *Muttersleibphantasie* or womb fantasies, the very birthplace of the uncanny. The womb evokes the uncanny in its strange mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar. One way that Freud defined the uncanny is:

The "uncanny" is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar...The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning "familiar," "native," "belonging to the home"; and we are tempted to conclude that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar. Naturally not everything, which is new and unfamiliar is frightening, however; the relation cannot be inverted. We can only say that what is novel can easily become frightening and uncanny; some new things are frightening but not by any means all. Something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar to make it uncanny.

Hiding, Discovering, Darkening. The Affect of the Hidden



XIII. Dunham, Damaris, detail and in progress photo of *Phobos*, February 2020.

The progress photograph of *Phobos* (XIII) in its early stages, portrays one of the small orifices that form a hidden place. The ruddy marbled look of the paper is visible, yet it still shows the depth and darkness of the orifice in its beginning stages of formation.

In October 2019, I took a trip to Lake of The Ozarks. One of my goals for this trip was to go cave exploring (XIV). I wanted to fully experience being inside of a cave. Entering voluntarily into darkness did not come naturally to me. I experienced a lot of fear as I stepped into the cave and learned that I am not alone in my fear. My cave guide brought us to a specific point and stated it was the last portion of it where daylight was visible. Because of this, the American Indian tribes that used to inhabit the cave would never go any further. For them, going into pure darkness, untouched by the light was essentially welcoming evil spirits that lurked in the darkness; it was bad luck to venture past the light.

Many religions, philosophies, and cultural beliefs point to darkness as the source or container for evil or misfortune. Many cultures also condemn women as creatures connected to darkness, night, and nature as opposed to men considering themselves connected to light, mind and culture. However, in the instance of the visit to the cave, my own fear of the dark was awoken. It has always been with me, since before anyone could teach me this fear and before I remember fearing anything else. Still, I walked through this cave.

I was surprised by the continual dampness that seemed symptomatic of the darkness. Though this was probably merely a result of the cave being underground, it felt like the cave was weeping. The tears that flowed along the walls and dripped down to the earth were generative tears. The guide used terms like stalactite, stalagmite, cave bacon, and calcification to name the formations caused by the “cave tears” (XV). She explained that in order for the cave to remain “alive,” this moisture was necessary. The darkness needs to cry.



XIV. Dunham, Damaris, photo from within the cave, October 2019.



XV. Dunham, Damaris, photo from within the cave, October 2019.

The moment that stands out the most for me from this cave exploration, is the moment when the guide stopped us and turned out every artificial light that was guiding our way through the cave. The resulting darkness was palpable. I blinked several times, eyes aching to see something, anything. I could not see the faintest outline of my hand nor any other shape in the total blackness. I was enveloped. This was terrifying to me yet incredibly fascinating. Why am I so intrigued by that which I fear with such intensity? One other thing. If the empty cavity or cave of darkness is palpable and seemingly impenetrable, does that make it full?

My cave exploration and depiction of orifices and caves in my own work leads me back to a familiar and perhaps overused metaphor: Plato's cave. Plato wrote in his metaphor of the cave about prisoners trapped inside of a cave from birth. They are shackled and unable to see anything but shadows cast upon the wall they face.³⁵ Reading this text with new eyes after my own cave journey helped make this situation visible in my imagination. Plato's cave serves as a layered philosophical investigation of the way that humankind's knowledge and acceptance of information is dictated primarily through that which can be experienced through the senses, namely sight.³⁶

Perceptual knowledge, resulting from experiencing an aesthetic event or object, closely relates to the contemporary study of affect. The cross-disciplinary nature of affect theory allows it to encompass several disciplines all while remaining crucial to both the creation and theorization aspects of the art world. In fact, according to Marta Figlerowicz,³⁷ affect theory seeks to link the humanities with biology and neuroscience.³⁸ The more nuanced and mysterious aspects of human reaction to aesthetic affect is now being studied from a scientific standpoint. Perceptual knowledge derived from a sensory experience is what I attempt to set the conditions for within my own work and namely, in *Phobos*.

While the definition of affect theory is not yet an exact science or even fully agreed upon by its main theorists, the unifying idea behind the study is rooted in specific moments or flashes of mental activity as opposed to cause and effect or origin and endpoint.³⁹ Brian Massumi, a leading affect theorist and consequently, art theorist, has termed this phenomenon, “fluidity.”⁴⁰ He references Zeno’s paradox of movement that between one point on a line and the next are an infinite number of points.⁴¹ Massumi thinks about sensation in relation to movement:

[The body] moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving. Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other?⁴²

This innate link between movement of the body and sensation has major implications for the study of affect as it relates to art; the position of an artwork forces the viewer’s body to move through space in a specific way and therefore experience the sensation of an artwork in an equally specific way. Conversely, the residual pattern of movement utilized in the creation of a piece can also invoke an implied movement for the viewer to follow and feel through her body. The former relates to art theory while the latter impacts the way an artist like myself addresses and interacts with my art.

This phenomenon is perhaps what leads to the experience of “accidental empathy” that is noted in affect theory that according to Figlerowicz, “comes from having fallen into many affective experiences and from being ready always to fall into a new one or to experience several affects at once.”⁴³ Accidental empathy implies a form of self-awareness accompanied by a lack of self-restraint that allows one to fall into said affective experience. This event demonstrates the “pre-conscious” nature of experiencing affect. It reveals a relationship between the unconscious and conscious self in understanding a feeling in relation to affect. Massumi states, “it’s simply

this: sensation is never simple. It is always doubled by the feeling of having a feeling. It is self-referential.”⁴⁴

Whereas affect sensation begins pre-consciously, it remains at a pre-conscious state merely temporarily as the conscious mind quickly catches up and seeks to name the sensation. Because of the transient nature of a pre-conscious sensation, it can be assumed that the accidental empathy that accompanies the lack of self-restraint in the unconscious mind is short lived. When relating art to this phenomenon, that moment of pre-conscious empathy becomes crucial: that fleeting moment holds the power to capture the viewer and allows them to contemplate that which is outside of their own personal set of values, beliefs, etc. Figlerowicz paraphrases Elizabeth Abel’s⁴⁵ take on pre-conscious affect:

...those feelings that function beneath the threshold of conscious recognition and semantic legibility, those inarticulate, subliminal sensations . . . that operate across the boundaries between mind and body, action and passion, self and other.⁴⁶

These fleeting moments, difficult to name yet easy to experience, are at the heart of the work I am trying to do with tapping into the *affect of the hidden*. The visual clues relayed to the viewer through the various ways *Phobos* hides, conceals, and obfuscates, are meant to spark that brief sensation of curiosity and a form of *accidental empathy* with the *being*.

The unconscious mind seemingly drives the experience of affect and relates back to philosophical notions of sensation. Critics of the theory traditionally consider the kind of pre-conscious sensation of affect to be separate from meaning within an artwork.⁴⁷ However, I believe the power of affect to inspire bodily sensation should not be considered solely in isolation from meaning contained within an art object. Affective responses to a work can both enhance and inform the viewer’s read or experience with a piece. The pre-conscious response that then triggers a feeling that is self-referential (in Massumi’s terms) and acts as a vehicle for

introspection as to why that feeling was evoked. Affect in any capacity seems to carry with it the ability to force one to engage with the “whys” of how one feels.

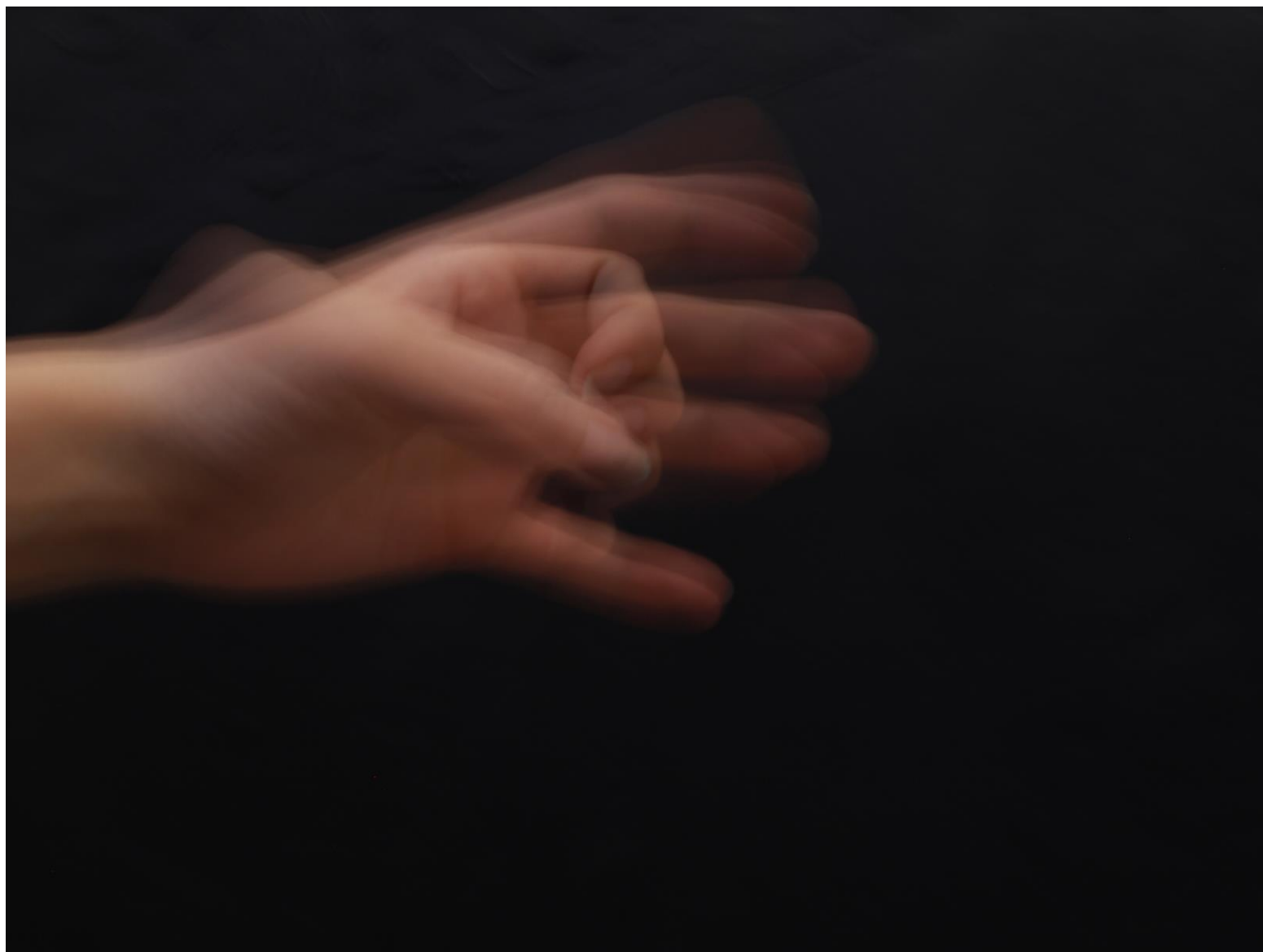
Affect as a measure of intensity is critical in an art object, whether physical or gestural. It is informative in its obscurity. The very basis of affect theory as it relates to aesthetics is predicated on the privileging of sight.⁴⁸ What is the affect when sight falters? What is the affect of the unknown, the less understood or the more imaginative? These are the questions that I am constantly asking myself as I make and reflect on my work.

Massumi references a study conducted by Hertha Sturm in an attempt to understand affect in visual/auditory stories told to children.⁴⁹ The children were told and shown three versions of a story about a snowman. In the first version, a factual account of the snowman was voiced over the narrative visuals. The second was an emotionally driven account of the story told over the same snowman narrative visuals. The third was simply the visuals from the first two iterations with no sound. The children involved in the study were then asked to rate the scenes from saddest to happiest and subsequently from most pleasant to least pleasant. The saddest rated scenes were also rated most pleasant and vice versa.

A Galvanic skin measure test utilized as an additional measure in this study, demonstrated parallel results to the children’s own accounts. This is a device that measures autonomic response, which refers to “a number of physical changes, including increased respiratory rate or hyperventilation, palpitations, flushing, and gastrointestinal disturbance, which most frequently occur in response to anxiety provoking or potentially dangerous stimuli.”⁵⁰ In short, it measured the physical manifestation of pleasure the children derived from each iteration of the tale. This test demonstrated that during the factual telling of the snowman narrative, the children’s autonomic response decreased while during the solely visual version, the

response was increased. The experiment contains a large number of implications, but what I found to be the most relevant, was that the affect was measured through both verbal account and bodily reaction, the latter being an essential aspect of affect.

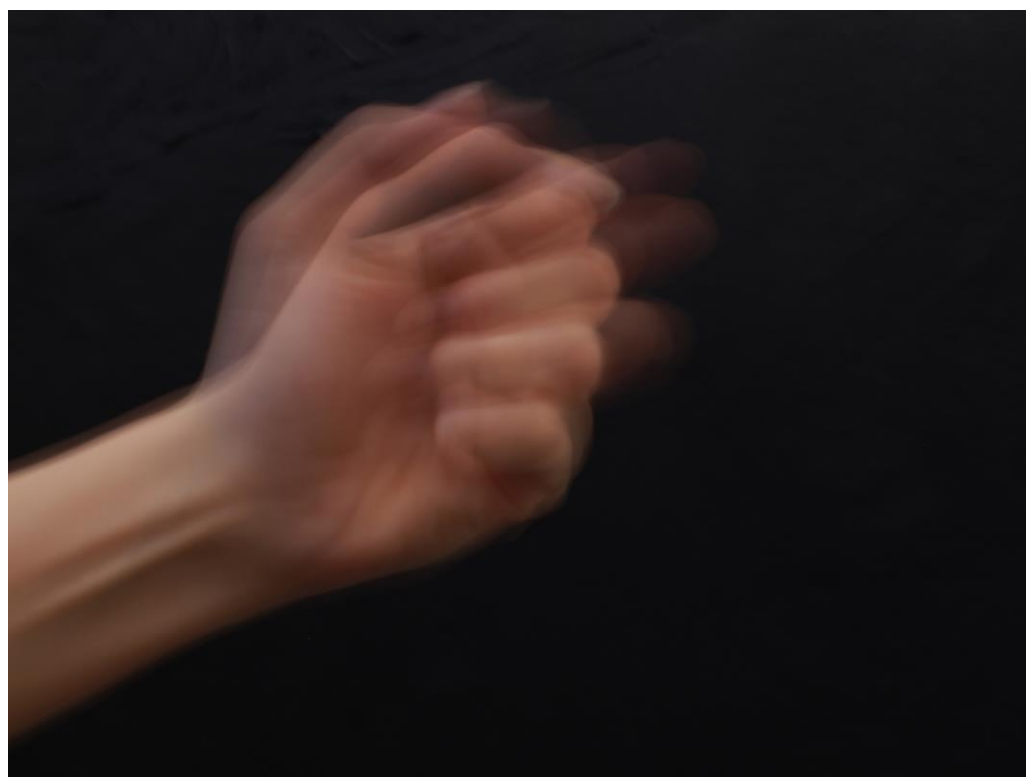
Naming the Complexity of the Hidden



XVI. Dunham, Damaris, *Hand Study 3*, February 2019, prolonged exposure digital photograph.



XVII. Dunham, Damaris, *Hand Study 4*, February 2019, prolonged exposure digital photograph.



XVIII. Dunham, Damaris, *Hand Study 2*, February 2019, prolonged exposure digital photograph.

Though my work has more recently become nonrepresentational (in the traditional meaning of the term), some of my studio research leading up to this transition was about gesture and movement of hands. I depicted this hand movement both in photography and, earlier, in paintings made based on photographic documentation.

I experimented with long-exposure photography and produced a series of performance-based photographs that documented my hands moving through dark space, exploring gestures of reaching, grasping and clutching. This series shows patterns of movement of second-long activities and capture the muscular and skeletal postures that allow the movement to occur. Hands contain a lesser amount of fat to hide what lies under the skin. The hands become characters, detached from my body and acting of their own accord. The movements are familiar and recognizable but strangely unrelated to my body.

Hand Study 3 (XVI) illustrates a grasping motion, my hand is reaching out toward something but reaches only toward empty blackness. As my fingers reach the peak of extending, they begin to contract into themselves and my hand transitions from a state of openness to the beginnings of closing. I want it to resemble a flower in this way, open for a short time in the light then closed again in darkness. *Hand Study 2* (VIII) depicts a more aggressive gesture than 3. It appears to be the gesture of making a fist, an act that offers many connotations and rejects neutral interpretation. This hand is acting with agency and assertiveness. In *Hand Study 4* (XVII), two hands come together forming an orifice. The focal point for me becomes the intense darkness of the center portion where the two hands are about to join, envelope, and cover. The potential movement indicated by this photograph has inspired me to fabricate the kind of frozen gesture I attempt to depict in my three-dimensional paintings.

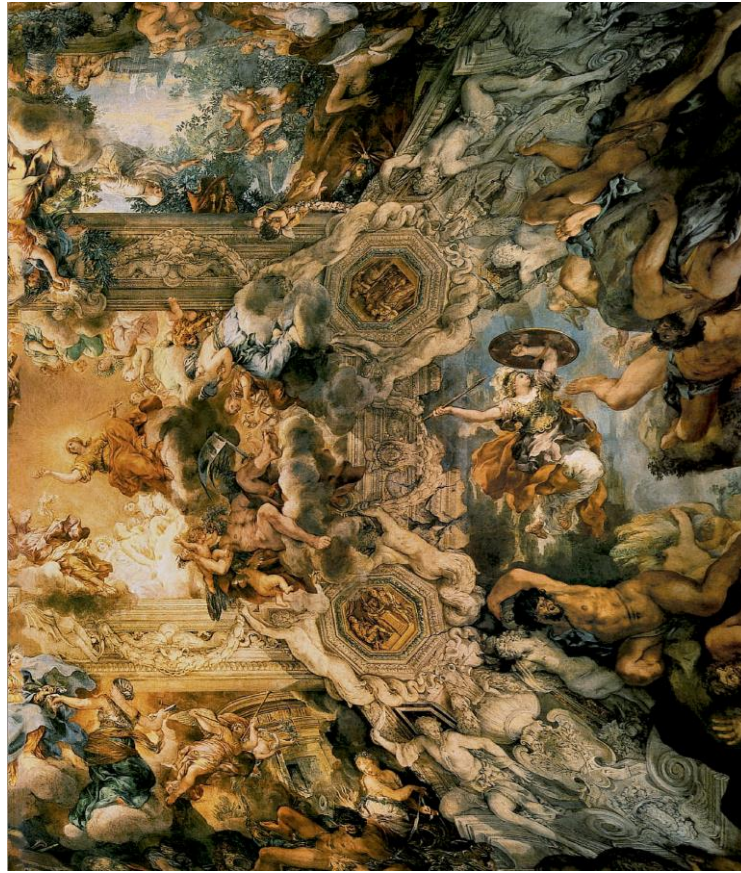
In *Latent Collections*, while not explicitly replicating hands, I attempt to access the affect of the gestures that the hand studies evoke. The reaching, grasping, and clutching all find their way into the implied movement of my sculpture and implicate the notion of touch. The act of concealing the hands starts to allude to and is present within the gestures of my three-dimensional paintings surrounding the orifices. My hand photographs freeze the bodily gestures and capture them into painterly images. This led me to think about Baroque art in which frozen gesture or frozen bodily sensation is present, such as in the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini.



XIX. Bernini, Gian Lorenzo, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, 1652, marble, life size

In this sculpture, Bernini “freezes” St. Teresa’s bodily and spiritual ecstasy eternally in stone (XIX). Bernini depicts Teresa’s human body selectively. Much of her is concealed beneath layers of marble, sculpted to evoke thick folded mounds of cloth. Bernini uses the concealed intentionally to draw attention to the gesture of ecstasy frozen on those parts which can most depict this sensorial experience. Her face is tilted up toward the angel with eyes closed and mouth parted in a moment somewhere between prayer and orgasm. Her left arm, with its visible hand, lays limp upon the stone her body rests against, and the fingers seem to dangle there, too overcome with sensation to move. Her left foot is what intrigues me and simultaneously baffles me the most. In some angles of the sculpture, her foot looks as if it too is dangling from over-arousal of the senses. However, in the angle of the sculpture I have chosen to show, her foot looks as if it is somewhat flexed in ecstasy. The frozen flex of this foot is perhaps the most revealing of Teresa’s experience with the angel: the toes raised upward and the foot at a strange angle. While this is a detail not often mentioned in relation to bodily experience of sensoria, the Baroque capture of this fleeting moment is precisely the element I seek to depict in my work.

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying.⁵¹



XX. Berrettini, Pietro, *Allegory of Divine Providence*, 1639, ceiling fresco, 46 x 78.7 feet.

Allegory of Divine Providence by Pietro Berrettini, is a ceiling fresco almost entirely composed of fleshy bodies curving and intertwining across the surface (XX). Even the elements of architecture and nature depicted in the scene possess an organic, flesh-like quality that brings cohesion to the overall composition. The architectural elements, both façade and actual, cause the work to be broken up into sections. Yet the subjects of the work seem to both interact with and cross over these confines. It forges a dynamic and complex space with greater depth but also with elements that bring the work forward toward the viewer. An element I pay close attention to when looking at works such as *Allegory of Divine Providence*, is the full treatment of space and inundation of information displayed in much Baroque art. This can be attributed to the idea of

“horror vacui” which has been identified by theorists of the Baroque as the fear of empty or blank space.⁵² Severo Sarduy writes:

Baroque space is the space of superabundance and overflow. In contrast to language, which is communicative, economic, austere, and reduced to its function—to serving as a vehicle for information—baroque language takes pleasure in the supplement, in the excess, and in the partial loss of the object.

This complete filling of space and near loss of information from the intense excess is often seen in Baroque work and demonstrates the concept of a fear of emptiness. But in the Baroque sense, horror vacui has also been taken to relate to the extremes of the Baroque impulse. David R.

Castillo states:

In this sense, horror vacui, may be taken to mean something other than a mere cult of exuberance and decorative excess, a more fundamental feeling of attraction/revulsion concerning the idea of absence.⁵³

The idea of fear of emptiness is conveyed through the orifices present within my work. They depict absence while surrounded with an abundance of information. The surrounding area of the holes is riddled with noise and busy, gestural mark making and material build-up, and allow the holes to become spaces of quiet and calm within the composition.

The orifices or lacks in my paintings are voids symbolic of a female body. They are sites representing mythology and fear of the vagina. My work seeks to reclaim the visual associations of vagina and womb as imbued with power, not a lack but as a site and as a locus of empowering.

Conclusion

My work intertwines multiple iterations of fear, holes, and the hidden within its form.

The focus on these formal elements relates to its conceptual framework of phobias, orifices, and the female as symbolically hidden or forgotten. *Phobos* offers the viewer a sensorial experience of these elements as she walks alongside it. The material choices in the work are uncanny and it is my hope that this displacement closely resembles or alludes to the unconscious mind.

Perspective and depth exist within the physical surface texture. The work hangs on the wall. As a result, it stares the viewer in the face forcing her to engage with it. It is feminine in a way that feminine is not allowed to traditionally be in my unconscious. It seeks to reclaim the visual and cultural associations of vagina and womb from the idea of a lack to an idea of power and a site or locus of empowering.

The orifices in *Phobos* and *Latent Collections* function as portals or liminal spaces. The dark crevices hide the reality of the wall that exists just millimeters behind them and propose an imaginative environment for the viewer to desire to enter through or fantasize about. I want the work to reveal things to the viewer such as ideas of holes and the hidden but I also want it to function as a place of open discovery. I hope she will be attracted and drawn toward the work because of its visceral quality. While the work never fully reveals that which is concealed in the layering and in the holes, I invite the viewer to experience with me, the complexity and the labor of attempted understanding of that which we cannot fully understand.

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- ¹ Monika Weiss (artist) in discussion with the author, April 15, 2020.
- ² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 42.
- ³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 43.
- ⁴ Secondary elaborations refers to the waking remembrance of a dream. It is used in Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*.
- ⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 49.
- ⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*. trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 17.
- ⁷ Marianne Hirsch is the William Peterfield Trent Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. She coined the term Postmemory and developed theory surrounding it.
- ⁸ Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 18.
- ⁹ Referring to Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst.
- ¹⁰ Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x.
- ¹¹ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 12.
- ¹² Ibid., 14.
- ¹³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919), 15.
- ¹⁴ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 54.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 47.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 46.
- ¹⁷ Ken Wilbur, *Spectrum of Consciousness*. p. 26
- ¹⁸ Magdalena Abakanowicz, "Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017)," *Art Forum Magazine*, April 2017.
- ¹⁹ Martin P. Paulus and Murray B. Stein, "Interoception in Anxiety and Depression," NCBI, *Brain Struct Funct.*, June 2010, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2886901/>.
- ²⁰ In reference to *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* by Gilles Deleuze
- ²¹ Lee Bontecou is a New York based American sculptor and printmaker.
- ²² Ken Wilbur, *Spectrum of Consciousness*, (Theosophical Publishing House, 1993), 59.
- ²³ Frank Close, *The Void*. (Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ²⁴ Lawrence Krauss, *A Universe From Nothing: Why There is Something Rather Than Nothing*. (Free Press: 2012).
- ²⁵ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 11th ed., s.v. "grotesque."
- ²⁶ David Notarius, Sophie Raikes, Marina Warner, *Helen Chadwick: Wreaths to Pleasure* (London: Ridinghouse, 2014), 16.
- ²⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Ed. and Trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 42.
- ²⁸ Leviticus 15:19-20 (ESV)
- ²⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 10.
- ³¹ Matteo Diano, Marco Tamietto, Alessia Celeghin, Lawrence Weiskrantz, Mona-Karina Tatu, Arianna Bagnis, Sergio Duca, Giuliano Geminiani, Franco Cauda, and Tommaso Costa, "Dynamic Changes in Amygdala Psychophysiological Connectivity Reveal Distinct Neural Networks for Facial Expressions of Basic Emotions," *Scientific Reports*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5366904/>.
- ³² Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 46.
- ³³ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, 47.
- ³⁴ Kathryn Watson, "Is Rebirthing Therapy Safe and Effective," *Healthline*, June 2019, <https://www.healthline.com/health/rebirthing>
- ³⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. B. Jowett. (Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2008), book VII.
- ³⁶ A.S. Ferguson, "Plato's Simile of Light Again," *The Classical Quarterly Vol. 28*, no. 3/4 (1934): 193.
- ³⁷ Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Yale
- ³⁸ Marta Figlerowicz, "Affect theory Dossier: An Introduction." *Qui Parle* 20, no. 2 (2012): 3.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 4.
- ⁴⁰ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002), 6.
- ⁴¹ N. Huggett (2010), *Zeno's Paradoxes*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/paradox-zeno>.
- ⁴² Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 1.
- ⁴³ Figlerowicz, "Affect Theory Dossier," 9.
- ⁴⁴ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 13.
- ⁴⁵ Professor of English at the University of California Berkeley
- ⁴⁶ Figlerowicz, "Affect Theory Dossier," 11.
- ⁴⁷ Frieze Magazine, "The Trouble with Affect Theory in our Age of Outrage." Susanne Von Falkenhausen, Web.

⁴⁸ Jeremy LeMahieu, "Affect Theory in Art Criticism," 3.

⁴⁹ Brian Massumi, "Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31, (1995): 83-89.

⁵⁰ D. Cox and J. Stone, "Autonomic Reaction, the Anxiety Response, and Development of Phobic Symptoms," *Journal of Neuroscience Nursing*, (2006): 167-171.

⁵¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*. Chapter XXIX, part 17.

⁵² Nadir Lahiji, *Adventures with the Theory of Baroque and French Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 37.

⁵³ David R. Castillo, *Horror (Vacui): The Baroque Condition*. Google Scholar. Web.

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